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Reconstituting Digital Counterpublics in Times of Crisis: The Case of the United States and the Republic of Georgia

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Abstract

Since the advent of social media at the turn of the 21st century, scholars of communication, cultural studies, and media studies have long been invested in the question of the relationship between social media platforms and the discursive formation of counterpublics for social movement mobilization. In this article, we seek to pose a new question for scholarly inquiry: How do citizens leverage the tools of social media platforms to reconstitute counterpublics in times of crisis? Toward this end, we conduct a comparative case study of the way citizens leverage platforms for counterpublic formation in the Republic of Georgia and the United States. Both cases represent two ends of the Janus-face of the 21st-century Internet: The Internet as a tool for public will-formation that can enrich the flowering of democracy across digital spaces, and the Internet as a tool capable of undermining traditional norms of public will formation predicated on shared understanding across the public sphere(s).

Keywords

Crisis, digital counterpublics, liberal democracy, Mastodon, social media

Introduction

Over the past two decades, the emergence of Web 2.0 and the concomitant rise of global platforms has fundamentally transformed life in the 21st century. The deep penetration of platforms into the granular fabric of everyday life has brought about a major shift in the way we relate to not only the larger social world but also the basic conditions of (post)modern life. The permeation of platforms has changed our relationship with the state, the flow of information, and the digitally mediated public spaces that we must inhabit with others to realize the democratic ideal of associated living.

In this article, we explore an important instance of the platformation of the digital public sphere through a comparative analysis of the impact platforms have had on digital counterpublic formation in the United States and the Republic of Georgia. Since the dawn of the modern age, counterpublics have long been recognized by scholars to be a social formation necessary for the sustenance of liberal democracy since they help foment practices such as civic participation and engagement, dissent, deliberation, and protest. Counterpublics can take many spatial forms and have historically included salons and cafés, Black barber shops, the pool hall for laborers, gay bars and clubs, or other underground counterculture scenes such as poetry slams and jazz clubs (Steele, 2016; Warner, 2002). In the digital era, counterpublics have been adapted to the digital realms of the Internet, which has enabled them to build connectivity across time and space in new and unprecedented ways.

Our article will proceed by first reviewing how scholars have outlined the importance of counterpublics to liberal democracy. Second, we advance a new analytical framework for critical scholarship that theorizes digital counterpublics in contexts of crisis. Counterpublic crises, we argue, are vital to study from a comparative perspective since digital counterpublic breakdown and reconstitution reveals important dilemmas for the platform society, particularly regarding matters

of trust, civic resilience in the face of democratic backsliding, and the politics of Big Tech.Next, we will advance a comparative case study analysis of the role of platforms in the formation of digital counterpublics in the United States and the Republic of Georgia. Finally, we will map some comparative insights from each case to draw larger conclusions about the new dynamics, risks, and possibilities the platformation of digital space can hold for counterpublics in an era marked by the threat of illiberal movements around the world.

Digital counterpublics and liberal democracy

Since the advent of social media at the turn of the 21st century, critical scholars of communication, cultural studies, and media studies have long been invested in the question of the relationship between social media platforms and the discursive formation of counterpublics for social movement mobilization. In her seminal statement on counterpublics, Nancy Fraser (1990) describes counterpublics as "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (p. 67) that operate as spatialized civic "training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics" (p. 68). "Counterpublics," as Asen and Brouwer (2001) note, "derive their 'counter' status in significant respects from varying degrees of exclusion from prominent channels of political discourse and a corresponding lack of political power" (pp. 2–3).

By making demands for political membership and citizenship from those who enjoy both more substantively, counterpublics are vital for liberal democratic societies since they serve as a sociopolitical impetus for mobilizing public expressions of dissent against both the state and mainstream political culture for rights, freedom, equality, and participatory inclusion in democratic will formation. Accordingly, in an era marked by the platformization of sociopolitical relationships,

the public sphere should be understood not as a singular entity of contiguous discursive flow, but rather as a shape-shifting polyphonous plurality of divergent and overlapping networked (counter)publics across a diverse ecology of social media platforms and legacy media institutions (i.e. broadcast radio and television, etc.) (Benhabib, 1997; Hauser, 2022; van Dijck & Poell, 2015).

Counterpublic research has been conducted primarily by scholars working from within critical and cultural studies-oriented theoretical frameworks and traditions. Critical and cultural studies perspectives on social media have made important contributions to our understanding of the complexities of the digital age. While many scholars, particularly those working in the Marxist theoretical tradition, have critiqued the exploitative and politically repressive tendencies of social media platforms such as Facebook, others have studied social media to map its emancipatory potential for progressive political projects and social change (Fuchs, 2016; Fuchs & Sandoval, 2015). An important strand of this research has focused on the ways citizens have leveraged the digital tools of social media to build digital counterpublics.

Several scholars have explored how the permeation of the Internet into more and more aspects of everyday life has catalyzed a digitalization of public space that has been foundational to the expansion of digital counterpublics. Rahko and Craig (2021) have explored how gig workers have utilized digital tools to pool their data and organize themselves in their efforts to demand employee status and fair compensation for their services vis-à-vis platforms such as Uber, DoorDash, and Instacart. Penney and Dadas (2014) have examined Occupy Wall Street as a counterpublic that utilized social media and other digital tools to mobilize followers and protesters in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and Great Recession. Moreover, numerous scholars have analyzed digital counterpublics that have arisen in response to racial inequality and police violence, which is best typified by the role Black Twitter has played in mobilizing the Black Lives Matter movement over the past decade (Graham & Smith, 2016; Jackson & Welles, 2015; Kuo, 2018).

In this article, we seek to pose a new question for scholarly inquiry: How do citizens leverage the tools of social media platforms to reconstitute counterpublics in times of crisis? “Crisis” has been a keyword for decades in the field of communication studies and is often associated with situations involving crisis communication or popular media scripts for the staging of current events. “Crisis” is a term brimming with surplus theoretical and semantic meaning, so it is important to carefully outline and clarify how we are employing this term in this study.

Etymologically, “crisis” is derived from the Greek krinein, which means “to decide” (Oxford English Dictionary, crisis, n.). In the modern era, the term has become a common metaphor for understanding complex and large-scale social phenomena marked by breakdown, destabilization, or grave disturbance. The metaphoricality of “crisis” draws on adjacent usages of the term in other rhetorical domains. In literature or drama, for example, a crisis refers to a key moment in a narrative when the dilemmas and fates of characters are decided. In medicine, crisis refers to a stage in a patient’s care that is decisive for his future health. In warfare, crisis refers to a sensitive stage or phase in combat that will decide the outcome of a battle.

The crisis metaphor offers scholars a rich reservoir for theoretical description and sociopolitical critique, to which scholars of communication have made important contributions. Whereas many scholars (Conrad, 2004; Rahko, 2011) have demonstrated how the rhetoric of crisis can be exploited by self-serving elites (i.e. “never let a crisis go to waste”), in this study we examine how ordinary citizens mobilize against social elites to reclaim digital space for protest, dissent, and counterpublicity necessary to sustain and defend liberal democratic values.

We understand “crisis” in both Habermasian and Arendtian terms. In his classic Legitimation Crisis, Jürgen Habermas (1975) observes that a crisis exists “when members of a society experience structural alterations as critical for continued existence and feel their social identity

threatened" (p. 11). For Hannah Arendt, the concept of crisis is central to her political theory even though she never poses the question "What is a crisis?" in explicit or direct terms. For Arendt, crisis names the disbanding and possible reconstitution of the sociopolitical relationships that underlie human sociality and community. "In every crisis," she notes, "a piece of the world, something common to us all, is destroyed" (Arendt, 1977, p. 178). Indeed, crises force us to confront the political in all its contingencies and uncertainty, for it is in these moments that "we have lost the answers on which we ordinarily rely without even realizing that they were originally answers to questions" (Arendt, 1977, p. 174). As Jakob Norberg (2011) notes, for Arendt "the supreme political question of human interconnection is brought to light in times of crisis: we are called upon to reaffirm or deny our previously established mutual bonds, a project that cannot fail to involve disputes and realignments" (p. 132).

Following Habermas and Arendt, we define a counterpublic crisis as a phase when the social and material infrastructure for counterpublic formation is threatened, nullified, or destroyed by the state, capitalist monopolies, or powerful political factions. In crises of this nature when the continued existence of a counterpublic is undermined and when habitual conduct and normal affairs are no longer adequate, citizens are forced to decide and judge the intolerability of their political circumstances and determine a course of political action in response to their condition that reconstitutes counterpublicity on new terms. Reconstitution can take many forms. In some cases, it may involve citizens leveraging new digital tools or using existing digital tools in novel ways to build civic resilience and resist state or corporate repression as well as misinformation and disinformation. In other cases, it may involve citizens creating new platforms to compensate for the limitations of existing alternatives.

Moreover, the question of crisis and reconstitution poses a new metric for critical scholars to use in their analysis of counterpublics: trust. Francis Fukuyama (1995) provides a useful definition of trust

when he claims that "trust is the expectation that arises within a community of regular, honest and cooperative behaviour based on commonly shared norms, on the part of other members of that community" (p. 26). Liberal democracies are political systems that depend on trust since they are comprised of institutions for making decisions as a people together. Likewise, trust is vital for counterpublics since they depend on shared bonds forged through stranger sociality. Counterpublics are ultimately the product of strangers coordinating efforts toward a common sociopolitical cause or purpose that they base public action upon, be those protests, boycotts, or otherwise. Counterpublic crises, accordingly, are marked by a loss of trust brought about threats to the material and digital means that enable citizens to coordinate their critical and oppositional activities against sociopolitical relations of domination, be that in domestic or international affairs.

Trust is a useful metric for measuring and comparing the context in which citizens make decisions about how to digitally connect with each other that critical scholarship has to this point left unconsidered. Trust offers an index of public sentiment that can clarify and illustrate perceptions of crisis among citizens. Our study thus offers a unique contribution to critical studies of counterpublics by analyzing how trust and the range of choice and access to social media platforms both affect and inform the way citizen activists leverage these tools to build digital counterpublics in crisis situations.

It is important to carefully analyze how citizens leverage the tools of social media platforms to reconstitute counterpublics in times of crisis since our current digital era is marked by a tension between (1) an unprecedented speed with which spontaneous social mobilization can occur, and (2) the fragility of social and political bonds such networked relationships constitute. Indeed, there is a profound paradox at the center of our digital era, for just as digital counterpublics can spontaneously emerge and move people to act, as in the rapid ascent of the 2020 George Floyd racial justice protests, those very digital means of sociality can just as easily tear away at the social

fabric holding collective life together, as in the case of fake news, networked propaganda, trolling, and perverse forms of online harassment and conspiracy entrepreneurism (Benkler et al., 2018). The #StopTheSteal violent insurrection at the US Capitol on 6 January 2021, for example, was a direct outgrowth of the fraying of American digital social life. Counterpublics, therefore, are context-specific phenomena and must be studied and understood within the sociocultural milieu in which they manifest.

The heterogeneity underlying counterpublic formation makes them an important point of cross-cultural comparison that analytically highlights the complex interplay of digital (counter)publics in times of crisis. A cross-cultural comparison holds deep analytical value since there is no singular Internet so much as there is a medley of digital realms and protocols with their own histories, legal regimes, political economies, material infrastructures, and geopolitical circumstances that we collectively refer to as "the Internet" (Ongweso, 2022). Toward this end, we shall advance a comparative case study of the way citizens leverage platforms for counterpublic formation in the Republic of Georgia and the United States. Both cases represent two ends of the Janus-face of the 21st-century Internet: The Internet as a tool for public will formation that can enrich the flowering of democracy across digital spaces, and the Internet as a tool capable of undermining traditional norms of public will formation predicated on shared understanding across the public sphere(s).

A comparative case study between these two nation-states would make a timely contribution to our field's understanding of the politics of social media in an era marked by uncertainty and the threat of illiberalism and democratic backsliding. While scholars have documented the way citizens use Twitter and other digital tools to build counterpublics for social change, many scholars have not conducted cross-cultural comparisons with other countries outside the United States. Scholars of counterpublics in the United States (or the Global North) would stand to benefit from comparisons between the US experience and other countries, especially in an era marked by threats to press

freedom, free speech on the Internet, and calls for banning platforms such as TikTok based on a combination of national security fears and a clear rise of xenophobic and jingoistic rhetoric.

The once pervasive and utopian ideal that the Internet would help bridge national cultures through a spirit of cosmopolitanism into a global public sphere has sadly given way to a world order increasingly marked by rival Internets competing for geopolitical influence and market access. Accordingly, it is important to measure and compare both public sentiment and levels of (dis)trust in the face of this changing global digital landscape to analyze how citizen perceptions of these developments across different nation-states informs how they respond to them.

Our criterion for comparison is informed by the need to deepen our understanding of the relationship between levels of trust and the choices citizens make when they build and participate in digital counterpublics during times of crisis. Francis Fukuyama (1995) provides a useful definition of trust when he claims that "trust is the expectation that arises within a community of regular, honest and cooperative behaviour based on commonly shared norms, on the part of other members of that community" (p. 26). Liberal democracies are political systems that depend on trust since they are comprised of institutions for making decisions as a people together.

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A comparative analysis between the specific countries of Georgia and the United States is timely for several reasons. First, the two countries are at different stages of economic and social media development. The United States is a member of the Global North while Georgia is a member of the Global South, which in part enables citizens in the United States much more access to a range of social media platforms and digital tools that are simply not available in Georgia. Yet, despite their differences in development, the two countries have several important points in common regarding social media and digital counterpublics that make a comparison between them on matters of trust necessary for scholarly value.

In both nation-states, for example, Internet culture is in a period of transition brought about by crises of confidence that bear on the defense of liberal democratic values. Recent surveys of American and Georgian attitudes toward major institutions suggest a moment in which confidence in liberal democratic values is shaky at best. The Pew Research Center (2022) reports that Americans' trust in government has fallen from 24% to 21% among respondents reporting that they could "trust the government at least most of the time" (n.p.), and surveys from the Caucasus Barometer indicate that Georgians who say they rather or fully trust Parliament has fallen from 25% in 2020 to 16% in 2021 (Caucasus Research Resource Center, 2020, 2021). Trust in the electoral process is strained in both countries, as indicated by drastic ideological splits along partisan lines. A Pew Research Center (2020) survey conducted following the 2020 US Presidential elections indicated that 59% of voters believe the elections were run somewhat or very well; however, this varied by party as only 21% of Trump voters believed the elections were run somewhat or very well, compared with 94% of Biden voters. Similarly, a 2021 survey of Georgians indicated that 57% of respondents believed recent parliamentary elections to be somewhat or completely fair; however, only 27% of supporters of the major opposition party, the United National Front, believed the

elections to be somewhat or completely fair, compared with 86% of supporters of the ruling Georgian Dream party (Caucasus Research Resource Center, 2021).

The source of each nation-state's crisis of confidence is also similar, for in each country we see both (1) external foreign influences interfering in their respective Internet cultures, and (2) affective partisanship that precipitates a breakdown in trust. Regarding external foreign interference, both countries have been involved in prolonged geopolitical disputes with Russia, a nation that has infiltrated the digital public spaces of each country in order to influence their domestic politics. Russian Internet interference in the domestic affairs of each country has been a major political issue in Georgia since the end of the Cold War and in the United States since the 2016 elections.

In Georgia, digital platforms function as a crucial tool for building counterpublic will formation in defense of liberal democratic values. At the same time, these counterpublic formations are threatened by reactionary, traditionalist forces that also deploy digital platforms in a context of crisis marked by Russian imperial aggression and calls to join the European Union and/or NATO. In the United States, Silicon Valley is in a state of disrepair, an industry in a "midlife crisis" as technology journalist Derek Thompson (2022) puts it, marked by layoffs, plunges in stock valuation, the stagnation of Meta, and the spectacular disintegration of X (formerly known as Twitter)1 under Elon Musk, who American liberals have come to perceive as a partisan threat to their values. In response to this crisis, we have witnessed a rapid migration from dominant and monopolistic social media platforms (i.e. Facebook, Twitter) to an emerging decentralized Fediverse (i.e. Mastodon).

A comparative case study is also an appropriate methodological technique for studying the conditions of sociopolitical crisis and reconstitution, especially in the case of digital counterpublics. Comparative case studies involve a close analysis and synthesis of similarities, differences, and patterns across developments that share a common focus or problem. This

approach helps illustrate the discontinuous dynamics of social change across time and space. Sociopolitical change is often expressed through destabilizing and disruptive moments of transition rather than linear, smooth, or gradual trajectories. Sociopolitical change is an open-ended and contingent process marked by conflict and strategic choices made under duress and uncertainty rather than pre-determined teleology. In what follows below, we advance a rich description of each nation-state while drawing upon survey data from publicly available sources to measure levels of (dis)trust. Our rich descriptions are informed by academic and mainstream journalistic accounts of events that have led to current conditions. As much as possible, we have sourced this scholarship and coverage from authors situated in each country. In addition, we have selected survey data from preeminent organizations that are nonprofit, nonpartisan, and that provide transparency about their research methodologies, including the Pew Research Center, the Caucasus Research Resource Center, and Freedom House.

Digital counterpublics in the United States: a slow-building crisis that has reached a point of uncertainty

Background leading to the crisis of trust in digital counterpublics

Digital counterpublic formation in the United States originated with Internet chatrooms and blogs, but fully matured to become integral to American social and political mores at the turn of the century with the development of Web 2.0. Web 2.0 provided a functional infrastructure that enabled networked computers to become so ubiquitous that they quickly became a primary basis for anyone with access to them to build social networks and manage peer-to-peer relationships with friends and family, professional colleagues and acquaintances, or even strangers. During the mid-2000s, an inaugural generation of closed platforms—Facebook (2004), YouTube (2005), Twitter

(2006), and later Instagram (2009)—began offering web tools for creating and exchanging user-generated content that came to dominate the Internet habits of most users. By the end of the 2000s, but especially with the introduction of the smartphone in 2009, these platforms had become an omnipresent digital foundation through which millions of Americans organized their lives, and where the online and offline domains of everyday life increasingly converged.

The digital tools of this new platform-based sociality supercharged digital counterpublic formation. Political activists and casual citizens alike could draw upon Facebook's social network or Twitter's algorithmic suite of hashtags for spreading petitions, raising awareness about social issues and causes, or organizing spontaneous protests. Social media's digital tools, notes Zeynap Tufekci (2017), "have made this work much easier to undertake, and to organize in a more horizontal and egalitarian manner" (p. 50). Networked protest via social media became operationalized for mobilizing counterpublics in opposition to the Iraq War and the War on Terror, and for promoting LGBTQAI+ equality and rights. Indeed, some of the most influential social movements of the past two decades—Occupy Wall Street (2011–2012) and Black Lives Matter (2012–present)—have leveraged social media connectivity to introduce a new paradigm of decentralized and leaderless movement building predicated on anonymous facilitators who link civil solidarity with cyber-connectivity between the protests and demonstrations in the streets and social media (Hardt & Negri, 2017, pp. 11–14).

Between 2005 and 2020, social media exploded in user growth, with platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter reaching hundreds of millions of users. The enormous scale of these platforms enabled dissidents to form digital counterpublics by virtue of their capacity to reach a massive audience cheaply and rather easily at unprecedented speed. However, the benefits of scale also compromised the critical and countercultural ethos that enable counterpublics to flourish. Put simply, the very algorithmic mechanisms of connectivity used for organizing protests

and spreading a cause also served commercial and monetizing endeavors for online markets, not to mention conspiracy entrepreneurism and disinformation propaganda for political parties and foreign governments. Driven first by the demands of venture capitalists and then Wall Street, the attention-driven economy of social media became a conduit for forms of constant user engagement that could be translated into data-driven advertising profits. User engagement, it was soon discovered, was commensurate with the emotional intensity of the content. Put another way, the more emotionally charged the content, the better it spreads across users' networks (Carr & Hayes, 2015; Stieglitz, Dang-Xuan, 2013). This presented social media with an ongoing problem, for content that is socially and politically polarizing, offensive, or frankly fraudulent and conspiracy-oriented is particularly well optimized for contagion across user networks.

The massive scale commanded by the likes of Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram has created a moderation dilemma driven in part by the emotionally charged content contagion that travels pervasively across them. The platforms came to be plagued by fake news, disinformation, scams, as well as harmful and abusive harassment (i.e. "trolling") that has diminished their counterpublic potential. Political activists and citizens who once eagerly leveraged the platforms for counterpublic endeavors now found themselves enmeshed in a digital climate that was often hostile to their ambitions, and even their very presence on the platforms. Such content moderation controversies are perhaps best typified by the 2014–2015 #Gamergate controversy, which was a right-wing online harassment campaign against feminism, diversity, and progressive values in gaming culture.

Since the userbases of these platforms are very large and diverse, the platforms themselves have been unwilling to decrease their userbases or relinquish control over content moderation. The result has been a process wherein the platforms impose top-down content moderation policies that generally alienate and displease all stakeholders. Conservatives have accused the platforms of

censoring their views, while liberals and progressives have accused them of enabling the algorithmic promotion of dangerous illiberal, racist, homophobic, misogynistic, and anti-democratic extremism.

Crisis of confidence: foreign Internet interference and the threat of anti-democratic developments

These controversies reached a new boiling point during the feverish American elections of 2016 and the subsequent chaos of the Trump administration (2017–2021). Twitter and Facebook were each accused of negligence in the face of Russian election interference from its Internet Research Agency, while Facebook willingly delivered psychographic profile data on tens of millions of its users without their knowledge to the controversial political consulting firm Cambridge Analytica, which has been accused of harboring white nationalist leanings. The platforms have also continued to be plagued by the rise of conspiracies such as QAnon as well as dangerous disinformation and anti-vaccine campaigns during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The most venomous social-media-driven conspiracy theory and disinformation operation to date, however, has undoubtedly been the #StopTheSteal campaign, which galvanized thousands of Trump supporters to violently attack Capitol Hill on 6 January 2021, to disrupt the certification of the 2020 US presidential election. Election deniers have used the digital tools of social media to harass and threaten local election officials across the country as well as spread conspiracy theories of nonexistent election fraud. Social media is now a psychological and ideological battleground that threatens future elections in the United States.

The cumulative impact of Russian foreign meddling in the 2016 election, Facebook's Cambridge Analytica privacy scandal, and the violence of 6 January has resulted in a crisis of confidence in social media within the United States. This crisis has been particularly evident in survey data collected on Facebook, the most popular platform in the United States. According to the Ponemon

Institute and Pew Research Center, Facebook experienced a 66% decline in trust after 2016, with only 15% of Americans surveyed claiming that they trust Facebook as a source of political news (Gramlich, 2021; Weisbaum, 2018).

Despite the challenges that have materialized since 2016, social media continued to serve as a vital digital infrastructure for counterpublic formation in many significant respects. Social media was instrumental in organizing the Women's March of January 2017, when millions of protesters demonstrated in Washington, D.C. and around the country against the inauguration of the Trump administration. Moreover, the counterpublic promise of social media was on full display during the intense summer of 2020, which witnessed nationwide protests in response to the killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. The scale, speed, and spontaneity of the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests could have never been organized or operationalized without the digital tools of social media. Finally, despite the viral COVID-19 conspiracy theories and disinformation that have plagued these platforms, the early and frightening days of the pandemic illustrate how public health officials, epidemiologists, doctors, and nurses were able to leverage the counterpublic potential of social media to provide harrowing accounts of the dangers of COVID-19 as well as health guidance to Americans in the midst of the colossal incompetence and failed leadership of the Trump administration.

Nevertheless, by the end of 2021, the state of the Big Tech platforms was ironically ambiguous. In many ways, the platforms were as powerful as ever. The COVID-19 pandemic was enormously profitable for them since most Americans were working remotely from home, obeying public health lockdown policies, and relying on digital tools to avoid human contact and exposure to the virus. On the other hand, they continued to be exposed to threats on a plethora of fronts that signaled signs of vulnerability. Threats to their power included ongoing consumer and advertiser boycotts (i.e. #DeleteFacebook), as well as bipartisan calls for their regulation and dissolution via antitrust law.

The greatest threat to these platforms, however, lay in a growing disillusionment with social media itself as a force for social progress and community. Vice technology journalist Edward Ongweso (2022) summarizes this sentiment when he observes:

Today, we recognize that the technologies responsible for social media do not always harmoniously synergize with one another to create wonderful communities. It's relatively easy for these networks to incite a genocide, spark a mental health crisis, radicalize people, black out entire countries, and surveil specific populations. (n.p.)

Likewise, the Atlantic's Brian Merchant (2022) expresses similar dread when he notes that

> The big social networks are stuck. And there is little profit incentive to get them unstuck. That, after all, would require investing heavily in content moderation, empowering trust and safety teams, and penalizing malicious viral content that brings in huge traffic . . . Rather than drafting and implementing robust policies to address toxicity, harassment, and user security, the networks' leadership has opted, essentially, to ignore the problems. (n.p.)

The "stuckness [of Silicon Valley] we're seeing," he concludes, "is the result of some of the most ambitious companies of our generation succeeding wildly yet having no vision beyond scale—no serious interest in engaging the civic and social dimensions of their projects" (n.p.).

The brewing disillusionment with the platforms that have dominated social media over the previous two decades of Web 2.0 came to metastasize into a multifaceted crisis in 2022. Indeed, 2022 proved to be a consequential year for all of the major players in Big Tech and Silicon Valley, but most acutely for Facebook (Meta) and Twitter.

Facebook's decade of scandals has finally caught up with the company. The public disenchantment with the company has now converged with a stagnation in user growth. The platform faces an existential long-term threat since its power users in the United States are aging while it has struggled to attract younger Gen Z users, who generally find it dull. After recording

record profits during the pandemic, in 2022 Facebook suffered immense market capitalization losses, with Meta's stock falling nearly 70% Facebook and Instagram, two of Meta's prime properties, have continued to lose market share to a new generation of platforms: Discord, Twitch, and especially TikTok (Merchant, 2022; Ongweso, 2022).

Crisis of confidence: domestic partisan polarization and perceptions of partisan bias

Meanwhile, Twitter underwent a monumental ownership change when billionaire Elon Musk purchased the platform in the fall of 2022. Though the premier microblogging social media site in the world and popular among newsmakers, journalists, and politicians, the platform too has struggled with a stagnation of user growth and has struggled to turn a profit (Ongweso, 2022).

Musk's leadership of the platform has been marked by a clear bias in favor of the extreme political Right. Since his purchase of the platform, he has emboldened its toxic trolling culture by reinstating accounts that were suspended for harassment and hate speech (including former President Donald Trump) while banning journalists who critically cover him. He has aggressively elevated politically far-right groups and immersed himself into the right-wing media ecosystem by promoting violent conspiracy theories, as in the case of the attack on Paul Pelosi. According to survey data collected by Pew Research Center, Musk's leadership has resulted in the widespread perception among liberal and democratic-leaning users of the platform that Twitter is both hostile to them and bad for American democracy, prompting them to limit their use of the platform and leave it entirely (Anderson, 2023; Faverio, 2023).

Moreover, Musk's leadership has only intensified the problems that have plagued the platform and has potentially placed it on a path toward a slow decay to irrelevance. He has drastically and indiscriminately eliminated engineering staff to cut costs, which has undermined the technical performance of the platform and threatens its long-term functionality. His changes to Twitter's

verification and algorithmic recommendation systems have undermined the veracity of information that flows on the platform, with reports suggesting that he has instructed engineers to artificially boost some accounts he prefers (such as his own) over those he despises. Finally, due likely to a dearth of technical staffing, he has placed restrictions on the number of daily tweets users can see, which has restricted how users can utilize the site. The cumulative result of these developments has been a mass exodus of Twitter users since late 2022 (Lomas, 2023; Warzel, 2022).

Responding to the crisis: the civic reconstitution of digital counterpublics in the United States

The multidimensional crisis of digital counterpublics in the United States—which includes crises of trust, financial stagnation, and anti-democratic violence—has prompted political and civic leaders to discover alternative digital means for forming counterpublics. There has been a specific urgency to design and participate in a digital infrastructure that minimizes, and even abandons, the pressures of virality and its attendant algorithmic rewards that often breed values (i.e. toxicity and hostility) that undermine counterpublics.

One popular alternative social media platform that has emerged is Mastodon, which has exploded in popularity due to its absorption of a surge of new users in the months following Musk's takeover of Twitter. First developed by German programmer Eugen Rochko in 2016, Mastodon is an open-source platform that resembles the microblogging tools and format of Twitter. Unlike Twitter or the other closed garden Big Tech platforms, however, Mastodon is decentralized and built upon the protocol ActivityPub, which enables anyone to use the open-source software to establish a server that hosts a Twitter-style social media community with the power to set their own rules. Users of these servers, which are called "instances," can in effect cultivate their own mini-Twitters that link up with other Mastodon (and non-Mastodon) servers to form an interlinked online community

called the “Fediverse.” Users are free to join an “instance” that matches their values, interests, and digital community standards (Knight, 2022).

Within this “federated” model of social media, users are empowered to moderate content and maintain online standards of decorum in ways that are almost impossible on Twitter or Facebook. Server administrators, who are volunteers that maintain and moderate the “instances,” can suspend users who violate the rules of the community. Unlike X or Facebook, where a single figure such as Musk or Mark Zuckerberg can impose standards of his choosing in a centralized and top-down method, Mastodon is far more democratic and grassroots in orientation. If users violate community standards by posting hate speech or by abusively trolling and harassing other users, the community can remove them.

It remains to be seen if Mastodon, or any other new alternative such as Threads, Post.news, or Hive.social, will be able to permanently disrupt the monopolistic reach of the closed garden Big Tech platforms since user migration to alternatives will likely be uneven and intermittent. Scaling federated alternatives will be a challenge, but recent events have demonstrated that it can be done, and the foreboding uncertainty and toxicity surrounding X and Facebook may potentially serve as a catalyst for more migration to the Fediverse over time. Nonetheless, Mastodon offers a compelling design model for a digital infrastructure that aligns with the ethos and values necessary for counterpublics to thrive.

Digital counterpublics in Georgia: a crisis of self-determination and foreign influence

Background leading to the crisis of trust in digital counterpublics

Digital counterpublic formation in Georgia is markedly different from that in the United States. Even though Georgia has a rich history of counterpublic formation and mass demonstrations, it has only recently seen widespread Internet adoption. Freedom House reports that only 20% of the population had Internet access in 2009, growing to 45% in 2015, and 88.4% in 2022. Mobile broadband adoption has only recently increased as well, from 43% of the population using mobile devices to access the Internet in 2015 to 87.2% in 2021 (Freedom House, 2016, 2022). Furthermore, few social media platforms outside of Facebook have provided user interfaces in the Georgian language (Kakachia et al., 2014), a phenomenon that explains why Twitter—often understood as the de facto platform for global dissent and protest—is virtually unused by the general public in Georgia. These limitations mean that Georgian counterpublics and opposition movements have relied more on sympathetic television and radio stations than social media for agenda setting and organizing, a reality made manifest by the deep partisan polarization in Georgian news media (Anable, 2006; Robakidze, 2019).

After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Republic of Georgia has struggled to fully realize its own national self-determination against the backdrop of a protracted proxy war of influence between Russian imperialism and Western neoliberalism. Since the mid-1990s, Russia has exploited sectarian divides within Georgian society. This was especially pronounced during a period of civil unrest in which separatist groups in Abkhazia and South Ossetia sought their own independence, leading to the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia that resulted in the Russian occupation of these two regions, amounting to about 20% of Georgian territory. At

the same time, Georgia has seen an influx of funding from Europe and the United States to support the development of liberal democracy through civil society and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The tensions between these competing ideologies can be felt across Georgian society. While a majority of Georgians identify as European and hold aspirations of joining the European Union and NATO, a significant population views Westernization as a threat to traditional Georgian values and religious orthodoxy, thereby making them vulnerable to anti-Western propaganda generated by the Kremlin.

Crisis of confidence: foreign Internet interference and the threat of anti-democratic developments

While Georgia has seen several major crises of civil society over the past 30 years, it was the 2008 "August War" with Russia that emerged as a threshold moment in the significance of digital communications for nascent Georgian liberal democracy. During this conflict, Russian forces supported separatists in the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and invaded major Georgian cities near these borders. In conjunction with this invasion, Russia launched major cyberattacks against Georgian information infrastructure by defacing or overwhelming government websites and popular news sites, arguably the first time in history that cyberattacks were used in parallel with military action. Interestingly, these attacks were precipitated not only by government agents but also by loosely coordinated groups of noncombatants. These attacks created an "information blockade" that temporarily prevented the Georgian government from communicating directly with its citizens and the international community. This allowed the Kremlin to fill the void with its own narrative that shaped early perceptions about the war, including blaming the Saakashvili government for instigating the conflict and justifying Russian occupation as "peacekeeping" (Beehner et al., 2018).

Despite Georgia's losses in this conflict, it did gain a new kind of engaged citizen. Scott and Gamreklidze (2013) report that during this crisis, noncombatant Georgians used social media "to help clear the rumors, lies, propaganda, ambiguities, and information blackouts that always constitute the 'fog of war'" (p. 99). In addition, they attribute the Civil Society and Media Support Program at Tbilisi's Open Society-Georgia Foundation with coordinating teams of citizen journalists who translated and distributed media to international media outlets to provide Georgian perspectives on the conflict. Following the invasion and subsequent occupation, Russian and Georgian activists have continued to engage in online propaganda wars, using social media platforms to promote nationalism and refute disinformation.

Georgia's 2012 parliamentary elections demonstrate another threshold moment. Following the 2008 war with Russia, the government of the ruling United National Movement party attempted to exert increasing control over broadcast media, and it was anticipated that they would retain power through this advantage. At the time, however, Georgia had very few if any laws in place restricting Internet access or social media use. As a result, opposition parties such as the Georgian Dream coalition, as well as news and media outlets used social media to circumvent media restrictions, often posting in English to attract the attention of Western audiences. While social media did not have a major impact on the election outcome, outreach efforts targeting younger voters in digital spaces set the stage for future digital activism. In their assessment of this election, Kakachia et al. (2014) argue the significance of social media as follows:

> For the first time, a critical mass of opposition-leaning literature and opinion was readily available, in clear international English, for journalists, analysts, and opinion-makers abroad to examine a more nuanced perspective of the internal political situation. Given the outsized influence that Western official opinion plays in Georgian internal politics, this may have contributed to both the electoral upset and the relatively peaceful transfer of power. (p. 274)

Thus, by 2012, the Internet was becoming a significant force in Georgian civil society.

We argue that these two threshold moments—the 2008 war with Russia and the 2012 parliamentary elections—define the conditions that have led to a contemporary counterpublic crisis in Georgia. Despite humiliating losses and occupation during the 2008 war, anti-Russian sentiment and nationalistic fervor became more normalized in groups likely to be online, such as urban youth and professionals. During the 2012 elections, Georgians experienced the first system-wide efforts by parties to use social media to influence political opinion, normalizing political engagement in digital spaces. After the Georgian Dream coalition unexpectedly won the parliamentary majority in 2012, new opposition movements emerged to protest government overreach in elections, regulations over independent media, and the perception that Georgian Dream leaders were fostering closer ties with Russia. In June 2019, the Georgian government allowed a visiting member of Russia's Parliament to make an address in the Georgian Parliament, setting off months of street protests (Higgins, 2019). In November 2019, opposition movements continued demonstrations, this time calling for election reform to allow for proportional representation in Parliament, arguing that the current system too heavily favored the Georgian Dream coalition (Crowcroft, 2019). Groups organizing these protests, such as the "Shame Movement," typically have strong pro-European Union views and receive support from Western NGOs and civil society organizations. The Shame Movement, in particular, has leveraged its relationship with organizations such as the European Endowment for Democracy to pressure Georgian lawmakers and to use social media campaigns to recruit young voters (European Endowment for Democracy, 2020). Mobilization by youth-dominated organizations like the Shame Movement has emboldened other groups such as LGBTQAI+ organizations, who have attempted to carve out counterpublic space for themselves in an otherwise culturally conservative country.

Crisis of confidence: domestic partisan polarization and perceptions of partisan bias

A crisis has emerged in the escalating conflict between movements aligned with Western liberal democracy and those who favor isolation and illiberal religious orthodoxy. The latter movement is best represented by "Alt-Info," a reactionary organization known to use tactics of intimidation and violence during counterprotests. For example, on 5 July 2021, Tbilisi Pride canceled its LGBTQAI+ march through Tbilisi after Alt-Info leaders organized a counter-demonstration that resulted in violence against activists and journalists, injuring as many as 20 people amid a tepid security response from the government (Roth, 2021). Prior to the attacks on Tbilisi Pride, Facebook removed dozens of accounts and pages linked to Alt-Info for "coordinated inauthentic behavior" (Meta, 2020), but according to Myth Detector (2019), an independent fact-checking platform, Alt-Info uses Viber and Telegram platforms to mobilize its audience and disseminate anti-Western propaganda, often parroting Russian talking points.

Illiberal organizations like Alt-Info are able to operate freely in Georgia for several reasons. First, their actions often receive tacit support from the Orthodox Church and many members of government who oppose the values imparted by pro-Western NGOs and civil society organizations, including gender equality, sexual liberation, and LGBTQAI+ rights. Second, Georgia has very few restrictions on social media and Internet use, making it easy for them to disseminate propaganda and organize, so long as they do not run afoul of social media platforms' terms of service. Freedom House's 2022 report on Freedom on the Net gave Georgia a "Free" rating, giving it a score of 78/100 (the United States earned a score of 76/100, for context).

Despite the openness of access to the Internet in Georgia, the threat environment created by illiberal organizations has a chilling effect on counterpublics. In a policy brief from the nonpartisan,

Tbilisi-based Georgian Institute of Politics, Nino Gozalishvili (2021) summarizes the present crisis in Georgia as follows:

[I]n reality both populism and the big data open platforms have had a counterproductive influence on democratizing society and its institutional structures. Bypassing the cordon sanitaire of traditional media and institutional constraints, national populist, as well as radical powers in Georgia, make use of social network platforms for legitimizing and mobilizing purposes. What is more, such actors have the leverage of offering alternative meanings to fundamental concepts of democracy, such as freedom of expression or that of free speech—the ultimate democratic goals throughout the 30 years of independence in Georgia. (p. 6)

Gozalishvili further defines this as a dilemma between "strengthening democratic values on the one hand and tackling political actor's leverage to benefit from the new practices of disinformation dispersal (in the name of 'freedom of expression'), on the other" (p. 6).

Responding to the crisis: the civic reconstitution of digital counterpublics in the Republic of Georgia

NGOs and civil society organizations have invested in media education and fact-checking initiatives in Georgia to counteract disinformation and propaganda spread by illiberal organizations. Examples of these include the Media Development Fund (MDF) and Myth Detector. MDF promotes media accountability, professional and institutional development for journalists and media professionals, and media literacy initiatives that build citizen resilience. Myth Detector, a fact-checking platform sponsored by the MDF, has partnered with Facebook to fight misinformation in the Facebook News Feed.

It remains to be seen if these organizations will be able to effectively shield Georgian counterpublics from reactionary forces because even these organizations are at risk. In early 2023, the Georgian Parliament introduced a "foreign agents law" that would require individuals,

organizations, and media outlets that receive 20% or more of their funding from non-Georgian sources to register with the Georgian Justice Ministry as “agents of foreign influence” or else face stiff fines and penalties (Cordell, 2023). In response, Georgians organized massive protests in cities across the country and broadcast them over Facebook and TikTok using the hashtag #არარუსულკანონს (ara rusul kanons/“No Russian Law”), in reference to a similar law created in Russia that was ultimately used to stifle dissent and pro-Western views. Demonstrators ultimately succeeded and Parliament ended up dropping the law, but the incident further exposed the precarity of Georgian digital counterpublic formation, which relies on Western civil society organizations for support and the good graces of social media platforms run by Western billionaires.

Digital counterpublics in the United States and the Republic of Georgia: comparative insights

The respective cases of the United States and the Republic of Georgia each provide a rich account of the complexities, uncertainties, threats, and possibilities of our current digital era. The United States offers an example of an advanced liberal democracy that has integrated the digital tools of Web 2.0 into everyday life. Georgia, by contrast, offers an example of an emerging liberal democracy that has not yet fully integrated these tools.

There are a series of important insights that the comparison between the two cases reveals about social media and digital counterpublics in our current era. First, the two cases reveal a paradox of Big Tech platforms that can serve to refine and resituate critical scholarship of social media, particularly Marxist critiques (Fuchs, 2016). Indeed, our findings illustrate how the Global South offers cases that deviate from totalizing critiques of platforms such as Facebook. In the United States, Big Tech platforms (i.e. Meta/Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) and TikTok are accused of

fostering illiberal trends in the West, including the censorship of speech and political views, surveillance, violent harassment, and even fomenting attacks on the US Capitol and legislators. In Georgia, however, proponents of liberal democracy do not have the luxury of a wide range of digital tools to draw from to form and maintain digital counterpublics against illiberal Russian proxy groups. As reported by the 2021 Caucasus Barometer, Facebook remains the country's primary social media platform, with 93% of male and 95% of female respondents of any age reporting using the platform. In addition, 40% of respondents ages 18 to 34 reported using TikTok and 56% reported using Instagram in 2021 (Caucasus Research Resource Center, 2021).

Accordingly, Big Tech platforms such as Meta and now TikTok serve as a form of digital life-support from which they can digitally mobilize citizens to protest illiberal developments in their society. Whereas in the United States, algorithmic virality has been criticized for fomenting disinformation, fake news, and a mental health crisis, in Georgia such virality can be the difference between national self-determination, freedom, and constitutional rights or democratic backsliding and illiberalism. Our comparison illustrates the necessity for critical scholars of social media to emphasize the importance of context in future research. As we have emphasized throughout this article, the contrasting national and sociohistorical contexts for social media use are vital for understanding the complex ways users leverage it as they navigate the specific conditions that inform their political dilemmas.

In addition, our findings offer scholars of digital counterpublics a new line of inquiry for future research. To date, critical scholarship on counterpublics has left the question of their digital reconstitution largely unexamined. Scholars tend to take their existence as an organic feature of liberal democracies without carefully analyzing structural trends and developments that make them vulnerable and even threaten their very survival. Our comparison of the United States and Georgia reveals a series of variables such as external foreign threats, domestic polarization, and

partisanship bias, as well as the range of digital tools available to citizens that future scholarship should consider when theorizing the fragility and reconstitution of counterpublics.

Likewise, our findings also reveal the resilience of digital counterpublics in the face of the challenges illiberalism and democratic backsliding present to them, which future scholarship should consider. Digital counterpublics are kairotic by nature. They are not permanent structures of our digital era, rather, they result from the timely and strategic action of citizens that recognize situational moments when digital tools can be used to organize other citizens in a common cause. The two cases of Georgia and the United States illustrate just how creatively amorphous and shapeshifting digital counterpublics can be. Counterpublics by their nature are contingent and marginal, and always keen to adapt to changing circumstances often under the threat of repression from either the state or powerful state adjacent actors that harbor hostility toward them.

Activists and leaders who form counterpublics must have what might be called “digital dexterity”; that is, they must either leverage existing digital tools or create new ones to gain a strategic advantage in their struggle to either enrich the democratic possibilities of the digital era or to stand against democratic backsliding. Our findings suggest that future research should emphasize the range of digital tools and choice that underlies the digital dexterity of citizens in the context in which they build digital counterpublics to do politics.

Finally, our findings emphasize that digital counterpublics are fragile and precarious. The cases of the United States and Georgia illustrate how the digital means by which counterpublics can form can also be a source of their potential dissolution and undoing. The dangerous potential of artificial intelligence (AI) chatbots and deepfake propaganda, for example, could very easily erode trust in online networks over time. Since counterpublics depend on social bonds that can sustain them beyond the events and conditions that give birth to them, scholars should continue to measure

public trust as we have. Likewise, the intense pace and scale of technological innovation in our digital era will likely result in some form of digital divide between citizens in terms of their digital literacy with these tools. Digital illiteracy has likely contributed to the vulnerability of digital counterpublics from foreign interference since, as in the case of Russian interference in the United States and Georgia, it was designed to exploit affective polarization and the cultural biases of digital consumers.

It is also not a given, moreover, that the tools of digital media necessarily result in democratic outcomes, which is why the Fediverse presents a compelling model of social media that scholars should continue to study. Unlike Big Tech platforms, the federated model is decentralized yet organized through both formal and informal layers of democratic management that empower a diverse set of stakeholders to participate in the platform's community standards. It is a work in progress, to be sure, but it offers a unique precedent and standard for the quality of democratic participation that users on Twitter or Facebook have yet to experience. To paraphrase a popular credo of open-source software: "With enough eyeballs, and an engaged and participatory community, many errors will be caught." In an era of uncertainty and risk, scholars should continue to study how citizens engage in platform experimentation that digital tools make possible.

Conclusion

In this article, we have conducted a comparative case study analysis of the role of platforms in the formation of digital counterpublics in the United States and the Republic of Georgia. The findings of our comparative case study suggest that the platformation of the digital public sphere poses both risks and democratic possibilities for the formation of digital counterpublics in an era marked by the threat of illiberal movements around the world. Given the complex and heterogeneous nature of digital counterpublics, scholars should continue to study how they form in a cross-cultural

comparative manner to deepen our understanding of the different models they can take and the contingent and kairotic events that catalyze them into existence.

Note

1. In July 2023, Twitter was renamed X by Elon Musk. We refer to the platform by both names in this article since the platform was named "Twitter" during much of the period we analyze.

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