



**Selected Papers of #AoIR2025:
The 26th Annual Conference of the
Association of Internet Researchers**
Niterói, Brazil / 15 – 18 Oct 2025

WHY REDDIT? HISTORIES, ETHICS, POLITICS & PRACTICES AS REDDIT TURNS 20

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Panel Overview

Suggested Citation (APA): Vilkins, S., Carlon, D., Nagappa, A., Stillman, A., Kasianenko, K., Suresh, V. P., Bruns, A., Svegaard, S. K., FitzGerald, K. M. (2025, October). *Why Reddit? Histories, Ethics, Politics and Practices as Reddit Turns Twenty*. Panel presented at AoIR2025: The 26th Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Niterói, Brazil: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

As Reddit approaches its twentieth anniversary in 2025, it occupies a unique and relatively under-studied place in the online landscape. The ruptures of recent internet history are visible as geological fixtures through the persistence and growth of structures and communities on Reddit. Once the self-proclaimed “front page of the internet”, to the latest tagline encouraging users to “dive into anything”, Reddit has evolved from a news alert homepage to a complex content ecosystem of over 3.5 million communities, each with distinct cultures, governance structures and communicative practices. Perhaps for this reason, Reddit has been extensively scraped for AI training material, leading to unintended results, such as the now-famous glue on pizza suggestion (McMahon & Kleinman, 2024). Reddit’s infrastructure remains semi-open with a monetized API, which places some restrictions on research as well as scraping/crawling. Nor is all content directly human-generated, as bots play a central role both in the platform’s governance, administration of separate subreddits, and user interactions.

Reddit has recently seen all-time records in traffic and growth in research interest, particularly for studies of community dynamics, but in everything that has made the internet the internet, from fan groups to radicalization and back. Our panel celebrates the platform’s anniversary year and explores Reddit’s rising position as both subject and site of methodological, ethical, and political ruptures in internet research through five complementary papers.

The first paper provides a historical examination of Reddit’s evolution over two decades, from a single landing page to a vast network of communities. This perspective identifies key moments of rupture in Reddit’s development, particularly its decision to enable user-created communities in 2008 – a move that fundamentally transformed its architecture and governance. The paper analyzes how competing analogies for Reddit’s identity, such as “city-state” versus “convention center”, reflect ongoing tensions between community autonomy and corporate control. Recent decisions to monetize its API and license user data for AI training have created new conflicts and controversies, yet Reddit’s distinctive architecture has allowed it to maintain forms of resistance not possible on more centralized platforms.

The second paper explores the ethical questions created by researching Reddit in what has become known as the post-API era. As platforms increasingly restrict access to user data, researchers face new challenges in collecting and analyzing social media content. This paper situates Reddit data collection within broader platform politics, arguing that researchers must shift from traditional ethical frameworks that have been shaped by corporate interests rather than user protection or desires. The paper calls for researchers to rise to the occasion, acting with utmost morality and looking to explicitly anti-capitalist modes of data ethics.

The third paper examines political communication on Reddit and works with the concept of ‘sedimented polarization’ -- a condition in which political fragmentation has become embedded in the platform’s architecture. Through mixed-methods analysis of political subreddits, this research identifies how Reddit’s structure shapes political discourses, with minimal cross-ideological interaction even on subreddits designed for diverse debate. Each political community develops distinctive communicative practices,

information sources, and collective identities, often viewing other subreddits as antagonistic even when they share similar ideological orientations. This paper demonstrates how platform affordances, moderation practices, and user behaviors combine to create polarized environments.

The fourth paper builds on this analysis by exploring toxic masculine practices on Reddit through a novel methodological framework. It develops a power-centric approach to online radicalization, examining how Reddit's architecture enables the formation of "parasitic publics" that exert discursive violence upon marginalized groups. By applying specific computational techniques to analyze interactional data from various subreddits, this paper shifts how we understand and study radicalization online. Rather than focusing on content alone, it examines the communicative practices and power dynamics that shape interactions between dominant and marginalized communities on the platform.

The fifth and final paper extends these investigations of community practices and ideological cleavages to a case study of fan communities, focusing on the ruptures and reformations in Taylor Swift related discussion on Reddit. The paper presents an adaptation of practice mapping, originally developed on X and Facebook data, to Reddit's unique environment, capturing how users engage across multiple communities with varying norms. This research demonstrates how Reddit's architecture enables both specialized community formation and complex cross-community practices, revealing patterns of engagement both invisible to traditional network analysis and made clearer by Reddit's architecture itself.

By examining Reddit's past, present and future, this panel contributes to our understanding of contemporary platform politics by highlighting how Reddit's unique architecture has grown, reacting to and shaping ruptures in conventional platform evolution narratives. As the platform navigates competing pressures of commercialization, content moderation, and community autonomy, it continues to occupy a distinctive position in the online landscape – neither fully succumbing to corporate logics nor entirely resisting them.

Paper 1:

REDDIT TWENTY ‘CAKE DAYS’ ON: FROM THE ‘FRONT PAGE’ TO THE ‘HEART’ OF THE INTERNET FOR AUTHENTIC HUMAN CONNECTION

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Introduction

Reddit embodies contradictions. It is a centralised platform comprised of decentralised spaces. Dispersed subreddit communities operate with a high degree of autonomy while being connected within the same infrastructure. Reddit hosts mainstream discussions on subjects like science, politics, and entertainment, while also embracing the novel and niche such as the art of submerged chairs (*r/chairsunderwater*). And it self-reflects – extensively (see for instance *r/TheoryOfReddit*). It is an enormous repository of data, and a hub for supportive, passionate, and at times toxic communities. Importantly, it is a historical entity and relic of a past era but holds remarkable resilience for the future.

With 2025 marking Reddit’s 20th birthday, this paper explores Reddit’s evolving sense of ‘self’ and resilience in maintaining its identity as a place for authentic human connection. Drawing on the author’s digital ethnographic studies on the platform, and our wider research (Carlon, 2025a; Carlon, 2025b; Nagappa, 2023) using platform biography (Burgess and Baym, 2020) and web histories (Brügger and Milligan, 2018), this paper brings to light some of its eclectic analogies, cultures, and evolving affordances, that make the platform so resistant to categorisation.

The ‘Front Page of the Internet’ to ‘Dive into Anything’

The origins of Reddit, founded by Alexis Ohanian and Steve Huffman in June 2005, is emblematic of the web 2.0 era. It was one of the many experiments in digitising everyday practices that took a different turn altogether. Where Facebook emerged from a site ranking female Harvard students (Kaplan, 2003) and Twitter evolved from SMS microblogging (Burgess & Baym, 2020), Reddit began as a restaurant cell-phone food service. Persuaded by Y Combinator to pivot, the founders instead created a single-page news aggregation site akin to Slashdot and Delicious (Panek, 2022), earning its first tagline: “the front page of the internet.”

Reddit's initial phase as being a single-page landing site did not last long. Its evolution to a sprawling network of subreddits was shaped by another typical web 2.0 feature: pornography. Just six months after launching, concerns arose about using the site at work because of the swift rise in explicit content. Rather than prohibit pornographic content, Reddit chose a different path in creating a new subsection called *r/nsfw* (acronym for 'not safe for work').

It was during these formative years, that Reddit underwent its most significant transformation. In 2008, it allowed users to create their own subreddits. This pivotal change ushered in a new era of active participation, affording individuals the power to set the rules, norms, and moderation practices for content and participation on their respective subreddit communities (Chandrasekharan et al., 2018; Fiesler et al., 2018; Weld et al., 2024).

From this foundation, Reddit expanded to nearly 3.5 million subreddits (Reddit metrics, 2022), dedicated to almost every imaginable topic. The updated tagline "dive into anything" reflects this sprawling network. Moderators, often subreddit founders, became producers, evaluators, and enforcers of rules, shaping Reddit's distinctive form of community-driven governance and collective ownership.

From 'City State' to 'Convention Centre'

The transformation of Reddit into a network of communities has resulted in a platform characterised by complex and layered governance, temporal shifts in rules and norms, diverse and constantly evolving moderation practices, and a tendency towards in-group culture and humour. This complexity has also generated identity crises about Reddit's values and ethos (Massanari, 2017; Panek, 2022; Singer et al., 2014). Reddit functions as a hybrid assemblage, producing multiple meanings depending on perspective. Being situated somewhere between Wikipedia and other social media platforms, the ambiguities in Reddit's identity is reflected in the analogies shared by its founders and CEOs over time.

Yishan Wong, Reddit CEO in 2012, described it as a "city state." Wong was referring to the city-like components of the platform, from the infrastructure and legal framework to the people and culture within, therein emphasising that Reddit as the city state exists to "facilitate and steward the messy human goals of the people who live there."¹ In many ways, Reddit does resemble a city-state comprising users who can travel between subreddits, "some as tourists, some as vandals, and some as residents who are heavily invested in the wellbeing of their community" (Panek, 2022, p.110).

¹ u/Yishan 'I am Yishan Wong, the CEO of Reddit' in r/IAMa.
https://www.reddit.com/r/IAMa/comments/sk1ut/comment/c4en44e/?utm_source=reddit&utm_medium=web2x&context=3

Co-founder Alexis Ohanian countered this however, offering an alternate analogy, comparing Reddit to a “convention centre” with “infinite rooms” (Ohanian, 2023, p. 114). While the city state is a place that governs those within, the owners of convention centres can say, “in spite of wanting to fill our space, we’re making an editorial decision that you cannot host your convention here” (Ohanian, 2023, p.114).

The ‘heart of the internet’ for authentic human connection

Ohanian, who resigned in 2020, used the convention centre analogy to support taking a strong stance against hosting racist and extremist content. By contrast, Steve Huffman, Reddit’s other co-founder, has more recently emphasised the pressures of commercialisation, positioning Reddit’s vast repository of human data as a commodity in the emerging “AI age.” On this premise, Huffman argued that Reddit must “grow up” into an “adult company” (Leedham, 2023). Between 2023 and 2024, Reddit went public and sold access to its content to train large language models (LLMs) through lucrative deals with Google and OpenAI. This move crystallised a paradox: Reddit presented itself as a prized dataset of authentic human knowledge while simultaneously contributing to the success of LLMs that now challenge the very human status it claims to represent (Carlon, 2025b). By mid-2025, Huffman acknowledged this tension directly:

Unwelcome AI in communities is a serious concern...Reddit works because it’s human. It’s one of the few places online where real people share real opinions. That authenticity is what gives Reddit its value. If we lose trust in that, we lose what makes Reddit...Reddit.²

Alongside this affirmation, Huffman signalled impending verification changes:

To keep Reddit human and to meet evolving regulatory requirements, we will need to know whether you are a human, and in some locations, whether you are an adult...We will do our best to preserve both the humanness and anonymity of Reddit.³

These contradictions—between genuine community and AI training data, anonymity and verification—usher Reddit into yet another era of contested self-identity. Speculation that Reddit may adopt WorldID, the iris-scan system backed by Sam Altman (Albergotti, 2025), further heightens these tensions. Yet it is through such ongoing negotiation, paradox, and evolution that Reddit’s story continues.

² u/spez, in ‘Reddit’s next chapter: smarter, easier, still human’
https://www.reddit.com/user/spez/comments/1kfciml/reddits_next_chapter_smarter_easier_still_human/

³ u/spez, in ‘Reddit’s next chapter: smarter, easier, still human’
https://www.reddit.com/user/spez/comments/1kfciml/reddits_next_chapter_smarter_easier_still_human/

Conclusion

Since inception, Reddit has been remarkably adaptive. The ethos of collective ownership and dedication to self-governance has contributed to Reddit's resilience to both generalisation and enshittification—redditors actively debate and critique the platform's changes, rather than passively accepting decline. Despite being caught between opposing forces of commercial logics of the platform business model, the AI attention economy, and community interest, Reddit does not collapse. Its historical evolution shaped the type of affordances and community-led governance that have meant that Reddit has maintained an almost indefinable resilience and strength while other platforms rise and fall. While Reddit has cemented a distinctive position, we propose that if it does fall it will likely be in distinctly 'Reddit' fashion: loud, eclectic, and from within.

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Paper 2:

REVISITING REDDIT DATA COLLECTION AND DIGITAL ETHICS

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As researchers clamored over how they would gather data after Twitter closed its research API in February 2023, many looked to Reddit as an alternative source of social media data. However, four months later, Reddit also closed its free API. As other platforms followed suit, Internet research entered the so-called 'post-API era', where user data has become unavailable or commodified. This turn has not only ushered in challenges and innovations in data collection, but also warranted a re-evaluation of digital ethics.

While platforms' reasoning behind commodifying or restricting access to user data varies, these decisions are often financially motivated. For instance, large language models (LLMs) are trained on large quantities of Internet data; if this data can be acquired for free, platforms lose money. Such platform politics present a new digital divide in which access is partitioned between academics and Big Tech. This paper explores these factors in situating Reddit data collection within its platform politics. In doing so, I offer a qualitative solution to data collection catering to Reddit's platform affordances. This paper also aims to spark larger conversations about how research ethics have, in some cases, been written with platforms' regulations in mind rather than participant protection and safety. Therefore, I argue, researchers should feel empowered to reject policies and practices that privilege capitalist institutions.

Reddit was founded as an open-access platform in 2005 but closed its API access to monetize user data in preparation for its 2024 IPO. Revoking API access did not just foreclose data access for researchers but also put third-party developers out of business and rendered obsolete tools used by Reddit's moderators – the volunteer labor that runs the platform's 100,000 active communities. Despite widespread organized resistance within the platform, Reddit threatened protesting moderators with removal and replacement, following through in dozens of subreddits and thereby quelling the resistance. Then, to the outrage of many members, Reddit announced it would license user data to inform a Google LLM. Despite ongoing debates about data ownership, Reddit's Terms of Service (ToS) require members to relinquish ownership of their data; those opposed were told they could migrate to another platform. But as we have learned from Twitter's cascade of questionable governance, users go where the community or conversation is (He et al. 2023) and, in absence of an alternative platform, abiding by ToS becomes coercive.

As researchers petitioned for API access, Reddit agreed to explore a program called Reddit for Researchers (R4R) in which they selectively allowed access to individual subreddits over fixed time periods. Reddit has since invited other researchers to apply for R4R access (u/KeyserSosa 2024) – something I'm still waiting for nearly a year later. Importantly, Reddit handpicks and limits access in the name of ethical data sharing and

user protection. While the former is interesting given the open-to-all nature of Reddit's previous API, the latter is significant because, as an anonymous platform, Reddit user data lends itself to post-demographics – what Richard Rogers articulates as an analytical approach to media without biopolitical categories and therefore removed of personally identifying information (2009). Public data dumps, an unofficial alternative to R4R, disseminate anonymized user data – the same data researchers would access previously through the API. However, in working with data dumps, researchers not only encounter the ethical question of using the data they themselves did not collect, but also face potentially breaching Reddit's ToS agreement in working with data not sourced through the API. Hope notwithstanding for R4R, the initiative follows the well-worn paradigm of co-optation to subdue resistance and foster good will.

Given the aforementioned limitations to computational data collection and in contradistinction to the last decade's trend toward big data, one possible solution is a renewed emphasis on qualitative research. This turn is not without its obstacles on a platform predicated on anonymity and known for trolling (Brubaker et al. 2021). But through various forms of performing good faith outreach, I have identified several best practices for galvanizing positive responses and protecting user identity. At the outreach stage, this entails identifying myself as a researcher, linking my public academic profile, and providing contact for my line manager – first the subreddit moderators for initial approval and then to prospective research participants to foster legitimacy. A link to a survey was included with the study details and consent form split over a number of pages to not overwhelm the participant with text. The survey also solicited optional demographic information not linked to the participant's username to situate responses at the aggregate. At the data collection stage, this entails allowing participants to be interviewed on a medium of their choice and comfort to foster trust. At the writing stage, this entails not using any quotes from digital ethnography so nothing can be traced back to individual users to foster privacy. Lastly, at the publication stage this entails sharing back the output to close the feedback loop. Taken together, this approach yields positive responses and bypasses concerns over violating Reddit's ToS while also requiring rethinking research questions, project aims, and scope in accord with scaling down from big data.

Even with creative approaches to Reddit data collection, it is important to situate shifting platform assemblages against ethical standards in the field and at institutions. With the former, while AoIR has proactively been at the forefront of pioneering internet research ethics (Zimmer 2022) – most recently advising on how to address the implications of generative AI – these ethics fall short of addressing increasingly extractive data practices of selling user data and coercing consent. With the latter, we must reconcile the fact that Research Ethics Boards at universities are often comprised of individuals outside of Internet research (Hanganu et al. 2021). This means that they lack field-specific knowledge such as the fact that ToS are not legal codes but are typically predatory and extractive by design. Far from protecting users, ToS subject them to commodification and exploitation. Likewise, ethics in university settings have strayed from focusing on protecting research subjects and researchers to focus on indemnification. Historian of science Lorraine Daston argues in her book *Rules: A Short History of What we Live by* (2022) that although ethics are often bandied about as universal at best and culturally delimited at worst, in reality they are hegemonic norms

codified in the interest of power. As the neoliberalization of higher education has replaced knowledge production with capital production as its primary driver, how this turn compromises the ethics process warrants earnest investigation.

Given the challenges to data collection in the post-API era and capture of ethics by capitalist forces, I offer several provocations. Just as Google quietly removed its 'do no harm' mantra in 2018, we need to recognize how the 'enshittification' of free platforms and shifting priorities of tech companies (Birch 2023) demonstrate their commitment to profit over both user and researcher interests. Such provocations include treating media platforms as potentially bad faith actors, ignoring ToS as an obstacle to data collection, and calling for an anti-capitalist approach to ethics as the only ethical option. This entails rising to the occasion – that we as researchers need to act with the utmost morality – not abdicating our agency to corporate bodies that purport to act in the interest of user or participant protection when key indicators of their sincerity suggest otherwise.

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Paper 3:

THE ARCHITECTURE OF POLITICAL FRAGMENTATION: SEDIMENTED POLARISATION ACROSS REDDIT COLLECTIVES

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In this article, we present the results of Phase 1 of a study on political communication across eleven subreddits over a sixteen-year period (Table 1). We discuss the significance of discursive-digital entanglements, their methodological implications, and how some of these challenges may be addressed when researching political communication Reddit.

Digital practices are not solely the product of users' identities and agency, but are entangled with the broader context, platform logics, design choices, technological features, use cultures, collective practices, and moderation norms (Panek, 2021; Proferes et al., 2021; Van Raemdonck et al., 2025). Despite the significance of this entanglement in shaping the dynamics of communication, it is rarely factored comprehensively in large scale empirical studies. Here, we address this by studying cross-ideological political communication on Reddit through identifying both visible and obscure dynamics of practices.

Reddit's forum-like structure allows users to self-organise into interest-based communities, each with its own rules, norms, and cultures (Hintz & Betts, 2022; Prakasam & Huxtable-Thomas, 2021; van der Nagel & Frith, 2015). This affordance lays out a different landscape to study political communication, as the enactment and enforcement of subreddit specific expectations significantly shapes acceptable mode of communication. Further, literature has shown that inaction itself is an indicator of collective identities, and that a lack of activity cannot be simply attributed to lurking behaviours (see, e.g.: Crawford, 2011; Ferguson, 2003; Merten, 2021; Tenenboim, 2025). Therefore, collective non-doings (e.g., not voting, not commenting) are as important as what users say or write on a platform. In this light, our study examined not only the dynamics of visible practices but also explored the dynamics of absence and

silence. We used mixed methods to identify absences through the presence of other patterns, and as a consequence of subreddit-specific rules and culture.

We collected the core data using existing Reddit datasets provided by Pushshift/ArcticShift. Starting from a seed list of political subreddits, we narrowed the scope to include a range of subreddits representing left-, right-, and neutral-leaning ideologies. For each subreddit, we studied the rules and moderation practices over time, to examine how they impact communication. We then compared user overlap, cross-posting, cross-commenting, and information sharing patterns between subreddits, to understand inter-group communication dynamics, and the presence and absence of subreddit-specific information sources. Finally, we employed corpus-assisted discourse analysis (Baker, 2020; Baker et al., 2008) and keyword analysis (Baker, 2004; Gabrielatos & Marchi, 2012), combined with in-depth qualitative examination, to identify the collective identities, discursive strategies, and salient and latent themes and topics for each space.

Table 1: Subreddits in the study. Member numbers as of data collection time*

* Reddit does not report exact membership numbers. *r/esist*'s contribution percentage of over 100% is either because of the rounding done by Reddit, or due to non-members posting and commenting in this space.

	Creation year and month	No. of members (rounded)	No. of submission authors	No. of submissions	No. of comment authors	No. of comments	Total No. of contributors	% of contributing members
politics	Aug-07	8,500,000	522,187	3,865,783	3,891,790	169,990,447	4,098,075	48%
Conservative	Jan-08	1,100,000	98,413	814,853	642,085	12,994,625	685,619	62%
Libertarian	Jan-08	506,000	70,003	470,190	439,575	11,657,246	456,701	90%
progressive	Aug-08	77,000	9,819	96,545	27,629	297,801	33,277	43%
democrats	Oct-08	436,000	27,976	159,699	92,784	1,056,497	109,509	25%
Republican	Oct-08	190,000	22,823	157,341	103,838	1,070,125	116,325	61%
Liberal	May-09	117,000	11,319	54,470	42,535	360,648	49,114	42%
republicans	Aug-09	18,000	4,621	339,986	12,083	108,390	15,098	84%
DemocraticSocialism	Nov-12	151,000	8,697	38,125	74,314	429,798	78,057	52%
conservatives	Nov-12	107,000	12,774	190,579	71,302	822,484	77,973	73%
esist	Jan-17	120,000	12,476	92,956	122,610	845,418	128,086	107%

Findings

Overall, we found minimal cross-ideological interaction, even on subreddits self-describing as spaces for diverse political debate (e.g. *r/Politics*). For example, only a small proportion of users active on partisan subreddits ever participate in the more ideologically neutral spaces. That is, Redditors typically restrict their activity to the

subreddit they identify with. As Table 2 shows, cross-posting and commenting is surprisingly rare, even among politically and discursively aligned subreddits.

Table 2: Normalised ratio of expected versus actual cross-submissions (above the diagonal line, in blue), and combined cross-submissions and comments (below the diagonal line, in green), between subreddit pairs. Values above 1 show higher than expected overlaps

	politics	Conservative	conservatives	republicans	Republican	Libertarian	DemocraticSocialism	progressive	Liberal	democrats	esist	
politics	1	0.137	0.084	0.132	0.12	0.205	0.105	0.229	0.181	0.216	0.169	Cross-posting (submissions)
Conservative	0.332	1	0.233	0.2	0.237	0.18	0.066	0.093	0.129	0.124	0.046	
conservatives	0.138	0.257	1	0.265	0.168	0.072	0.054	0.058	0.074	0.07	0.024	
republicans	0.152	0.186	0.197	1	0.321	0.076	0.079	0.107	0.121	0.173	0.041	
Republican	0.335	0.445	0.287	0.294	1	0.108	0.062	0.089	0.107	0.149	0.035	
Libertarian	0.397	0.299	0.098	0.068	0.209	1	0.049	0.091	0.086	0.068	0.034	
DemocraticSocialism	0.301	0.211	0.072	0.057	0.143	0.141	1	0.084	0.075	0.125	0.044	
progressive	0.234	0.133	0.061	0.098	0.154	0.114	0.108	1	0.292	0.186	0.077	
Liberal	0.253	0.201	0.098	0.115	0.224	0.123	0.123	0.294	1	0.2	0.074	
democrats	0.35	0.237	0.131	0.149	0.283	0.173	0.192	0.193	0.321	1	0.087	
esist	0.378	0.211	0.069	0.05	0.123	0.159	0.167	0.131	0.156	0.217	1	
Combined cross-contributions (submissions and comments)												

In terms of information sharing, similar patterns emerge, in that each subreddit relies on a unique set of information sources, from which content is shared in the space. As it is evident in Table 3, when two or more subreddits use the same information sources—domains—they share strikingly different content—URLs—from them. In this regard, another factor significantly impacting the dynamics of information-sharing is the role of moderators and the rules they set for each subreddit. Content-sharing rules are strictly enforced, either manually by the moderators or automatically by auto-moderator bots, with some larger subreddits like *r/Politics* restricting content to a set of pre-approved domains.

Table 3: Normalised ratio of expected versus actual cross-posting of Domains (above the diagonal line, in blue), and URLs (below the diagonal line, in green), between subreddit pairs. Values above 1 show higher than expected overlaps

	politics	Conservative	conservatives	republicans	Republican	Libertarian	DemocraticSocialism	progressive	Liberal	democrats	esist	
politics	1	0.472	0.119	0.078	0.157	0.876	0.05	0.301	0.146	0.156	0.109	Cross-posting (Domains)
Conservative	0.097	1	0.735	0.487	0.912	1.486	0.246	0.998	0.654	0.677	0.478	
conservatives	0.013	0.234	1	1.774	1.406	0.947	0.281	0.902	0.666	0.642	0.482	
republicans	0.005	0.055	0.375	1	0.996	0.545	0.261	0.726	0.569	0.543	0.395	
Republican	0.021	0.275	0.944	0.278	1	1.271	0.332	1.266	0.907	0.883	0.607	
Libertarian	0.149	0.241	0.066	0.022	0.105	1	0.294	1.403	0.826	0.803	0.589	
DemocraticSocialism	0.005	0.009	0.003	0.003	0.004	0.018	1	0.582	0.396	0.386	0.339	
progressive	0.055	0.034	0.007	0.004	0.016	0.097	0.014	1	1.312	1.078	0.692	
Liberal	0.022	0.033	0.008	0.007	0.015	0.055	0.007	0.6	1	1.56	1.047	
democrats	0.041	0.038	0.009	0.009	0.021	0.049	0.017	0.217	0.279	1	1.622	
esist	0.027	0.024	0.005	0.003	0.007	0.037	0.016	0.052	0.068	0.13	1	
Cross-posting (URLs)												

Our discourse analysis also points to subreddits’ unique collective identities. Each collective views others as an Other-enemy in direct opposition to itself. This is true even for discursively resonant subreddits, such as *r/liberal* and *r/progressive*, or *r/conservatives* and *r/Conservative*. Regarding the dynamics of absence, our analysis points to how peer surveillance (Trottier & Woodhead, 2024), moderation rules, voting features (Graham & Rodriguez, 2021), and identity reinforcing practices lead to patterns of structured absence on subreddits.

Discussion

Synthesising the various findings, our study shows that polarisation in this fragmented communicative environment cannot be reduced to a single factor. Rather, polarisation among subreddits is entangled with Reddit’s design, affordances, user base, and manual or automated governance practices of moderators. Polarisation is embedded in Reddit’s design, ordering, sorting, and nudging users to remain within discursively homogenous spaces. The voting mechanism reinforces ingroup conformity, while the moderators and moderation bots tightly defend, define, and control the boundaries of accepted discourse within subreddits.

We conceptualise this phenomenon as “sedimented polarisation”: a discursive-digital condition in which polarisation itself has become the axiomatic and calcified logic of political communication on Reddit. Under sedimented polarisation, political conversations are not characterised by cross-cutting debate, nor even by continuous conflict. Rather, such communication occurs with an assumed irreconcilable divide that precludes meaningful interaction. Furthermore, sedimented polarisation creates

intra-collective splits, wherein discursively similar subreddits view one another as antagonists.

Conclusion and Future Direction

Our study emphasises the necessity of viewing platforms as non-neutral and constitutive participants in shaping collective identities. Platform infrastructure, design, user practices, and discursive identities shape both presence and absence on platforms, highlighting also the contingency of these dynamics. Identities, discourses, and even platform architectures change over time, and inevitably shape communication on these media. We argue that this entanglement, and its role in the dynamics of absence and presence on digital media, must be central to any analysis of digitally mediated political communication, to better understand the dynamics and evolution of political communication through digital platforms.

Furthermore, the traditional approach of studying digital collective practices in isolation, using linear and sequential methods, masks structured collective practices. That is, while some users may share links similarly, they may be different in other practices. This has remained as a methodological challenge, limiting studies in the field. Therefore, there is a need for the development of methods allowing for viewing the totality of collective practices, in combination. Phase 2 of this study—practice manifold mapping—develops one such method, presented in a companion article in this panel. This method places various quantifiable forms of platformed doings-and-sayings in a mathematical space, providing a comparable setting. That is, by vectorizing the user activity, we can now explore the relational dynamics on the platform through the lens of agential interactions. We extend beyond Bruns et. al. (2024), by comparing similarities among practice vectors by using manifold learning, to construct latent networks of discursive-digital entanglements.

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MANOSPHERE AND MANIFOLDS: A MIXED-METHODS APPROACH TO STUDYING TOXIC MASCULINE PRACTICES ON REDDIT

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Reddit and Radicalization

Reddit, as a platform, offers researchers a rich corpus of data — both qualitative and quantitative — to explore computationally mediated practices across disciplinary foci. The structured forum-like layout of Reddit allow users (and researchers) to navigate expansive rich text-based discourses about topics not found traditionally on other popular platforms, enabling both computational work that privileges statistically significant samples and descriptive work that privileges critical and nuanced readings of Internet culture (Proferes et al., 2021). However, most works that study Reddit use quantitative methods to computationally explore conversations online, with qualitative readings, and (most infrequently, <10%) mixed-methods approaches (Hintz & Betts, 2022; Proferes et al., 2021).

Reddit also has been at the forefront of the discussion about “online radicalization” both in academic circles (Marwick et al., 2022; Massanari, 2017; Ribeiro et al., 2021), and outside (eSafety Commissioner, 2024; Lee, 2024; Risius & Karanasios, 2024). However, as Marwick et al. (2022) notes in their review of literature, the field remains largely disconnected and without consistent applications of theoretical frameworks to situate radicalization as a sociotechnical phenomenon. By mostly adopting homeland security definitions of “radicalization” developed in the 2000s, online radicalization literature inherits the inherent coloniality (Madriaza et al., 2023), power-agnosticism (Mohammed, 2021), and lack of primary sources (O’Leary & Silke, 2007). Online radicalization requires a fresh theoretical framework that decolonizes platform dynamics and centers agential communicative actions (Coolsaet, 2023).

Defining radicalization

This paper proposes a power-centric approach to defining online radicalization, highlighting computationally mediated communicative practices of violence, pausing to redirect academic attention to victims of hate online, decentering institutions. Building upon the concepts of network of publics (Bruns, 2023) and “parasitic publics” (Larson & McHendry, 2019), I construct a communicative framework to understand online radicalization as a set of agential practices that rely on the inequities of power to exert violence upon the discursive other. Specifically, I frame GamerGate (GG) — the toxic masculine and anti-feminist movement — as an emergent parasitic public that seeks to narrow the dominant discursive arena for feminist and non-male gamers in the

mid-2010s. Reading conversations on Reddit through the lens of embedded “geek-masculinity”, I argue that GG exemplifies the violence and exclusion inherent to the platform’s toxic technocultures (Massanari, 2017). I define online radicalization at this intersection as the process of emergence of parasitic relationalities, enacted through practices of discursive violence, embedded within a computationally mediated discursive arena that sees emancipatory counterpublics (here, non-male gamers and feminists) as an existential threat to the normative power of the radicalized.

Practice Mapping

Bruns et al. (2024) developed practice mapping to address the issue of visualizing and untangling platformed interactional data that has multiple modalities or communicative practices embedded in it. They achieve this by reading relational aspects of online communication (“sayings-and-doings online”) as independent variables describing the communicative “address” of each actor in a dataset. This opens up the space for computational data to be analyzed through a communicative lens, and analyzing discursive features on interactional data previously reserved for descriptive methods like discourse or thematic analysis. Kasianenko et al., (2024) demonstrates that practices could also be delineated from textual corpus and be used as variables to embed actors with this method. Abstract concepts of knowledge production and community building that are usually ethnographically evident are now variables in an interactional embedding space. Furthermore, Bruns et al., (2024) visualizes this embedding space as a weighted network of interactions between actors where the edges embody the communicative relationship between actors, abstracted from “closeness” in the embedding space. This methodological pipeline, therefore, provides a convenient entry point for theoretical considerations, such as gendered power, to be modelled as an interactional component in large relational datasets, especially on Reddit where rich textual corpora embed interactional meaning.

Manifolds and Manosphere

While practice mapping uses the concept of similarity/distance in embedding spaces to visualize interactions, it involves pairwise comparisons, with cosine similarity, that do not scale well ($O[n^2]$) with larger datasets or features. This becomes relevant especially when text embeddings or temporal dynamics are considered in the vectorization process. Manifold learning approaches, such as Uniform Manifold Approximation and Projection (UMAP) offer a robust solution for this by using algebraic topology to construct weighted networks from embedded data (McInnes et al., 2018). Apart from enhancing computational performance (McInnes, 2018), UMAP offers a novel way to explore embedded practices as dynamic neighborhoods in higher-dimensions, allowing us to abstract communicative phenomenon, such as power dynamics between publics, from interactional data.

My paper sits at this intersection of developing a novel methodological paradigm to study online radicalization in toxic masculine spaces on Reddit through practice manifolds. By using LLM-based practice identification for textual corpora from the

interactional data spanning 2014-2016, I propose to track algorithmic radicalization as a communicative phenomenon by looking for emergent parasitic relationalities and discursive violence in practices on reddit from the following subreddits:

Toxic Subreddits	Feminist Subreddits	Dominant/General Subreddits
KotakuInAction	TwoXChromosomes	gaming
kotakuinaction2	GirlGamers	anime
GamerGhazi	WitchesVsPatriarchy	starwars
MensRights	Feminism	pokemon
MGTOW	FeministGamers	
SocialJusticeInAction	AskWomen	
TumblrInAction		

Subreddit lists based on works by Buyukozturk et al., (2018); Mamié et al., (2021); Massanari, (2017); Ribeiro et al., (2021); Salter, (2018).

Conclusion and Discussion

Reddit is a rich source of textual and interactional data that remains unexplored with mixed methods approaches. While the literature on radicalization on Reddit is diverse, it fails to address some fundamental questions about power, communicative actions, and coloniality. This paper attempts at addressing this gap by considering agential interactions to be the central feature of platformed discourse. Building on novel methodologies that combine mathematical rigor, computational scalability, and theoretical foundation, this work reaffirms the ideal of an accessible and safe internet for all becomes achievable only through critical readings of the sociotechnical apparatus of platforms.

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Paper 5:

MAPPING FANDOM RUPTURES: A CASE STUDY OF TAYLOR SWIFT FANDOM PRACTICES ON REDDIT

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Introduction

As research access to major social media platforms has become increasingly restricted, growing attention has turned to Reddit as a valuable alternative for studying online communities. This follows rising traffic and all-time user activity on the platform in 2024 (Reddit, 2024). Reddit has grown in recognition as a space online for fandom and community engagement: from long-standing spaces as a main source for fan reaction by journalists (Burt, 2025) to pop-up spaces in response to current events (Honderich & Wendling, 2024), and a concentrated, strategic and successful push to become the home of organic sports fandom online (Bradley, 2024).

It would be a mistake to attribute this rise entirely to the downfall of Twitter/X. Proferes et al. (2021) have noted that while Twitter was once a “model organism” (Tufekci, 2014) for research, Reddit is increasingly filling this role alongside additional advantages of a “qualitatively and quantitatively more expansive dataset” (Proferes et al., 2021, p.1). More recently, interest in network analyses of expansive Reddit activity have grown (Proferes et al., 2021), generated from metrics such as user co-comment networks at various levels (Baowaly, Kibirige and Singh, 2022), reply networks (Rohde, Liu and Rees, 2023) or sharing of posts across communities (Sawicki, 2023). This paper furthers previous research in community analysis on Reddit, presenting an application of the novel practice mapping methodology to studying Taylor Swift fandom communities on Reddit. We demonstrate how this approach can reveal patterns about user behavior that are left less clear via direct engagement metrics and data from other platforms.

Practice mapping and practices on Reddit

Practice mapping (Bruns et al., 2024) is a method which, unlike traditional network analysis, connects and clusters users by the similarity of their actions online rather than direct interactions. Practice mapping also enables visualization of a combination of actions at once, as opposed to single-mode networks such as reply or co-comment graphs. Therefore, a number of decisions must be made by the researcher regarding what practices and units to analyze, and how to weight the various inputs. This approach allows for not only a richer view of community behaviors in one graph, but more flexibility in which aspects of activity to focus on. However, this flexibility puts greater onus on the researcher to truly understand the context of their dataset both in the selection of practices and the conversion of them into countable metrics for analysis.

Translating practice mapping for use on Reddit data requires significant conceptual and contextual understanding of the affordances of the platform. Of significant importance is the structure of subreddits, where there are different community practices, not only due to cultural incentives but because of moderation rules that can vary between subreddits. Across and within subreddits, users disagree about governance styles and values (Weld, Zhang & Althoff, 2022), and rather than one platform community culture, users belong to largely transient communities each with “a very specific shared set of languages and conventions, rules, expectations, and rituals” (Robards, 2018, p. 193). Subreddits which may ostensibly look to be centered on the same topic of discussion may hold very different user behavior and content in practice, with both user history and local convergence playing a part in maintaining these distinctions over time (Rajadesingan, Resnick & Budak 2020).

Swifties and anti-Swifties on Reddit

Understanding the clear differences between subreddit practices is particularly important to our dataset. Our case study examines Taylor Swift fandom communities on Reddit, comprising of just over one year of data (1 September 2023 to 30 September 2024) from eleven subreddits: eight dedicated to Swift and three general subreddits filtered for Swift content. Our selection purposefully includes a variety of communities, including mainstream fan community *r/taylorswift* (3.2 million members at time of download) to relationship-focused groups (*r/travisandtaylor*, 116k) and music discussion groups (*r/popheads*, 2.4m); two of the subreddits are explicitly anti-fandom subreddits.

This timespan held significant ruptures within Swift fandom, stretching from Swift’s call for voter registration in September 2023 to her Democrat presidential endorsement in September 2024. This year also marks the rise in public consciousness of her relationship with celebrity footballer Travis Kelce sparking controversy and even conspiratorial thinking (see e.g. Pengally, 2024). While Swift’s relationships -- and, to a lesser extent, her politics -- had inspired community conflict and even new subreddit creation in the past (Driessen 2022a, 2022b), none reached the ongoing magnitude and engagement of those in 2023-24. These events generated not only substantial discussion across Reddit, but fan and anti-fan fragmentation, creating a rich case study for community analysis.

Fan studies literature has established that both fandom and anti-fandom (Sandvoss, 2019) represent powerful drivers for community formation (see Gray, 2003; Jones, 2015; Barnes, 2022). Anti-fan and alternative identities and communities can be complex, existing from both inside and outside traditional fan spaces, and often leading with emotional attachment in a “feels culture” (Stein, 2015). This is clear in the origins of the dedicated Swift subreddits, where one initial all-encompassing r/TaylorSwift subreddit started in 2010 was first joined by an additional dedicated r/GaylorSwift for “queer readings, themes, and motifs in her work and public persona” in 2018 (Reddit, 2025). In this affect-driven environment, identifying practices of fandom, including similarities and differences between seemingly similar or related subsets of fandom provides new insights into the functions of online communities.

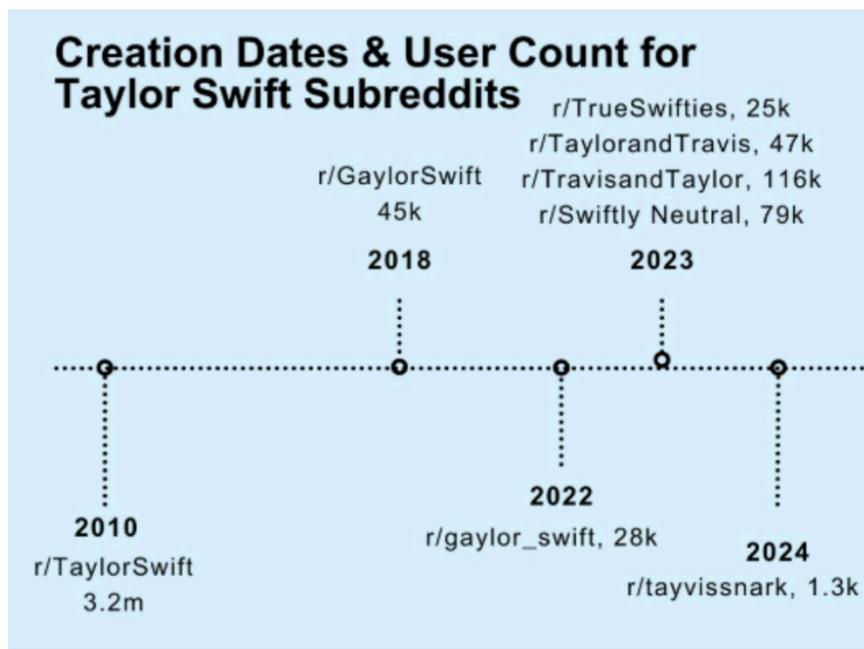
Measuring practices: a multi-level framework

Our adaptation of practice mapping for Reddit data required developing metrics that capture activities on the platform at multiple levels. These were informed by extensive exploratory research phases consisting of both qualitative observations and traditional network analysis with the data.

A short summary of the included practice metrics is:

User Account Level	Thread Level	Subreddit Level
Submission and comment patterns by users within each subreddit	Comment length and distribution from users	Submission and comment patterns by users within each subreddit
Thread domination and persistence	Post submitter recurrence patterns	Subreddit thread characteristics (width versus depth ratio, comment volume)
Content sharing patterns	Link sharing characteristics	External domain sharing patterns
Linguistic practices via word embeddings	Moderation indicators such as deleted comments, locked status, and megathreads	Internal cross-posting patterns

Extensive ethnographic observations were relied upon for initial scoping and ongoing context and sense-making checks. We constructed a timeline of Swift’s major moments during the time, and corresponding changes in activity across the subreddits for comparison. This revealed a clear reactive interplay across Reddit, as existing communities fractured into new ones with different perspectives on moderation and content focus.



Further observations informed variety in the practices selected. Other subreddits and their users were often referred to with specific pejoratives, marking something to later look for systematically in text data. Topological differences between massive, structured ‘megathreads’ for focused discussion and shorter conversational threads led to extensive reworking of thread structure and user dominance metrics. Exploratory data work with traditional social network analysis was also foundational in our approach, working with comment and submission patterns, URL and domain-level sharing, and cross-posting, and observing differences across users, individual threads and subreddit-level behaviors. Clear deviations, for example, in the overall visualization between user co-comment networks at the subreddit level versus the thread level led to an increased multi-level focus in our analysis.

This multi-level approach captures the complex interplays between platform affordances, community norms and individual practices that characterize activity on Reddit. This aims to recognize both the impact of subreddit-level and thread-level governance as well as individual patterns of behavior, as recognized in the literature (Robards, 2018; Rajadesingan, Resnick & Budak, 2020; Weld, Zhang & Althoff, 2022) and in our ethnographic investigations. It allows us to identify not only what users do within individual subreddits but how they adapt their practices as they move between communities – revealing patterns of rupture and continuity in communities.

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