

Living Divides: Unequal Lives in a Digital and Divided World

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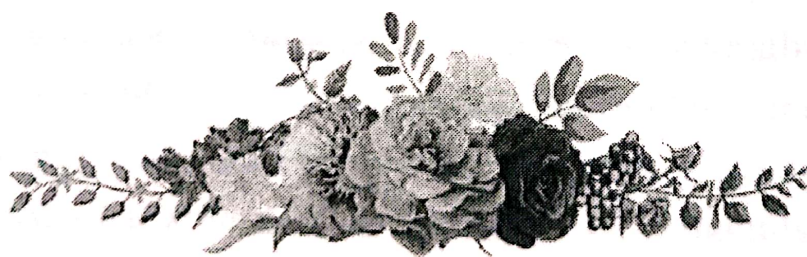
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Chapter 1

Constructing Digital Selves: Social Media, Identity Formation, and the Politics of Polarization

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Introduction

The rapid expansion of social media platforms over the past two decades has not merely transformed communication practices; it has reconstituted the very conditions under which identity, recognition, and political belonging are produced and contested. Digital platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, X, YouTube, and TikTok function as socio-technical infrastructures that mediate everyday interaction while simultaneously organizing the circulation of information, emotion, and symbolic capital (van Dijck, 2013; Gillespie, 2018). These infrastructures are neither neutral nor passive conduits of expression. Rather, they are governed by algorithmic architectures and corporate logics that shape what becomes visible, valued, and amplified within digital publics (Beer, 2017; Srnicek, 2017).

Identity formation in contemporary societies must therefore be understood within what has been described as “platform society” (van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018), in which economic exchange, cultural production, and political discourse are increasingly mediated by proprietary digital systems. Social media platforms embed social interaction within systems of data extraction and behavioural prediction, transforming everyday acts of communication into monetizable data flows (Zuboff, 2019). In this context, identity is not only performed but continuously measured, categorized, and algorithmically ranked. Recognition is mediated through quantifiable metrics like likes, shares, comments, follower counts creating a system of comp...