

Digital interculturality

Understanding postdigital reality through a new conceptual lens

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Abstract *This article develops the concept of 'digital interculturality' as a critical lens for understanding postdigital societies. Against the backdrop of platformisation, algorithmic governance, and AI-driven epistemic infrastructures, interculturality is reconceptualised as a structurally mediated, dynamic, and ambivalent process, shaped by both connectivity and exclusion. The authors write in line with arguments for a shift from essentialist and interactionist models of cultural difference, which presume fixed, monocultural identities, toward a view of identity as fluid and developing within a culturally hybrid lifeworld. Interculturality is, thus, framed as the ubiquitous negotiation of uncertainty and alterity in communicative environments where meaning is algorithmically filtered, amplified, or silenced. In this context, digital interculturality emerges as a multilayered phenomenon embedded in the asymmetries of platform capitalism, epistemic colonialism, and intersectional regimes of (in)visibility. Drawing on Critical (inter)cultural Studies, Internet Studies, and Sociolinguistics, the article calls for infrastructural literacy as a key competence for engaging with the communicative conditions of the post-digital lifeworld, therefore part of intercultural competence. Digital interculturality, the authors conclude, is not peripheral—it is constitutive of contemporary cultural production and transformation.*

Keywords *Intercultural Communication; Digital Transformation; Platforms; Social Media; Cultures*

1. Introduction

As Clifford Geertz (1973) argues, context is essential for interpreting communicative behaviour; indeed, meaning emerges through spatial and social circumstances (Watzlawick et al., 1967, p. 20), and any interpretation of language use must account for the contextual variables shaping the communicative act (Austin, 1962; Gumperz, 1982). The field of intercultural communication is intricately connected to understanding these complex meaning-making processes while acknowledging how different collectives resort to (partially) divergent and contextually-bound resources. The need to understand not only how cultures differ but also how cultures flow one into another, merge, and develop (Bolten 2018, pp. 46–54) has remained central.

The ‘digital turn’ has massively radically reconfigured the landscape and complexity of human communication, opening to more connections and transformations, reshaping the conditions as well as the modalities of intercultural meaning-making (Conti, 2024). This development means that the field of intercultural communication needs to engage with this extended reality. Thus, a return to heavily contextualised methodologies, such as Geertzian “thick description”, can help scholars to trace, disentangle, and reflect upon the contextual intricacies of what we term ‘digital interculturality’.

Postdigitality—understood as the entanglement of the digital with every facet of life (Cramer, 2014)—further demands a theoretical reorientation. Context in digital settings is no longer merely social or spatial but also infrastructural and algorithmic. While the acknowledgment of contextual layers constitutes, in many ways, the very ethos of intercultural communication, postdigitality has brought about the necessity to incorporate further contextual layers (Jones et al., 2015, p. 9), beyond the representational: Rapidly changing life-worlds now intertwine with a rapidly changing technological and media landscape. We argue here for a return to a consciously contextual orientation and make suggestions for the rethinking of what, exactly, constitutes context.

The rise of digital platforms has increased the speed, reach, and intensity of intercultural interactions. A proliferation of media sources, coupled with algorithmic filtering and recommendation systems, now co-constructs what users perceive and experience as reality. New, hybrid forms of participation have emerged, often situated at the intersection of algorithmic governance, platform affordances, and cultural practices. Traditional categories of identity have become more fluid and others—such as affinity-based affiliations (Gee, 2007; see also Blommaert & Varis, 2015 on light communities)—have

gained importance. Local communities have become more heterogeneous and digitally interconnected, while disinformation, polarisation, and hate speech are now powerful phenomena threatening social cohesion and democratic discourse (Lenehan & Lietz, 2025).

This complexity, it is argued, calls for a theoretical framing of the internet as a space of constant movement—between standardisation and anti-standardisation, centralisation and decentralisation, culturality and interculturality. These dynamics are not fixed binaries but appear as processual tensions, waves of solidification and dissolution that inform digital life. Platforms have become not just spaces of interaction, but agents of these transformations. They incorporate economic and ideological logics, and increasingly exercise agency in shaping communicative norms, social recognition, and cultural legitimacy (Poell et al., 2019).

The paradox is striking: Local environments become more heterogeneous and hybrid through lifewide learning in culturally diverse lifeworlds (Conti & Lenehan, 2024), translocal publics often become more uniform—curated by algorithmic similarity—while proximity loses its power to produce connection. The line between individual and collective, between autonomy and normativity, between freedom and control is constantly redrawn.

In this chapter, we explore the conceptual field of what we have termed ‘digital interculturality’, provisionally described some years ago as the “hyper-interculturality of the digital world with its potential for a myriad of new and diverse connections” (Lenehan, 2022b, p. 6). Drawing on the work of the ReDICO¹ project, we refine this notion by approaching digital interculturality as a layered, dynamic, and ambivalent process—characterised by both expansive connectivity and structural exclusions.

In short, we approach the contextual layers embedded in digital interculturality, starting from a macro sociocultural perspective—with postdigitality, platformisation and artificial intelligence (AI), and the digital divide, regarded as moulding mechanisms influencing the formation of digital cultures. From there, we trace how digital interculturality is experienced and negotiated in situated practices, where shifting norms, representational politics, and infrastructural asymmetries intersect. Our aim is not to offer a fixed definition, but to map a conceptual terrain in which digital interculturality can be critically understood, as a site of potential, contradiction, and power.

1 ReDICO stands for Researching Digital Interculturality Co-operatively. The associated website is <http://www.redico.eu>

2. (Post)digitality

Digitalisation refers to the technical conversion of analogue signals into digital formats through a process known as ‘digitisation’. This process is foundational, enabling the subsequent development of digital systems and infrastructures, such as information and communication technologies and the internet of Things (Brennen & Kreiss, 2016, p. 556). Digitalisation, however, has always gone beyond the mere technical conversion of analogue into digital data and encompasses the broader integration of digital technologies into various societal domains, highlighting its transformative impact on culture, communication, and social structures (Conti et al., 2024). Digitalisation, thus, signifies a shift towards a world where digital technologies are not just ‘tools’ but integral components of everyday life, fundamentally altering how society functions and interacts. Processes of digitalisation are entangled deeply with lifeworlds and now constitute the dominant cultural environment in which we operate (Stalder, 2018).

In this context, the concept of “digital dualism” (Jurgenson, 2011, Introduction section), expressing the traditional separation of digital and physical experiences, has been overcome as contemporary life is lived within a unified digitality, an ultimate “onlife” (Floridi, 2015). The idea of being either online or offline becomes thus “anachronistic” with “our always-on smart devices”, as the postdigital becomes “hegemonic” and “entangled” with everyday life, in a “complex, messy and difficult to untangle way” (Berry, 2015, p. 50). In this vein, “the dichotomies of off-line/on-line do not do justice to the diverse ways in which the ‘real’ and virtual worlds are interpenetrated” (Warf, 2021, p. 1).

A theoretical discussion regarding the online/offline dichotomy has been ongoing for more than 20 years and can be seen as having stabilised via the introduction of the postdigital perspective, whereby the ‘post’ does not signify a world without computers and the internet but the opposite in fact (Schmidt, 2021, p. 7). In this sense, the ‘post’ in postdigital denotes a continuation rather than a rupture (Cramer, 2014, p. 13; for a sociolinguistic treatment of this issue, see Bolander & Locher, 2020): postdigitality also encompasses questions of materiality. The postdigital refers to how computation becomes “experiential, spatial, and materialised in its implementation”, part of the “texture of life”, materialising also “within the body” (Berry & Dieter, 2015, p. 3).

This materialisation is not limited to physical artefacts but includes the ways in which technological infrastructures shape social practices, affective relations, and embodied experiences. Recent theoretical discussions have built

on this, framing the postdigital in terms of a critical understanding of technology's pervasion of the social (Jandrić et al., 2018; Peters & Besley, 2019), not least its re-ordering of the physical world (Levinson, 2019, p. 15), and a "rejection of binaries" (Sinclair & Hayes, 2019, p. 130). The term postdigital is an attempt to outline what is indeed 'new' regarding our relationship to the digital but also highlights the ways that digital technologies are "embedded in, and entangled with, existing social practices and economic and political systems" (Knox, 2019, p. 358). Postdigitality means that human beings are entangled with a variety of digital platforms which represent, online, a form of 'cultural' standardisation and solidification, meaning that platforms themselves, and those who own them, retain a large degree of power in relation to what happens in a digital context, and also in relation to how digitality has moulded lifeworlds.

The term 'platform' refers to digital infrastructures which have become the dominant form of digital-informational architecture online and which look to ease interactions between users. Platforms point to "a set of online digital arrangements whose algorithms serve to organise and structure economic and social activity" (Kenny & Zysman, 2016, The Key Technology section). This dominating structure of today's internet includes the communicative landscape of both the web and mobile apps. Platforms encompass social media, app stores, online market-places, payment services, gig economy apps, search engines, communication services, streaming sites, AI sites, and many more. It is interesting to note how *YouTube* first began describing itself as a "platform" in the late 2000s and how the term gained currency from then on as the "discursive positioning" of the word was "specific enough to mean something, and vague enough to work across multiple venues for multiple audiences" (Gillespie, 2010, p. 349).

Platforms "supply infrastructures that facilitate particular types of interactions" but also "represent strategies for bounding networks and privatizing and controlling infrastructures" (Cohen, 2017, p. 144). Thus, platforms represent the bordering of the internet, the creation of at times exclusive and 'walled' micro worlds, not necessarily connected with other platforms. While earlier conceptualisations of the internet promoted its networked character, the contemporary internet—in terms of inclusions and exclusions, the organisation of software, and the structures of text—should be seen as a (partly) disjointed and haphazard "patchwork of platforms" (Lenehan, 2024, p. 244). Some parts of the internet may indeed be interconnected, but this structure does not warrant the term 'network' anymore, suggestive as this term is of a broader systematic and interconnected structure.

A patchwork of platforms suggests, instead, a collection of informational silos which are internally interconnected but not open-ended, meaning that a network exists within the reality of the platforms themselves, but is not extended to the internet as a whole. This is a change from earlier internet structures, which openly connected users embedded in various digital architectural forms via hyperlinks. Systematic-interconnection is now no longer an aspect of the wider internet, but increasingly confined to the closed ecosystems of dominant platforms. While certain credentials—like a *Google* account—grant access across multiple services, this form of interoperability signals not cultural openness, but the solidification of infrastructural power. Interconnection is conducted, rather, within platforms, on the platforms' terms, and with platforms acting as communicative moulding agents, not least of a type of standardisation according to the prevailing norms of the platforms themselves. In this context, the phenomenon of platformisation has been depicted as “the rise of the platform as the dominant infrastructural and economic model of the social web and its consequences” (Helmond, 2015, p. 1).

The increased algorithmic underpinning of online activity has become evident (Kenny & Zysman, 2016), with internet communication of various kinds now embedded in a moulding and structuring “algorithmic culture” (Hallinan & Striphas, 2014, p. 119). However, it is important to note that the platform metaphor may hide the power of platforms, not just in terms of facilitating cultural, political, and socio-economic interaction but, in fact, steering it (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4276)—and steering it towards a type of almost global standardisation, a solidifying of emerging digital norms.

While the majority of the most influential platforms, such as *Facebook*, *Instagram*, and *YouTube*, originate in the United States and ‘export’ via their platform U.S.-centric norms, values, and communicational logics, a growing global reach of Chinese platforms is also evident, the best example being of course *TikTok* (We Are Social & Meltwater, 2025). This U.S.-Chinese digital geopolitical dominance suggests two competing spheres of digital standardisation, but other platforms and ways of doing things on the internet also exist, in a type of conscious anti-colonial, anti-standardisation approach to the creation of both digital architecture, the algorithmic underpinning of the internet, as well as AI (see, e.g., Franco, 2022, 2025). Despite their competition for global influence, the U.S. and Chinese platforms share commonalities in terms of the functionality of platform capitalism: Through engagement-driven algorithms and the commodification of user data, platforms extract economic

value, and disproportionately from the Global South² (Udupa & Dattatreyan, 2023).

In many cases, users in the so-called ‘Global South’ rely mainly on foreign-owned platforms, for communication and information, reinforcing their dependency on the technologies they design and control. Researchers from South Africa (Gravett, 2020; Kwet, 2019) have labelled both the U.S. and Chinese approach to the internet in African countries as forms of “digital colonialism”. Such platforms extract vast amounts of data from various global regions, generally without adequate legal protections or equitable returns, while centralising profits elsewhere. Thus, platforms and platformisation are central to contemporary phenomena inherent to economic globalisation, feeding into aspects of global geopolitics. While dominating the infrastructure of the internet, postdigital driving forces mould increasingly the materiality of the life-world.

One of the most discussed forms of systematic agency³ in the realm of online action, contact, and interaction is of course AI. While an algorithm is a “set of instructions—a preset, rigid, coded recipe that gets executed when it encounters a trigger” (Ismail, 2018, *Difference Between AI and Algorithms* section), AI is used to refer to a set of “algorithms that can modify its algorithms and create new algorithms in response to learned inputs and data as opposed to relying solely on the inputs it was designed to recognize as triggers” (Ismail, 2018, *Difference Between AI and Algorithms* section). This ability for algorithmic modification, intertwined with human-linked inputs and data, is what gives AI its ‘intelligence’. How artificial and machine intelligences are to be viewed has been widely discussed.⁴ Indeed perhaps the term ‘intelligence’ is here something of a misnomer and suggests that this form of systematic agency retains a more independent type of agency than is actually the case. AI is a form of systematic agency that acts in relation to certain goals and norms (Barandiaran et al., 2009, p. 369), attributed ultimately to a collectivity of human agents involved directly in its authorship and development.

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- 2 While the term ‘Global South’ is widely used to denote regions structurally disadvantaged within global economic and technological systems, its usage is not without critique. Scholars have pointed out that it risks homogenising diverse political, economic, and cultural contexts, and can reproduce binary logics reminiscent of earlier colonial geographies. For a critical overview, see Mahler (2017).
 - 3 For a full discussion on the notion of agency in relation to postdigitality and platformisation, see Lenehan (2024).
 - 4 See, e.g., Brockmann (2019) for a theoretical overview.

AI should be seen as a form of hybrid agency and an epistemological resource, deeply intertwined with the actions, and authoring of human—and diversely culturally embedded and multi-relational—agents. It can also be viewed as a standardisation of certain forms of knowledge, as a kind of leveling-out, as the platforms and agents who dominate the internet also dominate the production of knowledge which is at the centre of very many forms of artificial intelligence, via the vast learning schemes which essentially create AI. This also represents a centralisation of power—which perhaps often goes unnoticed as it remains implicit, yet is deeply embedded in such processes. It has been noted that collective artificial intelligences pose challenges connected to “our *interactions* with them, given the degree of social influence collective epistemic agents have, such as government agencies or corporations” (original italics) and, as the capacities of collective artificial intelligences “vastly surpass the resources of any individual, an intelligence jetlag is a major risk” (Montemayor, 2023, p. 177). Thus, interactions with most forms of AI are marked by vast differences in epistemic resources and, therefore, represent an inherent imbalance in power relations.

While AI can, in principle, act as a levelling force—by lowering access barriers to knowledge, offering real-time feedback, enabling automated translation, or assisting in content production—its potential for epistemic democratisation is unequally realised. Tools such as *ChatGPT* or other generative AI systems may indeed support users in writing, translating, coding, or summarising complex information, thereby enhancing cognitive and performative agency. However, the questions remain: what form of knowledge is disseminated, who is in a position to use these tools, with what level of literacy, and under what infrastructural and sociopolitical conditions? The digital divide is far more than a matter of access to digital technologies—it encompasses layered inequalities that shape how, to what end, and with what impact digital technologies, including AI, are used (van Dijk, 2020, pp. 3–4). These asymmetries are not external to the epistemic architectures of the AI-infused internet, they are constitutive of it. They represent a form of infrastructural and institutional agency that configures who is able to participate meaningfully in these spaces, who remains peripheral, and who is rendered invisible. Thus, even before encountering the centralising and standardising effects of algorithmic logics inherent to the contemporary internet as a patchwork of platforms, with its implicit inclusions and exclusions, a series of excluding processes are already taking place in the material world, in the pre-use stage of internet usage.

3. (Post)digital cultures

Processes of digital centralisation and marginalisation do not unfold without resistance or counter-dynamics (Duarte, 2017; Matthews, 2024). Alongside their homogenising tendencies, platforms also generate spaces for decentralisation, cultural negotiation, and more inclusive access to discursive, expressive, and cultural participation. They simultaneously function as infrastructures of control and as arenas of participation, enabling inclusion, cultural hybridisation, and even forms of resistance within and through their own technical and normative architectures. For instance, translation technologies embedded in various platforms may work against linguistic exclusion and support communication in contexts shaped by mobility and migration (on language technologies and migration, see Yudytska & Androutsopoulos, in this volume). Platforms also serve as sites where global and local influences intersect, producing new, hybridised forms of cultural expression. Users in translocal spaces re-appropriate tools and trends, localising global phenomena or challenging dominant cultural narratives (on challenging narratives, see Silva's chapter, in this volume). For example, while platforms often impose Western-centric norms of individualistic self-presentation or consumerism, users adapt and reshape these norms to align with their own cultural contexts, creating dynamic forms of communication and identity (on the postdigital 'glocalisation' of discourses, see Thielemann & Zlatoslava, in this volume).

A clear example of this is seen in relation to Indigenous creators on *TikTok*, who use hashtags such as #NativeTikTok and #Indigenous to share content that blends global trends with their specific cultural heritage. These creators participate in viral challenges, such as dances or comedic sketches, while incorporating traditional regalia, language, or music, adapting global phenomena to reflect their cultural roots. Simultaneously, they use the platform to address issues such as colonial history, land rights, and cultural erasure, reclaiming their identity and challenging dominant narratives. Such practices illustrate how cultural heritage, in the postdigital age, is increasingly shaped by digital infrastructures and participatory logics. Rather than being passively preserved, it is actively re-authored, fragmented, and recombined through everyday media practices. Digital platforms thereby function as sites of cultural

negotiation, supporting hybridisation, visibility, and resistance in algorithmically structured spaces.⁵

Platforms also mould and structure flows of online communication between agents with varieties of complex cultural embeddedness, and increased platformisation has transformed the dynamics of communication on the internet, “in a hybrid post-digital environment where digital and human practices intermingle” (Davis, 2020, p. 84). In these quasi-universalised digital spaces, content that fits the specific medial frameworks of platforms—such as short videos, ephemeral stories, or algorithm-driven posts—can become globally accessible, often transcending geopolitical borders. Platforms and AI, as already discussed, are now integral to our postdigital lifeworld and platforms and AI systems lean on, and lead to, processes of standardisation and centralisation, which manifest themselves—outwardly at least—in shared semantic layers, digital metaphors, and analogous features across platforms, making them intuitive and easier to navigate.

As Bolten (2018, pp. 60–61) argues, standardisation emerges through a dynamic interplay between coordination—the process by which elements become increasingly aligned—and continuity—gradual, incremental change over time. Standardisations are reproduced, disseminated, and potentially passed down over time. Their intersubjective character provides the foundation for routine practices, enabling the formation of orientation systems that regulate the individual expectations and behaviours. In these transnational spaces, therefore, platforms lead to the emergence of new cultures that can be seen as specific formations of a broader culture of digitality (Stalder, 2018). Thus, the universal standardised presence of platforms contributes significantly to the emergence of shared behavioural—in particular communicational—routines at a global scale. These routines are shaped by medial frames—such as *Instagram’s* Stories, *TikTok’s* short-form videos, or *WhatsApp* Status—which dictate not only how human actions and expressions are presented but also how they must be conceptualised and adapted (or formatted, see Georgakopoulou, in this volume) to fit within platform-specific formats.

These frames structure communication in ways that are highly curated and influenced by the platforms’ design, often emphasising brevity, immediacy, and visually engaging content. The profit-oriented logic underpinning the algorithms that manage these frames plays a critical role in shaping not only the

5 For a full discussion on the dynamic construction of cultural heritage in the postdigital condition, see Conti (2025b).

format of content presentation but also the content itself. The dominance of engagement-driven algorithms compels users to prioritise content that aligns with platform incentives, such as virality, emotional intensity, or relatability. This dynamic often pressures content creators to tailor their messages to capture attention quickly, favouring sensational, hyper-aesthetic, or polarising elements that maximise reactions, shares, and overall engagement (Arora et al., 2022; Rogers, 2021; Roring, 2024). As a result, content creation is increasingly led by algorithmic priorities rather than organic or context-specific considerations. Thus, platforms exercise power not only through the circulation of content, but also in shaping the very forms of communication and expression that are considered viable or valuable within their ecosystems.

While facilitating translocal connections, platforms also shape socially constructed schemes of meaning that enable a “common understanding which makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy” (Taylor, 2004, p. 23). Such schemes are not neutral but are often deeply embedded in the cultural and ideological frameworks of dominant global powers, shaping how digital spaces operate and the behaviours they encourage, again highlighting the interconnecting of global everyday digital architecture and geopolitics. Affective digital capitalism (Andrejevic, 2011; Hearn, 2010) emerges as a key mechanism within these frameworks, commodifying emotions and identities as integral components of platform economies. On platforms such as *Instagram*, *YouTube*, and *Facebook*, self-presentation becomes an economic activity, where user engagement, measured via likes, shares, and comments, drives profitability. This process not only monetises user behaviour but also reinforces platform dependency, steering interactions and content creation toward the priorities of profit-driven algorithms, as such also constituting a centralising of power.

Platforms such as *Instagram* and *Facebook* exemplify such dynamics by promoting performative engagement, through their visibility-driven algorithms, which reward polished, curated, and sensational content. On such platforms, users are incentivised to present highly individualistic and aspirational identities that align with consumerist and competitive norms. The focus is on showcasing oneself for an audience, creating a culture of self-promotion and branding. Here, individuals do not merely share personal experiences but craft themselves as marketable products, contributing to a system where visibility equates to value (Whitmer, 2019).

This contrasts with other, largely less influential platforms that centre collaborative and participatory content creation and operate on the ‘edges’ of

the internet, often outside of some solidified internet norms and standardisations. The most prominent exception is *Wikipedia*: a non-profit, collaborative platform that not only resists many of the standardised norms of digital capitalism, but also remains a popular and epistemically influential platform. *Wikipedia's* open-editing model, much like features such as duets and stitching on platforms like *TikTok*, enables collective authorship and decentralised participation, fostering interaction and community rather than solely individual performance (Kopf, 2023).⁶ Still, such alternatives remain structurally marginal within an internet increasingly shaped by extractive economies and engagement-maximisation.

This structural imbalance is further reflected in the broader dynamics of participation in the digital space. From the cyber-utopian dominated early days to the emergence of web 2.0, the internet was widely perceived as a democratic arena where everyone could have a voice and diverse perspectives could be equally represented (Papacharissi, 2008). However, this ideal has receded as processes of standardisation and centralisation have gained a degree of dominance online. While the internet still allows for the possibility to produce, share, and access content—often while remaining anonymous or bypassing certain social barriers—this potential is not evenly distributed. Several platforms, including *Wikipedia*, *Open Universities*, *YouTube*, or even *ChatGPT*, can be perceived as helping to lower barriers to knowledge access. Yet, participation in digital spaces remains profoundly unequal, as some voices resonate louder than others and act as centralising forces (Bircan & Özbilgin, 2025). It is crucial to recognise that not everyone has the same opportunities or resources to engage meaningfully in the digital realm.

“Digital technologies support and strengthen epistemic colonisation, epistemic injustice, cognitive empire, and epistemicide” (Ndayisenga, 2024, pp. 8–9), and are part of excluding processes of digital centralisation, where diverse, local, or non-Western ways of knowing are marginalised or erased in favour of dominant narratives (see Schneider & Migge, in this volume). This issue is further exacerbated by the fact that AI technologies, which underpin many platform algorithms, are predominantly trained on datasets rooted in Western, Anglophone, and often white-centric texts and epistemologies. These systems thereby reproduce linguistic and cultural biases, reinforcing

6 However, there are relevant discussions on the gender gap on Wikipedia (see Ferrer-Ferrer et al., 2023).

the dominance of English and Eurocentric worldviews in digital infrastructures. Nevertheless, historically marginalised communities are reinterpreting and reconfiguring AI as a tool of resistance, developing practices that adapt existing technologies to align with their specific sociocultural realities, while also contributing to the emergence of new, plural forms of technological engagement (Aguiar & da Silva, 2024).

As a result, AI systems reproduce, amplify, and centralise biases, perpetuating racism and systemic inequality by privileging certain cultural logics and marginalising others (Bommasani et al., 2022; Schneider, 2022). The capital-oriented logic of algorithms amplifies voices and perspectives aligned with engagement metrics while silencing others, curating and limiting the types of translocal (inter)actions that are possible. Udupa and Dattatreyan (2023a, pp. 3–4) have called this process “digital unsettling”: This represents the ways in which “colonial formations persist” and have retrenched themselves in “online spaces in the form of extreme speech, disinformation, and propaganda, animating violently exclusionary nationalisms that rely on racist, casteist, misogynist, and homophobic discourse”. Thus, the centralisation and standardisation of platforms also means the re-inscribing of coloniality onto the digital.

What makes this particularly problematic is the extent to which communicative conditions are predetermined in digital environments. Unlike in physical settings, where communication can flexibly adapt to spatial, social, or material contexts, online expression is almost entirely mediated by the platform itself. Users depend on interfaces, algorithmic logics, and built-in affordances that shape not only what can be said, but how, to whom, and under which conditions something becomes visible. The architecture of the platform thus becomes the architecture of communicability—one that enforces specific temporalities, formats, and patterns of interaction.

This is particularly critical because these communicative conditions do not merely organise interaction—they actively shape what enters collective awareness. What is rendered visible under platform logics helps determine which meanings circulate, which experiences are legitimised, and which forms of knowledge become culturally authoritative. Communication is not merely the transmission of information; it is a primary means through which culture is created, negotiated, and transformed. The ways in which people express themselves, relate to others, and frame meaning are shaped today by the communicative infrastructures they inhabit.

In this sense, the platformisation of communication has direct implications for what people know, how they think, and how they act. It influences the very modalities of cognition, attention, and social interaction as well as the content of public discourse. In a postdigital society—where the boundaries between online and offline are increasingly blurred—these dynamics extend far beyond the digital itself. What happens within digital platforms feeds back into embodied life: shaping identities, reconfiguring cultural practices, and modulating collective perceptions of reality. Digital communication thus becomes a formative force not just within the digital realm, but of the social world as such. It alters subjectivities, restructures imaginaries, and transforms the contexts in which people live and relate.

In the postdigital lifeworld, platforms have therefore become central arenas upon which cultural identities and cultural practices are constantly negotiated. Platforms are thus not just tools for communication but spaces of convergence, shaping how individuals experience and construct their postdigital realities. Platforms function as translocal meeting points, allowing users to engage with a multiplicity of cultural references and influences that transcend their immediate geographical surroundings; spaces of co-existent standardisation and anti-standardisation, centralisation and decentralisation.

4. (Post)digital communities

As central nodes in the postdigital ecosystem, platforms mediate relationships, identities, and values, thereby reshaping the very foundations of community and belonging. Acting as digital ‘central squares’, they offer shared arenas for interaction, exchange, and collective sense-making across global flows of culture, knowledge, and affect. From this perspective, platforms may foster what Lenehan (2022a) describes as ‘postdigital cosmopolitanism’: the emergence of complex, cross-cultural entanglements that produce both individual transformation and new collectivities. These dynamics have long been seen as carrying emancipatory potential, promising a “joy of diversity” (Castells, 2004, p. 40) and the dissolution of inherited anxieties over alterity (Lenehan, 2022a).

However, the heterogeneity of digital environments can also provoke cognitive and emotional overload. In response, users often gravitate toward low-threshold digital routines and familiar spaces. Despite the internet’s apparent openness, patterns of use tend to cluster around habitual platforms and bounded communities (Olejnik et al., 2014), a tendency that is further ampli-

fied by algorithmic personalisation reinforcing risks of epistemic insularity and a declining openness to alternative viewpoints (Gunn, 2021; Turner, 2023). This reveals a deeper human tendency toward coherence, predictability, and affective security in environments marked by algorithmically structured fragmentation and noise. This retreat into familiar digital enclaves creates the conditions for new forms of community to emerge. Within bounded and more predictable environments, users can develop shared routines, norms, and semi-otic repertoires, forming micro-collectives based on recurring interaction and mutual legibility (Seraj, 2012).

While platforms enable translocal communication and cooperation, they transform the conditions under which social relations are formed and sustained. Users actively develop situated communicative practices in response to platform affordances. Although many digital communities remain fluid and fragile, others gradually stabilise. Digital environments can offer the stability needed for trust and collective meaning-making to emerge even in the absence of physical co-presence and, at times, of actual interaction (Cova & Dessart, 2022).

Blommaert et al. (2019) discuss the ethnomethodological notion of “congregational work” (Garfinkel, 2002) applied to the analysis of digital communities and highlight this dynamic process: Postdigital communities are constituted through congregational work where the word ‘congregational’ refers to the collaborative and often tacit efforts people make to produce and sustain a shared sense of social reality in everyday life. Particularly in super-diverse (Blommaert & Rampton, 2011) and weak-tie networks (Blommaert & Varis, 2015), this underpins ephemeral forms of collectivity, grounded in emergent norms and contingent alignments.⁷ Digital interculturality thus becomes constitutive of communication itself. These potentials for cultural negotiation and community-building are increasingly undermined by the structuring forces of platform capitalism. What appears as openness usually masks algorithmic governance, data extraction, and engagement optimisation (Zuboff, 2019). Such mechanisms not only personalise and fragment user experience, but also contribute to polarisation and the formation of ideologically homogeneous enclaves. These processes erode public discourse, diminish the visibility of alternative voices, and foster antagonistic affective communities that form around outrage, fear, and resentment (Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2018).

7 On communality, see also Stalder (2018).

Within this dynamic, platform infrastructures reproduce and amplify existing societal hierarchies along intersectional lines. For users with stigmatised or marginalised identities—such as women, people of colour, LGBTQ+ individuals, and disabled persons—digital participation is often conditioned by persistent risks of harassment, hate speech, and exclusion (Kamenova & Perlinger, 2023). These forms of digital violence are not accidental but systemic: They are embedded in the architecture of algorithmic visibility and platform incentives. A negative standardisation emerges as an algorithmic normativity in which dominant user profiles are reinforced as the default, rendering othered identities hypervisible, as targets or invisible through neglect (Noble 2018; Wachter-Boettcher, 2017).

These exclusions are not merely technical oversights but are enacted through the very social and cultural processes of digital community-building. Normativity becomes embedded not only through algorithmic design but through iterative practices of interaction, recognition, and exclusion—processes which shape who belongs, who is heard, and who is rendered marginal. In such dynamics, the imagined neutrality of digital infrastructures obscures how dominant norms are socially reproduced within communities themselves, reinforcing power relations under the guise of universality.

Rather than enabling pluralistic publics, such dynamics generate toxic forms of cohesion, affective collectivities bonded simultaneously through discursive solidarity within the ingroup and antagonism (Conti, 2025a). Anonymity, virality, and algorithmic amplification allow fringe ideologies and hate-based rhetoric to scale rapidly, often beyond the capacity of moderation or resistance. The result is a reinforcement of structural inequalities through digital means: Racism, misogyny, and other exclusionary logics are not simply mirrored but intensified in the postdigital condition, re-articulated in platform-specific vernaculars and validated through engagement metrics (Hassim et al., 2024; Madriaza et al., 2025).

These antagonistic dynamics unfold through the very modalities of digital communication. The affective power of digital interactions is shaped by multimodal forms—e.g., emojis, GIFs, synchronous chat, video—that blur the boundaries between oral, written, and visual language. These affordances favour emotionally charged expression and complex relational alignments, enabling both playful connectivity and the stylised circulation of hate, mockery, and symbolic violence, as with “Hatemojis” (Kirk et al., 2021). While such tools can bridge aspects of embodied presence and make mediated communication more immersive, they remain constrained by sensory and contextual

limitations. Experimental technologies such as digital skin or haptic interfaces promise deeper immersion, but the multisensory richness of physical co-presence remains only partially reproducible (Qi et al., 2024).

Yet digital spaces do not merely lack context; they produce their own. Availability indicators, metadata, user profiles, and algorithmically generated cues create layered communicative environments. These meta-contexts supplement interaction while also fragmenting it: Unlike physical space, digital communication lacks a unified, shared background. Interpretive instability becomes the norm, shaped by hidden infrastructures, disruptions, data trails, surveillance, and invisible labour. Despite this fragility, digital infrastructures can sustain and reconfigure local and translocal ties.

Both Castells (1996) and Appadurai (1996), from different theoretical vantage points, provide enduring insights into how global media and networked communication sustain diasporic connections across space. While Castells emphasises the infrastructural conditions that enable the maintenance of cultural and emotional bonds, Appadurai's concept of "mediascapes" captures the imaginative and symbolic dimensions of transnational cultural flows. Their frameworks remain useful for understanding how migrants today use digital platforms to maintain identity, build community, and facilitate economic and affective exchange across borders. In this context, tools such as translation apps, digital networking platforms, and localised support groups not only support these transnational ties, but also foster integration and participation in the new socio-spatial context (Lietz & Loska, 2024; see also Yudytska & Androutsopoulos, in this volume).

Digital infrastructures function as bridges, allowing users to inhabit multiple sociocultural realities simultaneously. Yet even here, the promise of connectivity remains uneven. As publics fracture into algorithmically tailored enclaves, the social functions of digital communication shift. Platforms increasingly satisfy emotional and political needs in lieu of proximate sociality. Whether one is recognised or accepted within one's immediate surroundings becomes secondary to digital validation. This fosters new forms of autonomy, but also cultivates atomised indifference and disembedded subjectivities. Hyperconnectivity and hyperindividualism converge in ways that challenge both democratic participation and social cohesion.

This culminates in a deep cultural paradox. Local communities grow increasingly heterogeneous, shaped by the lifewide learning processes that their

members experience across their culturally hybrid, postdigital lifeworlds.⁸ At the same time, the capitalist logics underpinning digital infrastructures favour disaggregating imaginaries: Instead of fostering pluralistic openness, they algorithmically stabilise and circulate fantasies of pure and static communities. The standardisation of platforms, which increasingly embeds authoritarian tendencies, feeds into a form of global techno-politics in which digital infrastructures are deployed as instruments of regulation, surveillance, and exclusion.

This dynamic produces a material regime of control in which digitally generated imaginaries manifest as real-world effects: in acts of offline violence, in cultural policing, and in the tightening of national and ideological borders. What is at stake, then, is not only epistemic but also political. As digital governance becomes more centralised, algorithmically enforced, and aligned with state interests, technological infrastructures and political authority are converging in new and dangerous ways, as the authoritarian trajectories emerging in the United States show.

5. Digital interculturality

Digital interculturality is not a supplementary dimension of intercultural interaction, but rather its contemporary condition. In postdigital societies, where communication is inseparable from the infrastructural, algorithmic, and economic architectures of digital platforms, interculturality becomes both ubiquitous and structurally mediated. It no longer describes encounters between clearly demarcated cultural identities, but rather the ongoing negotiation of meaning within systems that influence the visibility of content, guide affective responses, and determine which identities and perspectives receive recognition and legitimacy.

This transformation requires a conceptual shift: from interactional models to infrastructural analyses, from static identities to fluid, situational positionalities, and from normative ideals of ‘mutual understanding’ to critical inquiries into how cultural difference is produced, managed, and rendered (in)visible through digital infrastructures, and how these infrastructures actively shape cultural transformation and communicative agency and processes. As platforms increasingly function as global regulators of cultural

8 On lifeworld learning in the postdigital era, see Conti & Lenehan (2024).

expression, subtly shaping what becomes legible, amplifiable, or monetisable, interculturality emerges as a contested terrain, embedded in and shaped by systems of algorithmic normativity and platform governance.

Yet the ambivalence of digital interculturality is constitutive, not accidental. The same infrastructures that constrain also enable. New collectivities form across difference; hybrid identities are performed, destabilised, and reassembled. The process is shaped by dynamic tensions, between homogenisation and heterogeneity, connection and exclusion, visibility and erasure. Interculturality in the postdigital age thus cannot be captured through competence models or celebratory narratives of global connectivity. It requires what we might term ‘infrastructural literacy’ as part of intercultural competence: a critical awareness of the material, algorithmic, and economic conditions that shape the emergence of meaning and the enactment and transformation of culture.

If we take seriously Geertz’ (1973) call for “thick description” and the context-dependence of meaning, as suggested by Watzlawick et al. (1967) and Gumperz (1982), then studying interculturality in postdigital societies requires expanding our understanding of context itself. The digital infrastructure is no longer a background condition: It is the very environment in which culture is co-produced, circulated, and contested. The field of intercultural communication must therefore reorient itself: from analysing situated social interactions to also interrogating the invisible architectures that condition them.

Considering that culture is not a static repository of values but a product of communicative processes—often intercultural, increasingly digitally mediated—understanding the complexity of digital interculturality is not optional, but essential. It is through these processes of meaning negotiation, filtering, and amplification that cultural forms take shape and exert influence on individuals, institutions, and society at large.

The future of postdigital societies will hinge on our ability to collectively reimagine the internet, not merely as a tool for connection, but as a cultural infrastructure with world-making potential. Whether it enables plural, situated, and equitable forms of interculturality, or reinforces normative convergence and soft coercion, remains an open—and pressing—question, one that demands not just adaptation, but a fundamental rethinking of the internet itself: as a potential space for critical, emancipatory, and culturally plural futures.

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