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## “WHAT’S OUR ESCAPE PLAN, AND WHERE ARE WE GOING TO MEET UP?”: THEORISING PLATFORM EVACUATION IN PLATFORM SOCIETY

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In the lead-up to the law banning TikTok on national security grounds in the United States coming into effect on 19 January 2025, creators prepared for an impending departure. They reminisced about their TikTok era, dismissed concerns regarding data security, and encouraged followers to engage in cross-platform migration. We position these actions within the concept of “platform evacuation”, borrowing from @jamescharles’ TikTok where he asked, “Where are we going to evacuate to? What’s our escape plan, and where are we going to meet up?”

In this paper, we develop an analytical framework of “platform evacuation” to analyse departure and migration in platform society. “Platform evacuation” refers to the collective voluntary or forced withdrawal of users from a social media platform due to a crisis in or of platform governance, and is usually instigated by public announcements of departure, commemorations of nostalgia and loss, and negotiations of community migration, which are led by leaders in the community, such as influencers, creators, and mainstream celebrities. The US TikTok ban and migration to Xiaohongshu in 2025 is but the latest of earlier instances of platform evacuations, including the TikTok ban in India (Germain, 2024); waves of migration from X (Twitter) to BlueSky, Mastodon, or Threads (Tattersall, 2024); and departure of Tumblr adult content creators to OnlyFans (Moen, 2022).

### Theorising platform evacuation

Platform evacuation stems from changes to governance *by* platforms or governance *on* platforms (Gillespie, 2017; Gorwa, 2019), which result in departures and cross-platform migrations. It exposes the issues of platform dependency and precarity in the creator economy, which render evacuation a crisis, especially for those whose livelihoods are tied to it. The evacuation of X following Musk’s takeover exemplifies departure as a voluntary response to a regime of private governance (Murthy, 2024). In another

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instance, the half-day termination of TikTok services for US users illustrates departure mandated by legislative changes (Dedezade, 2025). The politics of platform governance is expressed through *evacuation memetics*, offering interpretations of why incoming governance arrangements cause evacuation.

The disruptive nature of platform evacuation reveals understandings of platform cultures. Creators articulate unspoken values of platform specificities (Kaye et al., 2021), engaging in *platform remembrance* in the evacuation lead-up. Although not involving the 'death' of the platform (see McCammon & Lingel, 2022), departure elicits digitally mediated practices of mourning (Abidin, 2018; Giaxoglou, 2021; Gibbs et al., 2015; Leaver & Highfield, 2018) and remembering (Annabell, 2022; 2023; Humphreys, 2018). Evacuation, thus, becomes a time to express and grieve emotional connections and belongings in platform culture.

Similar to crisis communication as a specialised area of public relations (Eriksson, 2018), platform evacuation requires strategic management. Creators display *evacuation leadership* as they develop evacuation practices, some of which draw upon existing creator practices like cross-platform labour (Glatt, 2022; Meng, 2024; 2025; Meng & Nansen, 2022) that are reconfigured by the urgency and orientation from managing individual risk to encouraging community cross-platform migration. We propose that the range of evacuation practices can be mapped across the temporal unfolding of the crisis, as we now illustrate with a recent platform evacuation.

### **Stages of platform evacuation**

#### *Evacuation instigation*

While the 2025 US TikTok ban can be traced back to the multiple lobbying, policymaking and lawmaking efforts of 2020 (Allyn, 2020) and 2024 (Fung, 2024), we anchor platform evacuation in its co-construction as an *inevitable* reality (rather than a political talking point or the potential future threat) by the judicial system, politicians, journalists, creators and TikTok. As TikTok exhausted the appeals process - concerning the governance of the platform - on 6 December and 17 January, creators shifted focus from influencing decision-making by publicising TikTok's value (Lorenz, 2024) to preparing for departure. We identify the reported likelihood that the Supreme Court would uphold the bill on 10 January as a pivotal moment; the combination of legal certainty and temporal proximity acted as a catalyst for creators to announce departures.

#### *Evacuation memetics*

In anticipation of evacuation, creators playfully critiqued changes to platform governance arrangements, building on TikTok meme cultures (Abidin, 2021; Zeng et al., 2021). For example, the 'take my data, China' narrative was reiterated through templates, skits, and audio memes to frame privacy concerns about the transactional exchanges between users and platforms as exaggerated and influenced by geopolitics disconnected from users. In one video, @jamescharles packs his suitcase to move to China, using the audio 今生缘 (Jin Sheng Yuan) circulating through the 'my Chinese spy' meme. The song was also used in the 'Sing in Chinese or X' trend (Wenxin, 2024),

indicating how evacuation memetics dovetail with racialisation in and by TikTok (Matamoros-Fernández et al., 2022; Zhao & Abidin, 2023).

### *Platform remembrance*

Creators publicly expressed gratitude for TikTok and their community of followers, pre-emptively mourning loss of access. This included emotional talking-head goodbye videos, nostalgic video compilations and slideshow presentations of their TikTok history. These audiovisual reminiscences reveal blurred boundaries between personal and professional identities, perceptions of influencer culture evolution, and content creation as life-changing journey, remediating scholarly concepts on platform and influencer cultures. By showcasing awkward, embarrassing videos instead of cute throwbacks, creators also expanded affective and aesthetic norms in resurfacing old content.

### *Evacuation leadership*

The approaches creators use to motivate users to follow them on Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat, and Xiaohongshu demonstrate cross-platform engagement as a form of leadership. Creators discussed alternative options with followers, promoted their accounts through their bios and captions and shared teasers of content available on other platforms. Examining these narrative strategies reveals nuanced understanding of platform norms and registers, and the negotiation of perceived interconnectedness (Abidin, 2015). For instance, @alixearle's quip, "If you don't follow me on IG [Instagram], you're never going to see when I get engaged," invokes future milestones as an incentive to continue interacting with her after the TikTok evacuation, declaratively asserting her familiarity with community expectations.

### *Platform curtain calls*

As the evacuation deadline approached, creators participated in intense final performances exemplified by the secret-telling 'since we're all going to die' trend. Creators revealed the 'truth' behind their origin stories and self-branding efforts, such as @kaelimaee not consuming the ice cubes she made, despite being known for aesthetic ice cube restock content, or the billionaire boyfriend mentioned in @haleyybaylee's two-year day-in-the-life as stay-at-home-girlfriend series being fake. These disclosures in response to platform evacuation speak to the temporal boundaries of disruption, dynamics of reputation and trust, and negotiations of authenticity as platform evacuation is experienced as world-ending and detached from consequences.

## **Conclusion**

Our "platform evacuation" concept offers internet researchers a framework for exploring the dynamics of departure and cross-platform migration arising from platform governance issues. The term "evacuation" captures the urgency and suddenness of collective withdrawal and alludes to the politics of mobility, dependence and precarity, heightened in times of crisis. Our account of evacuation stages during the US TikTok ban illustrates the leadership of creators as they explain the politics of evacuation through memetic content, express nostalgia and loss for the platform, encourage community migration and perform curtain calls. Thinking with temporalities, spatialities and discourses of platform evacuation allows for a critical examination of collective departures and migrations from social media platforms as anticipated, instigated and negotiated.

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