

Rhetorical Assemblages: The Interplay of Power, Identity and Community on Social Media

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Figure 1: Social Media Applications

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Introduction

In the digital age, social media is transforming politics by changing the dynamics in contexts where power is wielded, identities are formed, and communities are mobilized. In just over two decades, platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) have transitioned from being simply social communication networks to spaces for developing and contesting critical public discourse. This was prominent during the build-up to the 2024 U.S. General Election, as X was the destination for significant engagement, thereby housing narratives that would transform the outcome of the election.

This seminar paper investigates X as rhetorical landscape through the lens of rhetorical assemblages, a theoretical framework that emphasizes the changing interactions between human and non-human actors (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). The study focuses on X as an evolving space where political discourse is influenced by these actors: users, algorithms, hashtags, and governance practices, resulting the distribution of agency.

Furthermore, the paper examines Elon Musk's role as both platform owner and participant that blurred traditional boundaries of governance and discourse. This investigation offers a case study in examining how individual agency and algorithmic power may influence the collective behavior of people. Musk's leadership during the 2024 US elections highlights the complications of social media governance, as lines between ownership, individual-level influence and public discourse are crossed.

This exploratory study employs critical concepts from esteemed scholars such as:

- Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) notion of assemblages.
- Foucault's (1980) discursive formation of power/knowledge.
- Burke's (1950) theory of identification.

- Anderson's (1983) Imagined Communities.

Therefore, introducing these concepts will enable us to define more precisely the multilayered characteristics of rhetorical assemblages in digital spaces. Through such inquiries, this paper interrogates the mediatization of political discourse on social media platforms, the formation of collective identity, and how community is constructed across digital contexts.

The paper proceeds as follows: it first examines the theoretical framework for rhetorical assemblages, by referencing key ideas from Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, Burke, Anderson and Papacharissi. The second section treats X as a rhetorical landscape, analyzing the features, governing structures, and mediating role of discourse. The third section discusses the rhetorical strategies users and communities applied in identity construction and community mobilization during the 2024 U.S. General Election. The last section addresses this prospect, discussing avenues for future research by highlighting the ethical dimension in the dynamics between evolving rhetorical assemblages, platform governance and democratic engagement.

Theoretical Framework for Rhetorical Assemblages in Digital Spaces

Coined within the broader theoretical framework of assemblage theory by Deleuze and Guattari (1987), this concept of rhetorical assemblages illustrates the dynamic and interconnected nature of rhetorical activities. Assemblages are not static entities but fluid configurations of human and non-human actors, including users, algorithms, hashtags, and the socio-political contexts in which they operate. Latour (2005) Actor-Network Theory emphasizes the relational and ever-shifting nature of networks: Human agents (e.g., platform users, influencers) and non-human entities (e.g., algorithms, hashtags) contribute to the formation and reconfiguration of these networks, producing emergent meanings and actions. In digital spaces like X, these assemblages evolve and interact to produce meaning.

Furthermore, Foucault's (1980) conception of power as a dispersed and relational force provides a valuable framework to examine its significance as part of the rhetorical assemblages. Foucault's perspective on the diffused nature of power gives us an idea of how power mediates discourse on social media through an elaborate web of user interactions, platform policies, and algorithmic biases. Platform policies may regulate discourse by privileging certain narratives over others. This was demonstrated during the US 2024 election, as fear propaganda on the destruction of America was significantly amplified on X. This preferred amplification, influenced by (but not limited to) factors such as the platform's governance, illustrates Foucault's assertion that power conducts discourse by privileging certain narratives over others. The algorithms played a significant role in amplifying emotionally resonant hashtags, ensuring their prominence in public debate. This activity commiserates Foucault's position on the diffused nature of power, where control is exercised through the structuring of what is seen and discussed.

In addition, Burke's (1969) theory of identification adds a critical perspective on how identities may be formed through shared symbols and relational dynamics. Hashtags such as #MAGA and #Harris2024 acted as symbolic non-human actors within these assemblages used to foster connections among users by creating a sense of consubstantiality—a shared purpose and belonging. In this election context, the process of identification stems from division. Due to the differences in political affiliations, individuals used these symbols as unique identifiers to align with each other. This process highlights how identity is actively constructed within rhetorical assemblages in digital spaces, whereby individuals use symbols to negotiate their place in networks of discourse.

Also, Anderson (1983) adds to this conversation with his concept of imagined communities, where individuals can bond through shared narratives thereby creating a sense of

collective identity among geographically dispersed people. This shared narrative was evident on X, as supporters of Trump collectively aligned with the #MAGA movement.



Figure 1- Screenshot from X demonstrating imagined communities

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The screenshot captured from X illustrates the horizontal comradeship that binds individuals together regardless of differences (Anderson, 1983). The 3500 users that liked this tweet to validate the information may have their individual differences in other areas, but they have collectively aligned themselves with the shared sentiment expressed by this user. Similarly, the use of these hashtags contribute to the formation of affective publics. Drawing from Papacharissi (2015), emotional engagement is a driving force in community mobilization. Understanding how rhetorical assemblages interact in digital spaces requires this emotional dimension. It emphasizes the role of affect in driving user engagement and mobilizing online communities.

Social media platforms exemplify the non-linear and relational character of assemblages. Unlike traditional communication models which often center on sender-receiver dynamics, platforms like X function as ecosystems where meaning emerges from the interaction of multiple entities. For example, the reach and impact of a tweet may be determined by status of the user, the content of the tweet, the use of hashtags, the socio-political climate in which it is received and most importantly, the platform's algorithm. This process reinforces the need to view social

media platforms as active rhetorical environments where agency is co-constructed by human and non-human elements.

Foucault's Concept of Power in Digital Contexts

Power operates in a dynamic and relational sense in digital spaces, embedded in infrastructures, socio-political contexts, and user interactions. The Foucaultian lens of power/knowledge offers a view into the ways social media platforms like X represent power, not as a centralized or overt mechanism but rather something that is intrinsic to the structures and practices that enable visibility, participation, and discourse. Social media channels are far from passive channels of communication; they actively enact power and govern it by amplifying particular narratives, normalizing select discursive practices, and governing user interactions through data-driven algorithms and content policies.

Foucault's (1980) concept of governmentality, derived from "governmental rationality," describes a form of power that operates through the regulation of populations, guided by political economy and security mechanisms. In digital spaces, this concept provides a lens to understand how social media platforms govern discourse and behavior. Governmentality on X functions as a dispersed system of control, intertwining algorithmic design with regulatory practices to manage user interactions and shape public narratives. Just as Foucault identifies the intertwining of individual freedoms with population regulation in modern governmentality, X's operations balance user autonomy with algorithmic governance such as the community notes feature, subtly controlling what is visible, amplifiable, or restricted. An example of this subtle control can be seen in figure 3:

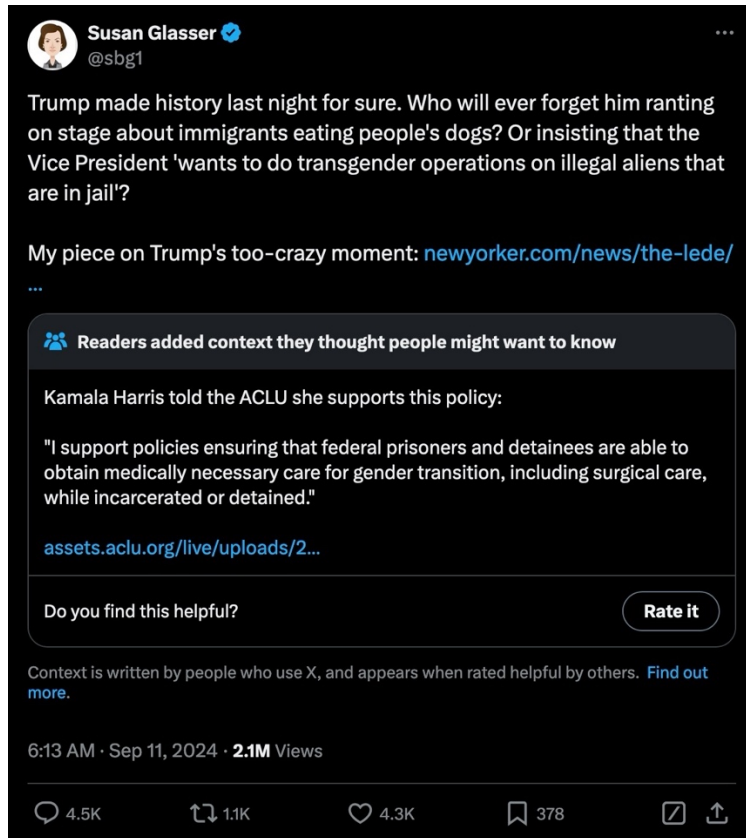


Figure 3- Example of Community Notes on X as a Governance Tool

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Figure 3 illustrates how X uses crowd-sourced context to regulate discourse with algorithmic and communal control. Under Elon Musk’s leadership, X exemplified the dual aspects of contemporary governmentality: the promotion of individual freedoms (e.g., Musk’s emphasis on “free speech”) paired with systematic regulation through algorithmic prioritization and platform policies. This demonstrates the historical shift Foucault identifies from *raison d’État*, where power was transformed from direct state control to modern liberal governmentality, where freedom is granted but subtly regulated through indirect mechanisms.

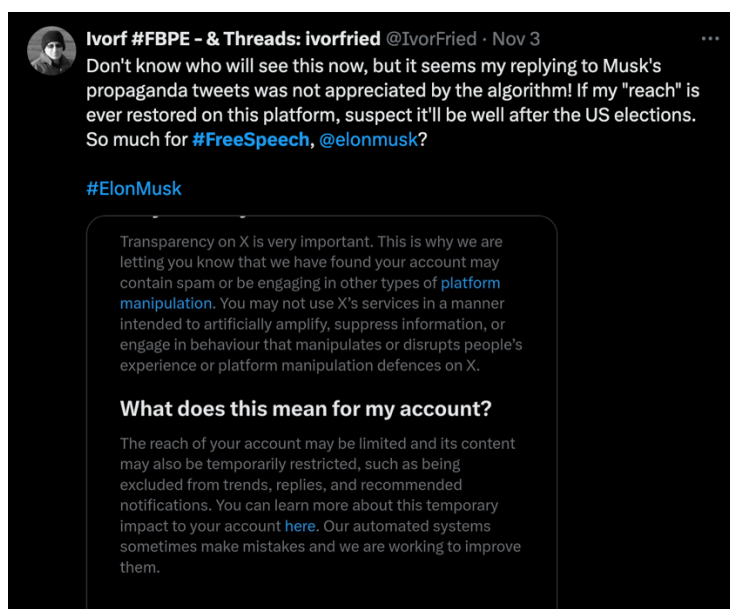


Figure 4: Screenshot from X on Content Regulation and Algorithmic Control

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Figure 4 shows how X's platform policies and algorithms are used to regulate user interactions and discourse. It highlights the intricacies involved in promoting “free speech” and controlling opposing rhetoric. This subtle exercise of power depicts Foucault’s concept of modern liberal governmentality, where individual freedoms are granted but subtly regulated through platform algorithms and policies.

Moreover, the public and performative aspect of social media matches Foucault's view of panopticism, in which a perceived condition of continuous surveillance makes people self-regulate their behavior. Like Bentham's Panopticon, those who act on X know that their action is visible to peers, employers, security agencies, and other regulatory bodies. This awareness drives users to self-regulate and conform to the standards of the platform. During the 2024 U.S. General Election, users inherently moderated their rhetoric to avoid penalties like suspension of accounts or any legal implication. In this sense, individuals were able to air their grievances without making baseless claims that may result to disciplinary actions. Such self-control reflects the

panoptic effect because it is evident that people are aware of the likelihood of surveillance and, therefore, will adjust their behaviors to conform to expected outcomes. Just like Foucault's argument about carceral systems functioning beyond confinement in physical spaces, the digital panopticon has organized behaviors within an environment in which users internalize underlying power dynamics of visibility and adjust their performances accordingly: becoming both subjects and enforcers of the platform's mechanisms of control. Aligning Foucault's scholarship with the concept of rhetorical assemblages on social media, X does not explicitly mediate power; it serves as an active participant in its production and regulation thus influencing individual interactions and the broader socio-political dynamics of public discourse.

Identity and Community Construction

The construction of identity and community in digital spaces, as demonstrated during the 2024 U.S. General Election, is a multifaceted process shaped by symbolic and emotional dynamics. Theories from Kenneth Burke, Benedict Anderson, and Zizi Papacharissi collectively reveal how rhetorical activity on X enable users to align with collective identities, construct shared narratives, and engage emotionally within imagined communities (Anderson 1983).

At the core of the identity construction process lies symbolic alignment where users establish consubstantiality or a shared sense of purpose with others through interaction with symbols, narratives and practices (Burke, 1969). This perspective on identification illustrates how common languages and symbols become unifying tools while serving as differentiating mechanisms that separate insiders from outsiders. Hashtags served as instruments of community mobilization and identity formation during the general election in America in 2024. Harris supporters made use of the hashtag #VoteBlue as a collective pledge for her campaign and its

ideals. The hashtag inherently formed a projected community of supporters across different demographics with similar political interest (Anderson, 1983).

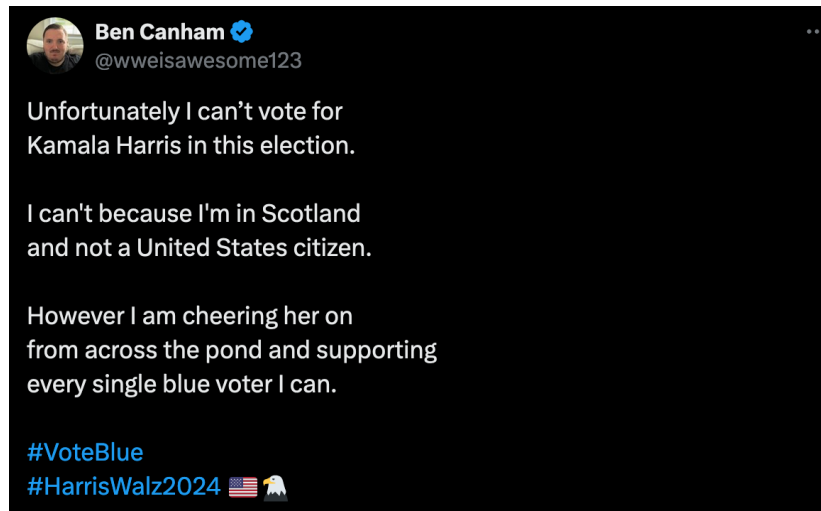


Figure 5 - A Harris supporter from Scotland uses the hashtag #VoteBlue as a collective pledge for her campaign



Figure 6 – Another Harris supporter from Australia responding to the Initial Tweet from Ben.

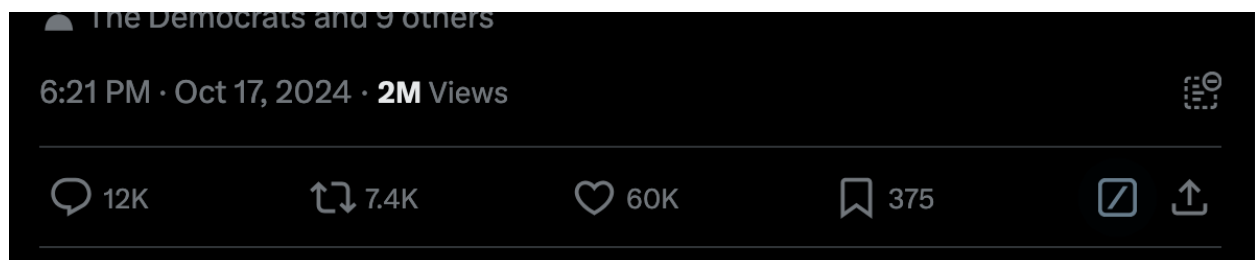


Figure 7 – Engagement metric from Ben's Tweet

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Figures 5, 6 and 7 demonstrate the ability of social media to unite individuals from diverse geographic and cultural contexts into a cohesive imagined community by virtue of shared interest (Papacharissi, 2015). The use of #VoteBlue as a collective symbol binds users from

Australia, Scotland, and beyond, exemplifying the role of social media in facilitating solidarity and identity formation on a global scale.

Conversely, Donald Trump supporters have been using #MAGA (Make America Great Again) beyond its etymology as a campaign slogan. The hashtag carried a cultural marker that served as the representation of a particular vision of patriotism and loyalty to the traditional values of the America. For this reason, the hashtag mobilized even more national pride and nostalgia among supporters. Through these hashtags, both Harris and Trump supporters don't just find space in which to engage in political discourse; they define a space in which their identities as groups can be expressed, challenged, and solidified. Social media became the canvas for these competing narratives, where belonging and division were at real times articulated. Users were not merely fitting into existing narratives; they were actively helping to create a communal identity by merging individual stories into a collective political experience. This indicates that forming identity on X involved more than just observing or spreading symbolic acts—it required active participation in meaning-making, underscoring the platform's role in building digital communities.

Furthermore, Elon Musk's performative identity as the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and an active participant on X further enhances these rhetorical dynamics. His actions—whether amplifying tweets aligned with his support for Donald Trump or reshaping content moderation policies (to reiterate his position on free speech)—depicts the convergence of power dynamics, individual agency, and systemic influence in digital spaces.



Figure 8: Individuals align with Musk by virtue of his identity and track record

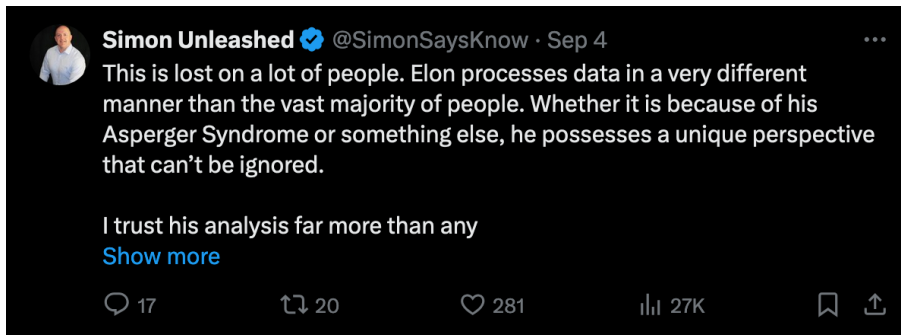


Figure 9: Individuals align with Musk by virtue of his identity and track record.

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Figures 8 and 9 illustrate how Elon Musk's unique reputation and track record encouraged individuals to align with his support for Trump. Musk played a dual role that blurred the lines between neutral management and his personal beliefs. He leveraged his identity to persuade his audience by amplifying narratives that resonate with their values. As both a leader and participant, he could indirectly control which stories were amplified and suppressed. Figure 4 demonstrates the subtle power control on a pro-Kamala Harris supporter that replied to a tweet from Elon Musk. This situation begs the question: how free is free speech on x?

From this discussion, it is evident that identity and community construction on X during the election was a relational process within a larger rhetorical assemblage. The collective frameworks by these authors reveal the complex interplay of human and non-human actors in rhetorical assemblage. The 2024 U.S. General Election demonstrates how social media actively participate in creating and sustaining identities thus highlighting the transformative potential of digital rhetoric in shaping societal structures.

Implications for Digital Rhetoric and Democratic Processes

Social media platforms are positioned at the heart of political discourse, and this has fundamentally reshaped the democratic process. Individuals are increasingly interacting in networked spaces allowing for more open-ended participation in crucial political events. These platforms, in principle, foster what Zappen (2005) describes as “rhetorical agency” in distributed communities of humans and machines. Similarly, Bennett’s (2012) describes this distribution as a form of collective engagement which he terms “connective action”. These digital connections have prompted a rethink of authorship and accountability in digital rhetoric. Traditional notions of a single, identifiable speaker becomes less clear in a context where anonymous or pseudonymous accounts, sometimes activist-driven or satirical, contribute to the evolving narrative on social media. While such anonymity can amplify viewpoints that might otherwise remain unheard, it may also erode trust and hinder accountability. Warnick (2007) expresses concern stating that the dilemmas of digital rhetoric are not solely about quantity but also about the quality and integrity of public debate.

Furthermore, the gamification of political participation further illustrates the affordances and sometimes limitations of digital rhetoric. When likes, retweets, and follower counts become the metric of political influence, the conditions promote discourse manipulation over genuine

deliberation. Papacharissi's (2015) explains how these engagement farming feed into emotionally charged exchanges, thus collapsing the structure of civic engagement. Although this gamification approach may lead to increased participation, it risks reducing critical political discourse to comical engagement thus weakening the foundations of informed democratic engagement (Bennett, 2012).

In addition, political discourse on social media may be susceptible to context collapse. As a result of the rapid spread of information on social platforms, substantial information may be condensed or distorted. Clipped soundbites or decontextualized video snippets can ignite passionate debates. Warnick and Heineman (2012) note that this lack of contextual jurisdiction may reward emotional charge over careful reasoning. Similarly, Lanham (2006) observes how digital media's "economics of attention" favor content that provokes strong responses over those that demand reflection. A short clip of Donald Trump declaring "I will terminate birthright citizenship" generated intense controversy on X, sparking heated discussions on immigration and constitutional rights, often without a deeper examination of the relevant legal frameworks or policy details. Foucault's (1980) highlights how discursive power influences issues that gain traction and how people come to understand them. This reinforcement of emotionally charged, surface-level narratives can undermine the richer debates that are essential to a functioning democracy.

Overall, these developments have ramifications that extend well beyond the electoral cycle. Democratic discussions have been rendered fragile due to the tension between the rapid spread of information and the need to circulate genuine information. Reimagining the role of these platforms as spaces of meaningful discourse may be an important step forward. This would require a sustained effort to consider ethical design principles, to acknowledge the varied cultural

and political circumstances in which these platforms operate, and to invest in users' abilities to evaluate information critically. The 2024 U.S. General Election stands as a reminder that while digital forums have expanded opportunities for participation, their long-term contribution to democratic life will depend on how well we navigate the ethical and structural challenges they present. In rethinking these systems and the values that underpin them, we may find more sustainable paths toward inclusive, informed, and constructive political engagement.

Ethical Considerations in Platform Governance

Social media platform governance evolves around technology monitoring, social engineering, and discourse moderation. These governing systems implicitly define the standards of knowledge by determining which sources appear credible, prioritizing certain narratives, and limiting the visibility of others. Although such frameworks often function beneath the threshold of ordinary awareness, Beer (2009) notes that their hidden architectures have the power to shape collective understandings of what should be trusted or questioned. As a result, the design choices and internal policies of these platforms raise significant ethical issues as it directly impacts the choice of users to critically engage with content or passively consume narratives that reinforce existing biases.

Algorithmic influence is a notable element that guide how information is encountered and interpreted. Rahman et al. (2024) highlight how algorithmic complexity and opacity can undermine users' capacity to scrutinize the processes governing their informational environment. During the 2024 U.S. General Election, content that provoked strong emotional reactions tended to dominate the timeline on X, while more measured analysis frequently remained in the background. A particularly notable strategy involved boosting the visibility of specific high-profile accounts and political viewpoints, creating digital echo chambers where like-minded

users reinforced each other's beliefs. Observers widely noted that Elon Musk, the outspoken CEO of X, did not shy away from publicly endorsing Donald Trump's candidacy.



Figure 10: Musk's Direct Endorsement of Trump on X

Figure 10 highlights Musk's explicit support for Donald Trump during the 2024 U.S. general election. Musk's statement exemplifies how his rhetoric leveraged fear and urgency to gather support for his preferred candidate. Musk's active promotion of conservative messages, memes, and talking points appeared to intensify the emotional stakes of key campaign issues. Under such conditions, users are often left to navigate a curated landscape without the means to understand why certain voices persistently rise above others. As Figure 10 demonstrates, his tweets had high reach driven by factors such as his popularity and role as CEO of the platform. These factors likely influenced the algorithm thus posing an ethical challenge to democratic discourse. His amplification of emotionally charged content and the mass visibility of his tweets may exploit emotions of users thereby undermining the fairness and transparency of discourse on X.

Overall, the ethical implications of platform governance extend well beyond the visible downstream effects of content moderation. They include the foundational structures that influence how knowledge is shared, policies are shaped, misinformation is addressed, and leadership dynamics operate. To effectively address these issues, there is an unending task of improving transparency, building up a more inclusive governance process, enabling a more constructive commentary with media, and monitoring the concentration of power that poses a threat to an open system of public discourse.

Conclusion

This study has shown the complex nature of power, identity and community on social media using a political event on X as a case study. The democratic engagement observed during the 2024 US general election calls for a reimagination of the prevailing assumption that online spaces serve as neutral channels for free expression. The implication of this reevaluation is far beyond examining the outcome of a particular democratic event like the 2024 US general election. The critical point is not whether digital spaces are inherently good or bad, but how we choose to shape and navigate them. Further studies may investigate how these digital ecosystems continue to evolve and the key challenges in recognizing both the power and vulnerability inherent in online discourse.

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