

**Editors' Introduction to Special Issue of *JQD:DM* in  
Collaboration with *ICWSM***

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This special issue aims to build bridges between scholarly communities engaging in the study of digital media. The result of a partnership between the International AAAI Conference on the Web and Social Media (ICWSM) and the *Journal of Quantitative Description: Digital Media (JQD:DM)*, this effort provides both journal space and physical space for strengthening our interdisciplinary community. The eight articles in this volume showcase the diversity of data, methods, and contributions being made in the study of digital media. As editors, we are pleased at this collaborative forum for such interdisciplinary conversation, and it is our privilege to present the first set of articles — of many more to come.

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Academic silos are a nonsensical strategy for understanding an interconnected world. The digital revolution has redefined humanity's ability to communicate across time

and space, yet academic disciplinary boundaries have remained a stubborn hindrance. This special issue therefore challenges, and presents a step towards overcoming, the obstacle of historical disciplinary division.

Bringing together two outstanding organizations which have each worked hard to build meaningful communities, this special issue highlights what an interdisciplinary academic community can look like. Founded in 2007, the [International AAAI Conference on the Web and Social Media \(ICWSM\)](#) is a premier conference for computational social science research on social media. It follows the computer science model of peer-reviewed conference proceedings and has produced highly impactful work on social media over the years. Our second partner, the [Journal of Quantitative Description: Digital Media \(JQD:DM\)](#), is the leading outlet for quantitative descriptive work related to digital media in the social sciences. It provides desperately needed space for careful quantitative descriptions of the ever-expanding and evolving digital media spaces in a world in which human behavior increasingly plays out online (Munger et al., 2021). To advance scientific knowledge about social media and digital media at large, computer scientists, social scientists, and computational social scientists must stay informed about and build on each other's research, breaking the disciplinary silos that hinder scientific growth. As editors, we are pleased at this collaborative forum for such interdisciplinary conversation, and it is our privilege to present the first set of articles — of many more to come.

The eight papers showcased in this special issue have each been published in *JQD:DM* and presented at ICWSM. In other words, this issue provides both journal space and physical space to bring together the scholarly communities engaged in the study of digital media. This is meaningful not only because publications and citations are the currency of academic advancement, but because these venues represent tools of community building which academics themselves control. While a community formed on social media may fall apart under changes in private ownership, conferences and publications are long-term communities we can nurture as part of our academic traditions.

In addition to celebrating the disciplinary diversity of work in this space, this special issue also highlights three key dimensions along which digital media research is advancing.

### **Diversity of Data Sources**

No two papers in this volume share a common data approach. [Brown et al.](#) use a subject consent approach to acquire data from the platform Nextdoor. [Chen et al.](#) examine the hyperlink network among YouTube video descriptions. [Scarano et al.](#) interrogate characteristics of users who interact with Twitter polls. [Barari](#) collects Twitter and Instagram data with myriad other data sources to examine the political speech of major corporations. These are just a few examples of the creative ways in which scholars explore important processes of opinion expression and information diffusion across the internet.

While this diversity is impressive, it also highlights the pressing challenge of data access. Researchers have little control over which platforms they can access or what data they can acquire. And that reality necessarily shapes what digital media research looks like (Freelon, 2018). For the past decade, Twitter was one of the most widely studied platforms—not only because of its importance to political speech, but because the API made the data accessible. As platforms are moving to restrict data access or charge exorbitant fees, scholars of digital media will need to get more creative in how they go about studying these important spaces.

### **Diversity of Methods**

The papers in the special issue also employ an impressive array of computational social science methods to advance their research. [Boukes et al.](#) conduct a visual analysis of memes, combining machine learning and in-depth analysis. [Yang and Menczer](#) use bots that accidentally say they are bots to highlight the limitations of bot detection and the characteristics of LLM-powered bot networks. [Greipl et al.](#) use a BERT approach to examine how extremist movements use fear-based language. [Mendelsohn et al.](#) take a

mixed-methods approach to understanding social movement frames, releasing a codebook and annotated dataset along with their computational models. Every paper in this volume takes an innovative and thoughtful approach to data analysis.

In many ways, this methodological diversity is at the heart of computational social science. CSS is more than the application of computational methods to social science; at its heart it is the development of bespoke, yet efficient and replicable, approaches to addressing fascinating research questions at scale.

### **Diversity of Contributions**

Finally, the articles in this special issue showcase the diversity of questions that need exploring in digital media. For example, while digital media serves as an important space for various actors to achieve their strategic purposes, many questions remain about the characteristics and motivation of these actors across a variety of contexts. In this issue, [Yang and Menczer](#) tackle the challenge of artificial actors, particularly bots powered by large language models (LLMs), which are capable of producing human language at scale. [Chen](#) and colleagues focus on content creators as actors, examining the intersection of commercialization and climate change discourse. [Mendelsohn et al.](#) explore actors organized around three different social movements in the U.S., while [Greipl et al.](#) examine extremist actors in Germany. Meanwhile, [Barari](#) interrogates brands as social media actors, examining possibilities of partisan signaling and so-called “woke capitalism.”

Digital media also provides a key window into how society reacts to unprecedented circumstances. [Boukes et al.](#)’s study of crowd-sourced pandemic memes and jokes during the COVID-19 pandemic offers key insights into not only meme culture but also online humor during difficult times. [Scarano](#) and colleagues present a systematic investigation of Twitter polls during two U.S. presidential elections, revealing both challenges and opportunities for inferring public opinion. Lastly, digital media has its offline component, especially for platforms that prioritize offline locations. [Brown et al.](#) provide one of the

first studies of Nextdoor, a hyperlocal social media network, offering rich descriptions of what types of neighborhoods have a Nextdoor and what types of posts are made in those neighborhoods.

In sum, digital media can be leveraged to study a vast range of collective behaviors and social phenomena. The articles featured in this special issue demonstrate the diversity of questions that can be asked and answered using digital media.

We thank our authors for sharing their extraordinary contributions with us and urge you, the reader, to appreciate each one.

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### **References**

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