

DIGITAL SOCIALITY AND THE RESHAPING OF NETWORK PARTICIPATION

The emergence of phatic imbalances

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Abstract: This article theorizes phatic imbalances as emergent effects of how participation and presence are reorganized in contemporary digital sociality. It argues that participation in digital networks has become increasingly transactional and positional, oriented toward sustaining visibility and availability rather than exchanging meaning. Drawing on work on networked sociality, weak ties and deep mediatization, the article conceptualizes phaticity and phatic work as *a priori* conditions of digital participation. It introduces digital proxemics as the sociotechnical production of presence, distance and relational positioning in environments structured by telepresence, virtuality and AI-infused affordances. Phatic imbalances arise when infrastructural demands for continuous phatic presence exceed the cognitive and temporal capacities of subjects, producing overload, hollowed presence and machine-modulated rhythms of interaction. By linking participation, phaticity and digital proxemics, the article offers a diagnostic lens for understanding how digital infrastructures reshape attention, presence and communicative agency in AI-saturated environments.

Keywords: digital sociality, phaticity, phatic imbalance, digital proxemics, telepresence.

Sociabilidade digital e reconfiguração da participação em rede: a emergência de desequilíbrios fáticos

Resumo: Este artigo teoriza o desequilíbrio fático como efeito emergente da forma como a participação e a presença social são reorganizadas na sociabilidade digital contemporânea. Argumenta-se que a participação em redes digitais se tornou cada vez mais transacional e posicional, orientada para a sustentação da visibilidade e da disponibilidade, ao invés do intercâmbio de significado. Com base em trabalhos sobre sociabilidade em rede, lassidão do laço social e mediatização profunda, o artigo conceptualiza a faticidade e o trabalho fático como condições *a priori* da participação digital. A noção proxémica digital é introduzida enquanto produção sociotécnica de presença, distância e posicionamento relacional em ambientes estruturados pela telepresença, virtualidade e *affordances* crescentemente suportadas por inteligência maquínica de cariz artificial. Os desequilíbrios fáticos surgem quando as exigências infraestruturais de presença fática contínua excedem as capacidades cognitivas e temporais dos sujeitos, produzindo sobrecarga, presença rarefeita e ritmos de interação modulados por máquinas. Ao articular participação, faticidade e proxémica digital, o artigo propõe um dispositivo de diagnóstico relevante para compreender o modo como infraestruturas digitais modelam a atenção, a presença e a ação comunicativa em ambientes modulados por agência artificial e algorítmica.

Palavras-chave: sociabilidade digital, faticidade, desequilíbrio fático, proxémica digital, telepresença.

Sociabilité numérique et reconfiguration de la participation en réseau: l'émergence des déséquilibres phatiques

Résumé: Cet article théorise les déséquilibres phatiques comme des effets émergents de la manière dont la participation et la présence sont réorganisées dans la sociabilité numérique contemporaine. Il soutient que la participation aux réseaux numériques est devenue de plus en plus transactionnelle et positionnelle, orientée vers le maintien de la visibilité et de la disponibilité plutôt que vers l'échange de sens. S'appuyant sur les travaux relatifs à la sociabilité en réseau, aux liens faibles et à la médiatisation profonde, l'article conceptualise la phaticité et le travail phatique comme des conditions *a priori* de la participation numérique. Il introduit la proxémie numérique comme la production sociotechnique de la présence, de la distance et du positionnement relationnel dans des environnements structurés par la téléprésence, la virtualité et des *affordances* imprégnées d'IA. Les déséquilibres phatiques surgissent lorsque les exigences infrastructurales de présence phatique continue excèdent les capacités cognitives et temporelles des sujets, produisant surcharge, présence creusée et

rythmes d'interaction modulés par les machines. En reliant participation, phaticité et proxémie numérique, l'article propose une lentille diagnostique pour comprendre comment les infrastructures numériques reconfigurent l'attention, la présence et l'agence communicationnelle dans des environnements saturés d'IA.

Mots-clés: sociabilité numérique, phaticité, déséquilibre phatique, proxémie numérique, téléprésence.

Sociabilidad digital y la reconfiguración de la participación en red: la emergencia de los desequilibrios fáticos

Resumen: Este artículo teoriza los desequilibrios fáticos como efectos emergentes de la manera en que la participación y la presencia se reconfiguran en la sociabilidad digital contemporánea. Sostiene que la participación en redes digitales se ha vuelto cada vez más transaccional y posicional, orientada al sostenimiento de la visibilidad y la disponibilidad más que al intercambio de significado. A partir de trabajos sobre sociabilidad en red, vínculos débiles y mediatización profunda, el artículo conceptualiza la faticidad y el trabajo fático como condiciones *a priori* de la participación digital. Introduce la proxémica digital como la producción sociotécnica de presencia, distancia y posicionamiento relacional en entornos estructurados por la telepresencia, la virtualidad y affordances impregnadas de IA. Los desequilibrios fáticos surgen cuando las exigencias infraestructurales de una presencia fática continua exceden las capacidades cognitivas y temporales de los sujetos, generando sobrecarga, presencia vaciada y ritmos de interacción modulados por máquinas. Al articular participación, faticidad y proxémica digital, el artículo ofrece una lente diagnóstica para comprender cómo las infraestructuras digitales remodelan la atención, la presencia y la agencia comunicativa en entornos saturados de IA.

Palabras-clave: sociabilidad digital, faticidad, desequilibrio fático, proxémica digital, telepresencia.

Introduction

Scholarship on digital media has been tracing, in recent decades, a shift from early notions of networked (Wittel, 2001) and hybrid sociality (Postill and Pink, 2012) toward platformed (Van Dijck et al., 2018), deeply mediatized and algorithmically governed environments (Van Dijck, 2013; Couldry and Hepp, 2019; Bucher, 2020), depicting how social relations become increasingly fluid, connection-driven and infrastructurally mediated, while recent work on *deep mediatization* (Couldry and Hepp, 2019) and algorithmic governance has shown how digital infrastructures script, automate and condition social interaction. Within this evolving landscape, participation in digital networks appears less as the exchange of meaningful content and more as the continuous work of maintaining a position in a network of positions.

This article proposes that *phatic imbalances* constitute a defining feature of this condition. It argues that participation in digital networks is increasingly organized around phatic work (Gradinaru, 2018) and digital proxemics (McArthur, 2016): practices and affordances that infuse a sense of presence in latently diffused networks, ensuring social presence in physical absence under medial logic conditions that privilege reach over depth. Building on Balsemão Pires (2025) account of information–meaning decoupling in digital and AI-infused systems, and engaging debates on telepresence, virtuality and digital proxemics, the article develops a

conceptual framework that links phaticity, digital proxemics and networked participation to diagnose the emergence of phatic imbalances.

Analytically, the argument rests on four premises, whose intertwined development constitute the article architectural structure: that participation in digital networks is primarily functional and transactional, oriented toward positional maintenance (Deuze, 2006); that phaticity and phatic work operate as a priori conditions of such participation; that digital proxemics is a contingent sociocultural process through which presence, distance and relational positioning are produced; and that phatic imbalances emerge as systemic effects of these dynamics. The premises are introduced below and developed throughout the article in dedicated sections.

Key analytical premises: participation, phaticity, digital proxemics

The first premise is that participation in digital networks is primarily functional and transactional. Rather than being oriented toward sustained dialogue or mutual understanding, much of what counts as participation consists in ensuring a position or location within a network of positions. Presence becomes a kind of currency: to participate is to remain visible, reachable and responsive within latently diffused networks that privilege breadth of connection over depth of engagement. Under these conditions, participation is best understood as presence-work, a continuous effort to maintain one's inscription in the network.

The second premise is that phaticity and phatic work operate as a priori conditions of such participation. Building on Wittel (2001) notion of networked sociality, Granovetter (1973) analysis of weak ties, Gurevitch (1961) sociometric experiments, Milgram (1967) small-world thesis and White (1992) work on networks and uncertainty, phatic exchanges can be seen as the minimal units through which networked relations are stabilized. Weak, instrumental and often transient ties can be conceived as structurally optimal for diffusion across otherwise disconnected clusters. Phatic work (*e.g.*, likes, reactions, brief messages, acknowledgments) performs the infrastructural maintenance of these ties, enabling actors to remain connected without the demands of thick, meaning-laden interaction.

The third premise is that digital proxemics (McArthur, 2016) is a contingent sociocultural process through which presence, distance and relational positioning are produced in networked environments. Unlike classical proxemics (Hall, 1966), which described spatial arrangements among co-present bodies, digital proxemics concerns the sociotechnical organization of visibility, addressability and responsiveness in mediated settings. It encompasses how interfaces, notifications, status indicators and algorithmic rankings configure who appears close or distant, who is reachable, and who is effectively absent. In White's (1992) terms, digital proxemics is one of the mechanisms through which identities and control are negotiated and made legible or visible in uncertain, chaotic networks.

The fourth and last premise is that *phatic imbalances* emerge as systemic effects of these dynamics. Phatic imbalances can be defined as the structural misalignment between the demand for continuous phatic presence, as generated by network

logics, platform incentives and AI-driven automation, and the finite cognitive, temporal and technical capacities of agents (human or non-human). As phatic work and digital proxemics become preconditions for participation, individuals are exposed to escalating demands for presence that they cannot fully meet, resulting in overload, fragmentation and a reconfiguration of how attention, presence and agency are distributed.

Digital sociality and the reshaping of participation

Over the past two decades, scholars have been returning to the question of how digital technologies reshape the ways people related with one another, producing what Zayed (2021: 45) describes as a sustained effort to theorize the “reshaping of sociality” – processes through which people associate with one another. Early formulations such as Wittel’s (2001) *networked sociality* captured the shift toward fluid, connection-driven relations, while subsequent concepts, such as Postill and Pink’s (2012) *hybrid sociality*, Van Dijck’s (2013) *platformed sociality*, Ellison and Boyd’s (2013) *social media platform sociality* or Miller *et al.* (2016) *scalability sociality*, highlighted different dimensions of digitally mediated association. Taken together, these perspectives illustrate what Kozinets (2021: 115) calls a “coevolution of socialities and technologies”, a dynamic especially visible in digital social media environments that has been leading to a ubiquitous, *panmedia* landscape (Galloway and Thacker, 2007; Mosco 2017). Within this evolving media landscape, digital sociality can be understood as an overarching condition that encompasses and extends earlier formulations, not as an add-on to existing social forms but as a reconfiguration of social relations, networking practices and temporalities (Madianou, 2017; Hine, 2020), by including the relational patterns described by *networked sociality* (Wittel, 2001), while also foregrounding the infrastructural, algorithmic and automated processes that increasingly influence social interactions and human reasoning.

Contemporary media theory clarifies the infrastructural transformation underlying this shift, with authors such as Bucher (2018, 2020) or Leonardi (2025) showing how algorithms increasingly script social action through conditional logics and automated prompts, and Couldry and Hepp (2019) demonstrating how *deep mediatization* currently renders sociality possibilities as inseparable from digital infrastructures, with media ubiquity and invisibility (Kramer, 2015) being displayed as evidence of a post-Internet era (Mosco, 2017).

Remediation processes (Bolter and Grusin, 2000) accomplished through the recombination of content and other aspects of pre-existent media has been changing, and a culture of hyperconnectivity (Van Dijck, 2013) currently seems to subsume, in increasingly comprehensive terms, all fields of human experience (Kania-Lundholm, 2021). For authors such as Kittler (2009) and Balsemão Pires (2025), hylomorphic causality, grounded in the notions of matter and form, and the possibility of the subject’s control over the mediations underway, present themselves as insufficient or displaced notions for accounting for the mediation

operations that mark the computational processes of contemporary technique, in their nano-temporalities, automatic and ubiquitous processes of information processing, and possibilities of remediation (Bolter and Grusin, 2000) anchored in language and algorithmic-based control:

Digital remediation processes and [McLuhanesque] tetradic-like effects are becoming normal in generative AI applications, with the dissemination of digital platforms that modify text in text, text in images, or text in sound profiting from the [...] [basal differentiation of communication and consciousness]. AI's tremendous remediation potential is due to its underlying semantical plasticity, which facilitates the flow from data to meanings autonomously from materials forms and ensures a limited but controlled coordination between psychic and communicative operations. According to this informational and semantic corridor, AI can be paradoxically described as a meta-medium, meaning that information and its semantic content can, in principle, be transmuted into any material media as a matrix of remediations in action (*op. cit.*, 2025: 127).

To this regard, it is important to retain what Bogalheiro (2021: 218) describes as the “double character” of digital media expansion: (i) the inexistence of immediacy in contemporary digitized human experience; and (ii) the partiality of the control that subjects exercise over technical mediations. Authors such as Balsemão Pires (2025) link this merely partial control of mediation to the invisibility (Kramer, 2015), from the subject's perspective, of the remediations involved in writing processes that are, in contemporary computational environments, tendentially (hyper)mediated:

Writing on computer is not authoring a text with a feather, a pen or even a mechanical writing machine. Digital writing entails occult processes that lie beyond the author's control and work for other purposes, such as saving the characters in machine language. Textual arguments, words, letters are decomposed into bits to be saved and again accessed on the same or other computer terminals. [...] Desktops are visual, iconic means that ensure the illusion of continuity between the symbolic characters and machine code. [...] [In addition to this] GUI [graphic user interface]'s inception isn't conducive to offering a surrogate of the writing feather. It is a completely new form of mediation, not an extension of the author's mind, eyes and hand (*op. cit.*, 2025: 126).

From a Durkheimian (1965 [1912]) and Luhmannian (1995 [1984]) perspective, these transformations can be read as a reconfiguration of participation processes themselves. Rather than primarily expressing meanings or sustaining thick, face-to-face solidarities, participation in digital networks increasingly takes the form of ritualized, low-intensity contributions that reproduce the communicative system. In Luhmannian terms, communication is conceived as a selection process, and participation as contribution to a system reproduction, through information circulation occurring independently of individual intentions. In Durkheim's terms, ritual participation maintains the social cohesion of a collective, contributing to generate a state of collective effervescence. In digital environments, these logics converge:

participation becomes positional and transactional, oriented toward sustaining visibility, addressability and inclusion within a network of positions.

The decoupling of information and meaning in contemporary AI-infused infrastructures intensifies this tendency. As Kittler (1986) and Balsemão Pires (2025) suggest, digital communication systems process and exchange more information than can be humanly appropriated as *sense*, breaking the classical continuum between consciousness, communication and meaning. Under these conditions, participation is less about producing shared understanding and more about contributing to ongoing streams of data that register presence, activity and connectivity. This provides the background against which digital proxemics and phatic work acquire their centrality. As illustrated by Balsemão Pires (2025):

Instead of continuity between consciousness and communication and between information and meaning, the new digital couple is a real break of the classical anthropological continuum and its metaphysical alliance. This break is real, even if not yet theoretically recognized. [...] Functional differentiation of social systems [as proposed by functionalists such as Talcott Parsons or Niklas Luhmann] involves an anthropological continuum break, [...] a central characteristic of modern crisis, between the two system responsible for producing meaning sequences: communication and conscience. [...] Social evolution toward modern functional differentiation of social systems explains the social undercurrents supporting media evolution as a series of technological changes that have greatly affected communication and meaning formation [by human subjects] (*op. cit.*, 2025: 119).

Digital proxemics: telepresence, virtuality and mediated distance

In a recent short essay, Habermas (2022: 146) associates hypermediated communication processes with a notion of hyphenation, fragmentation and retraction of the public sphere conceived as a “holistic background” shared as the “lifeworld”, a somewhat silent capitulation effect particularly visible among users of digital social networks, where the notion of the *other* and the chance to build *resonant* and responsive relations (Rosa, 2019) seems to be progressively fading out, being increasingly entrenched by a myriad of non-communicating *sphericules*, and the loosening of interdependent, face-to-face relational structures (Willson, 1997; Wellman, 2002).

In an early Internet study, Wittel (2001) has captured the way social and media shifts trickle their way down to the individual level in the form of *networked sociality*, a type of *disembedded* intersubjectivity that contrasts the belonging to a community with the concept of integration in a network. One can suggest that a key long-lasting issue in digital networked-based socialities is the maintenance of *meaningful presence* within networks, and, in particular, latently diffused networks – in other words, ensuring social presence in physical absence, within media conditions that privilege reach, not depth or meaningful encounters. To this regard, Miller (2011) account of digital environments, its attributes and implications, is

particularly insightful. Miller (*op. cit.*: 14-21) describes these settings as being *digital* (e.g., based on numerical representations subject to algorithmic manipulation), *networked* (e.g., based on decentralization enacted within a network of nodes), *hypertextual* (a synonym of hypermediation), *automated* (e.g., a driver of easy manipulation and possibility of personalization) and *databased*. More recently, Van Dijck et al. (2018) added *platformed* to this list of attributes, while Couldry and Hepp (2019) signal *algorithmic-infused governance* as means to describe *deeply mediatized* forms of association.

For Miller (*op. cit.*), two key sociocultural forms deriving from these attributes are the *lack of context*, which uproots subjects from their situational contexts, and the *situatedness*, embodied in the features of *telepresence* and *virtuality*, considered to be fundamental *immersive* elements of digital media. As illustrated by Miller (2011):

Instantaneity creates a situation where distance and space no longer have meaning and thus a depthless and horizonless world is created [...]. Where a narrative would provide a context, a cause, a reason or a story [meaning], a database provides a temporary relation. The extent to which digitally databased media is able to mix and match all manner of text, sound, image, data, demonstrates [...] [a] depthless, horizonless and contextless world (*op. cit.*, 2011: 24).

Within digital environments, subjects have the ability to *exist* simultaneously in two different environments: the physical environment where their body is located, and the conceptual or interactional space, a *space in-between* (Lister et al., 2009), where the subject is presented through the use of a medium. Given this, social relations have been in the process of moving from being *place-centered* to being completely *person-centered* and *a-spatial*, a process labelled by Wellman (2002) as *networked individualism*, a product of social differentiation (Luhmann, 1995 [1984]; Balsemão Pires, 2011) and instrumental reasoning. That is, the person to which one is connected performs a special role in one's life, as does membership in a specific network. Increasingly *a-spatial* network of flows and person-centered social networks replace communities:

Interdependency in physical space encourages a sense of obligation, responsibility and conflict avoidance. This emerges from being stuck together in the same place. In online, digital environments, there is very little "stickiness", because all membership is based on choice (Miller, 2011: 193).

For authors such as Steuer (1992: 77), returning to a notion coined by Marvin Minsky in 1980, this can be designated as a form of *telepresence*, "[...] the experience of presence in an environment by means of a communication medium". Complementing this, as noted by Miller (2011), discussions regarding the *vividness* and *first personness* of mediated presence lead to another significant aspect of digital contemporary media: *virtuality*. To this regard, Shields (2003) work (*The Virtual*) is particularly insightful, by positioning discussions of the virtual in a wider context, by defining virtuality as "[...] the nature of objects and activities which exist, but are not tangible or concrete" (*op. cit.*, 2003: 2).

Telepresence (Steuer, 1992), *absent presence* (Gergen, 2002) or *distributed presence* (Lister *et al.*, 2009) does not necessarily mean the eclipse or disappearance of an inscription (in a network), as it can be regarded as an active form of presence. The root of this dilemma is elegantly captured by Balsemão Pires (2025):

Social interaction across digital platforms may impact the participants more or less vividly. However, it has always the character of telepresence, and telepresence should be defined as a non-presence according to rigorous proxemic criteria. Some aspects connected to telepresence maintain qualities already identified in proxemic research, which may explain the use of compounds such as digital proxemics in recent literature that are perplexing at first sight (*op. cit.*, 2025: 129).

Considered as media studies branch, digital proxemics can be understood as the sociotechnical production of perceived presence, distance and relational positioning in digital networked environments (McArthur, 2016). Simply put, it concerns relational legibility in digital-first environments, the ways in which subjects are made visible, addressed and interpellated through interfaces, protocols and algorithms. As noted by Balsemão Pires (2025: 129), social interaction across digital platforms always has the character of *telepresence*, which, according to classic proxemic criteria, should be defined as a form of “non-presence”. Yet telepresence retains and transforms certain proxemic qualities, as it involves entangled psychological, social and virtual environments, and it operates with blurred, socially constructed senses of distance.

Twentieth-century social proxemics, as developed by Hall (1966), Birdwhistell (1970) or Kendon (1990), described interactional patterns involving spatial references of co-present agents. As noted by Balsemão Pires (2025), classic proxemics core concepts (*e.g.*, territory, crowd, personal space) fall short to provide fitting accounts of how digital devices have transformed contemporary ways of life, relying significantly on telepresence, as opposed to concrete co-presence of participants in verbal and gestural communication, entangled environments (*e.g.*, psychological, social and virtual) and blurred, floating, socially constructed senses of distance. In addition to this, contemporary digital environment affordances are significantly different:

[...] Digital sensorial channels are poor. They are drastically reduced to the eye and the hand, which do not belong to the inner side of the digital environments, rigorously speaking, but to the terminals. [...] the imaginary interplay between the eye and the hand in digital environments and the manipulation opportunities allowed by iconic representations of an unwritten digital fictional pact between the human species of the digital era and the new technological affordances, among which one should refer the machine learning-generated communication patterns (*op. cit.*, 2025: 128).

Telepresence (Steuer, 1992) and *virtuality* (Shields, 2003) thus appear as conditions under which digital proxemics operates. Subjects can exist simultaneously in a physical

environment and in an interactional space *in-between*, where they are represented through profiles, avatars or traces. In such settings, digital proxemics is enacted through technical affordances: notifications, read receipts, typing indicators, online/offline statuses, recommendation systems and machine-learning-generated communication patterns. These affordances structure how presence is signaled, how distance is perceived and how relational positions are maintained or altered. A correlated prominent issue was presciently signaled by Wittel (2001), while describing the reliance of technical affordances to accomplish compressed *social acts of catching-up*, with technologies “[...] often standing-up for people by making them almost continually contactable no matter their physical location” (Miller, 2011: 202). This is an increasingly significant topic in automation and AI-infused platform-based socialities research (Porter, 2017; Bucher, 2018; Couldry and Hepp, 2019; Markham, 2024; Leonardi, 2025).

Phaticity and phatic exchanges in digital sociality

The development of technical affordances more focused on connection and acknowledgment than in content, meaning and dialogue (Miller, 2008; Turkle, 2015; Markham, 2024; Balsemão Pires, 2025), being designed to acknowledge the presence of others and sustain social interaction through pervasive contact, have become central to digital networking culture (Baron, 2008; Miller, 2008; Couldry and Hepp, 2019). A noticeable effect of the intensification of technical affordances based on information and meaning decoupling (Balsemão Pires, 2025), disembedded subjectivity (Manovich, 2001; Dreyfus, 2001; Wittel, 2001; Miller, 2011), temporal immediacy and continued telepresence (Steuer, 1992; Lister *et al.*, 2009) is the proliferation of *phatic exchanges* in networked and digital platform-based socialities (Gradinaru, 2018).

Zuckerman (2021) traces the evolution of “*the phatic*” – derived from the Greek word *phatos* [φᾱτος], meaning “spoken” or “that which may be uttered” – by disentangling two historically intertwined but analytically distinct strands: *communion phaticity*, rooted in Malinowski (1923), and *contact phaticity*, developed by Jakobson (1960). *Communion phaticity* refers to sociable, rapport-building talk, patterned exchanges that seem to commune rather than communicate, such as small talk, greetings or the gentle chatter that accompanies everyday encounters. *Contact phaticity*, by contrast, shifts the focus from rapport to the technical and semiotic labor of establishing, maintaining, modulating or breaking communicative channels.

Jakobson (1960: 355) functionalist model highlights how speakers test channels, check attention, manage gaze, adjust bodily orientation and navigate asymmetries of perception, suggesting a phatic function as one which is “[...] primarily serving to establish, to prolong, or to discontinue communication, to check whether the channel works [...] to attract the attention of the interlocutor or to confirm [their] continued attention [...] on the other end of the wire”. In a related perspective, American literary theorist Menely (2007) demonstrates how the phatic element of

language has as primary function maintaining social harmony and cultivating the *status quo*, by acting as a *social adhesive* that achieves harmony by directing conversation to least controversial topics, where the actual content of what is said has little consequence or informational value in comparison to its use as a social glue.

Across both strands, Zuckerman (2021) underscores the centrality of ideologies of contact, noting that people treat the management of contact as meaningful in itself: as illustrated by Miller (2008: 395), “[...] digital media foster a phatic media culture in which content is not king, but ‘keeping in touch’ is”. This formulation of phaticity sustains Wittel’s (2001) notion of *networked sociality*, a mode of *disembedded* intersubjectivity grounded in weak, instrumental and often transient ties, echoing Granovetter’s (1973) insight that the *strength of weak ties* lies on their function as conduits for diffusion across otherwise disconnected social clusters, as well as Gurevitch (1961) sociometric experiments and Milgram (1967) *small-world, short-paths* thesis in acquaintanceship networks. To this regard, transposing Jakobson (1960) *contact phaticity* and Granovetter (1973) *weak ties* assertion to digital environments, Kulkarni (2014) offers a key reminder that the importance and the challenge of the online phatic gesture is that the parties may not actually be online at the same time and even if they are, the chances of contact might be reduced to coincidence or serendipity. On a similar note, Gradinaru (2018: 463) reflects about the increasingly phatic nature of online communication, finding that while “[.] telephony inserted levels of phatic use, [...] and the rise of the social software as the Internet developed conducted to another degree of phaticity”.

In contemporary digital networked environments, sociality is manifested via different social connection and participation practices, including non-participation, accomplished through the proliferation of phatic exchanges (Gradinaru, 2018), absent peers (Greger, 2010), digitized proxemics (McArthur, 2016) and minimal communicative gestures (such as likes, reactions, reposts) that signal or condition a *sense* of presence rather than convey meaning (Malinowski, 1923; Jakobson, 1960; Meneley, 2007; Miller, 2011). Within digital sociality, phatic exchanges are therefore closely tied to the dynamics of networked sociality and weak ties (Granovetter, 1973), signaling the increased relevance of low-intensity connections (Gradinaru, 2018) for the diffusion of information and the stabilization of transient ties, thereby enabling large, loosely connected networks to persist.

Critical accounts of digital communication underscore the dominance of phatic work over substantive conversation in many contexts: Turkle (2015: 35) distinguishes *connection* and *conversation*, describing “communication by short digital messages in a way that is reminiscent of analogue, brief and discontinuous data transmission, as *connecting in sips*”. In this sense, phaticity is not a marginal feature of digital communication but an infrastructural condition of participation in networked environments. Phatic brief exchanges, gestures and utterances help establish and maintain contact, are relevant due to the degree to which they contribute to a feeling of ongoing connectedness, and, as noted by Ouellette (2025: 3), “[...] are no more contentless than McLuhan’s notorious lightbulb example, whereby the lightbulb is a communication and information technology”. Recent studies described the relevance of these exchanges in domains such as asynchronous

instruction (Abualrob and Nazzal, 2019; Zan, 2019; Ouellette, 2025), crisis management (Hagedoorn, Costa and Esteve-del-Vall, 2024) and remote-first business and professional communication (Turner, 2017).

Phatic contact in Ouellette (2025) asynchronous classroom study was accomplished through the deliberate use of a learning management system (LMS) announcement tool (named “*The daily smile*”) as a lightweight, ritualized channel for maintaining presence. In this study, a “*daily smile*” operated as a digital phatic gesture: a brief, humorous, or sentimental post that says, in effect, *I am here, and I am thinking of you*, while simultaneously offering an entry point into course concepts (Ouellette, 2025: 2-4). The affordances of an LMS, such as persistent visibility, push-style notifications, threaded seriality and the ability to embed links, images and videos, enabled these posts to operate like social media micro-messages. The gesture brevity, informality and predictable rhythm create a sense of ongoing connectedness, proximity (McArthur, 2016), compensating for the absence of co-presence in asynchronous learning. Porter (2017) shows that phaticity in remote business and professional communication emerges through micro-gestures that keep communication channels open, operating as signals of presence, trust and goodwill echoing the classical rhetorical concept of *eunoia*. Porter (*op. cit.*: 16) also highlights how goodwill is increasingly automated and technologically mediated, especially through the use of phatic technologies, systems designed to establish and maintain human relations, as described by Wang, Tucker and Haines (2012), being “intelligent agents and phatic bots” increasingly relevant in this domain.

One can therefore argue not the relevance of phatic exchanges in digital sociality, but the implications of the affordances being used to accomplish social intents (*e.g.*, belongingness, maintaining a sense of presence). For example, Hagedoorn, Costa and Esteve-del-Vall (2024) shows that WhatsApp’s architecture (*e.g.*, its frictionless forwarding, group-based structure and constant *always-on* availability) enables users to circulate photographs, memes, screenshots and short videos as gestures of presence rather than as vehicles of meaning or information. These visual items function as phatic cues because they require minimal cognitive investment, yet sustaining a sense of proximity (McArthur, 2016): a meme signals “*I’m here*”, a screenshot signals “*I saw this and thought of you*”, and a viral video signals “*We are living this together*”. The authors also highlight how digital automation and AI-adjacent media forms intensify phatic affordances with possible detrimental consequences. The case of the deepfake video of dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte (Hagedoorn, Costa and Esteve-del-Vall, 2024: 657) exemplifies how algorithmically manipulated content becomes a phatic object: shared for communal purposes, not factual accuracy, with no particular context being provided.

Heightened phaticity levels (Gradinaru, 2018) suggest that contemporary digital media affordances may introduce structural networking asymmetries that earlier frameworks could not anticipate, namely in terms of noise and entropy – “[...] an underlying *hum*” (Markham, 2021: 55) – linked to contemporary digital sociality processes. Referring to Wiener’s (1988: 37) conception of human communication, higher entropy (conceived as “the amount of disorder in a system”) with informational unpredictability and uncertainty tends to amplify disorder and

disharmony in communication, which is less desirable and a possible disengagement trigger. Therefore, it can be suggested that low entropic and highly redundant information benefits human communication and social relations and networks. In other words, it can be argued that users are likely to engage with low entropic phatic exchanges (Radovanovic and Ragnedda, 2012), a notion that may be confused with *small talk* (Gradinaru, 2018).

Phatic imbalances: concept, mechanisms and manifestations

There is a thin line between phatic exchanges, understood as a glue of social discourse (Menely, 2007) and *small talk* (Gradinaru, 2018). In *Being and Time*, Heidegger (1962: 164) associates the maintenance of the *status quo* with the prevalence of *small* or *idle talk* (“*gered*”) (Gradinaru, 2018), a kind of inauthenticity achieved when one takes on mediated, “average”, “mass” understandings of the world without questioning or appealing to one’s own understanding. This becomes problematic because one loses one’s own particularity and uniqueness in terms of judgements, decision-making and opinion creation. Effectively, “[...] everyone is the other and no one is himself” (Heidegger, 1962: 165). Individuals cease to fulfil their potential as distinct entities who express “care” in any meaningful way and instead replicate and sustain the “great mass” of “*they-self*” of the mediated public.

Similarly to Menely’s (2007) view of the phatic, *small* or *idle talk* helps to restrict authentic or *real* understanding because it takes us away from the ground of what is talked about and towards the talk itself (Van den Eede, 2010). The relation therefore becomes *with the talk* as opposed to *what the talk* is about, closing off any meaningful understanding of the topic at hand or the formation of considered individual opinion. Thus, it can be suggested that small or idle talk substitutes individually attained knowledge gained through an embedding in the world with shallow and superficial average *mass* understandings, such as an understanding gained through forwarded links, retweets and likes.

In a related sense, assuming that phatic (digital) sociality depends on low entropic, lower-effort acknowledgments (Radovanovic and Ragnedda, 2012) to maintain relational digital network presence, one can consider that a scenario of withdrawal of a subset of users (human and/or non-human) produces a redistribution of *phatic work*, understood as activity required to sustain *contact phaticity* (Jakobson, 1960). Practices such as *posting-zero* behaviours, *digital detox* and strategic digital withdrawal and disconnection from social media platforms and networks (Kania-Lundholm, 2021; Feldman, 2021) that remove actors from the circulatory economy of phatic signals, can be considered an effect of a network structural asymmetries. In this scenario, the ecology of digital network spreaders can become distorted, with *hyper-phatic users* (those who compulsively like, react and repost), algorithmically amplified nodes and synthetic agents (such as bots and automated accounts) becoming disproportionately responsible for the circulation of phatic signals.

Drawing on Granovetter’s (1973) account of *weak ties* and diffusion, Jakobson’s (1960) articulation of the phatic function as channel maintenance, Meneley’s (2007)

ethnographic attention to everyday phatic practices and Zuckerman's (2021) distinction between *communion phaticity* and *contact phaticity*, this condition can be described as a *phatic imbalance*, a structural distortion in the relational texture of digital networked socialities, where *phatic work* emerges as a priori condition of communication processes. *Phatic imbalances* are produced when the withdrawal of some actors amplifies the visibility, influence and circulatory power of others — particularly algorithmic, synthetic or *hyper-phatic spreaders*. Relevant inquiry questions can be derived from *phatic imbalances* conceptualization and empirical testing in different social domains (e.g., political engagement, mental health, spatiality of violence and memory), by exploring the way individuals engage in phatic digital communication to maintain a *sense of presence*, how withdrawal and disconnection practices affects latent network diffusion dynamics in concrete settings, how algorithmic and synthetic agents compensate for reduced human activity, or the way users experience others through alternative practices in environments dominated by phatic signals overload.

As participation becomes increasingly organized around phatic work and digital proxemics, individuals are expected to remain perpetually reachable, responsive and visible across multiple platforms and channels. This expectation is *both* social and infrastructural, embedded in notification architectures, engagement metrics and algorithmic rankings that reward constant activity. Several mechanisms contribute to the production of phatic imbalances: (i) notification systems and alert infrastructures generate continuous calls for attention, transforming every interaction into a potential demand for phatic response; (ii) algorithmic amplification of engagement prioritizes content and interactions that elicit quick, low-effort reactions, thereby reinforcing phatic over substantive exchanges; (iii) auto-generated phatic content, such as suggested replies, automated acknowledgments, chatbots and AI-driven assistants, further inflates the volume of phatic signals circulating in networks, blurring the boundary between human and machine-produced presence. These mechanisms manifest in everyday networking practices as overload, hollowed presence and fragmented attention. Users experience pressure to respond, acknowledge and remain visible, even when they lack the time or energy for meaningful engagement. Phatic gestures become both necessary and insufficient: necessary to maintain one's position in the network, insufficient to sustain *resonant* relations (Rosa, 2019). Machine-generated rhythms of interaction (e.g., constant updates, prompts, reminders) impose temporal patterns that may conflict with human rhythms of attention and rest. In this context, phatic imbalances reshape subjectivity by fostering forms of self-presentation and self-management oriented toward continuous availability, and they reconfigure social order by stabilizing networks through shallow but incessant presence.

Recent digital social media usage trends presented in DataReportal¹ “*Digital 2025: State of Social Media*” (2025) report illustrate how contemporary social media infrastructures seem to amplify *contact* (Jakobson, 1960) without *communion*:

- (i) Global social media *user growth* over the past decade reveals a system that has expanded rapidly but now seems to be entering a phase of structural saturation.

DataReportal's longitudinal series charts the rise from early-2010s adoption curves to the 5-billion-plus user "identities" recorded in 2025, with annual increments that remain positive yet increasingly modest: the 259 million new user identities added in 2025 represent a 4.87% year-on-year increase – still substantial, yet markedly lower than the double-digit growth of 2010-2015 or the 8-10% annual increases of 2015-2020.

(ii) *Penetration rates* reinforce a picture of consolidation. By 2025, an estimated 93.8% of Internet users engage with social media monthly, and 92.6% of adults report active use, figures that contrast sharply with the roughly 50-55% penetration observed in 2015 and the surpassing of 70% in most connected regions by 2020. The historical arc thus moves from majority adoption to near-total integration among connected populations. Social media, in this sense, becomes less a discretionary communicative choice and more an infrastructural condition of contemporary digital life.

(iii) *Platform multiplicity* further illustrates the transformation of user behavior. In 2025, individuals engage with an average of 6.75 platforms per month, with younger users (16-24) reaching nearly 7.7. This stands in contrast to the 3-4 platforms typical of 2015-2018, and the 5-6 platforms characteristic of the early 2020s. The shift from single-platform anchoring to multi-platform dispersion signals a reconfiguration of digital sociality: breadth increasingly supersedes depth, and communicative presence becomes distributed across a constellation of micro-environments. This dispersion aligns with a dynamics of *phatic imbalance*, where the maintenance of multiple open channels dilutes the intensity of any single relational tie;

(iv) *Time-use patterns* add another layer to this evolving ecology. In 2025, users spend approximately 18 hours and 36 minutes per week on social platforms – roughly 2 hours and 39 minutes per day. Historically, daily use rose from around 1 hour and 30 minutes in 2015 to a pandemic-era peak of roughly 2 hours and 25 minutes in 2020, before stabilizing or slightly declining in the years that followed. This decoupling of platform multiplicity from time spent (more platforms, less time per platform) provides a relevant empirical anchor for the notion of *phatic imbalance*: attention becomes thinner, more fragmented, and more susceptible to the low-intensity maintenance of presence without depth.

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- 1 DataReportal "Digital 2025: State of Social Media" report aggregates indicators from a wide range of third-party sources rather than relying on a unified primary sample. Social media user figures (e.g., the reported 5.24 billion active user identities in 2025) are derived primarily from platform-reported metrics, including advertising audience estimates and publicly disclosed activity data, which may include duplicate, automated or non-human accounts. Internet usage statistics similarly synthesize datasets from international agencies such as the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), GSMA Intelligence and Eurostat, alongside national regulatory authorities and telecommunications industry reports. Where direct national data are unavailable, DataReportal applies extrapolations or harmonization procedures to generate comparable estimates across regions. Given this methodological architecture, the numerical indicators employed here should be interpreted as infrastructural measures of digital activity rather than as survey-based representations of individual behavior. They reflect the scale, distribution and intensity of *platform presence* across heterogeneous data sources, offering a composite statistical portrait of global digital sociality. Being worth acknowledging the limitations inherent in secondary data aggregation and the absence of a single, unified sampling frame, these figures serve as a relevant proxy for analyzing macro-level digital social media patterns, such as adoption rates, platform diversification and shifts in user motivations.

(v) *Motivations for digital social media usage* in 2025 reveal a decisive reorientation of communicative purpose. The most frequently cited reasons for using social platforms include “keeping in touch with friends and family”, “filling spare time”, “reading news stories” and “earning about brands”, with close to 50% of adult users reporting that they visit social platforms specifically to discover or research products and services. These figures indicate that entertainment, passive browsing, and commercial discovery now rival, if not surpass, interpersonal communication as dominant motivations.

Viewed through the lens of *phatic imbalance*, these empirical trends reveal a structural drift from communication as relation to communication targeting an *ambient, distributed presence* (Lister *et al.*, 2009), where phaticity operates as a *priori* condition. Available media affordances remain relational in design, but their dominant uses seem to no longer sustain reciprocity, attention or mutual orientation. To this regard, digital proxemics (McArthur, 2016) delivers a key function related with network latent maintenance and expansion. These dynamics open several conceptual insights. First, the rise of digital sociality as *ambient sociality* (e.g., *being surrounded by something*), suggesting a topology and politics of presence (as contact) organized around flows, trends and algorithmic rhythms rather than interpersonal ties. Second, the dispersion of attention across platforms invites analysis of *phatic saturation* and possible *imbalance* as a defining condition of contemporary digital life, where the maintenance of *being in touch* becomes decoupled from relational intention. Third, the colonization of phatic space by brands and influencers points toward a commodification of the phatic function, where the open channel becomes a vector for commercial presence. Finally, generational differences indicate that phatic imbalance is not merely behavioral but structural: a reconfiguration of sociality toward post-interpersonal forms of connection, privileging circulation over relation, signal over reciprocity, and ambient awareness over communicative depth.

Concluding note and future research directions

The analysis developed in this article suggests that *phatic imbalances* are structural features of contemporary media environments, illuminating broader transformations in the architecture of digital sociality. *Phatic imbalances* reveal how digital infrastructures reorganize the conditions of *individuation*, producing subjects who are simultaneously hyper-addressable and partially absent, distributed across multiple environments, temporalities and proxemics regimes (McArthur, 2016). They also expose the limits of traditional communicational models that presuppose stable subjects, coherent contexts and meaningful reciprocity. In environments where information circulates independently of meaning (Kittler, 1986; Balsemão Pires, 2025), and where automated agents increasingly participate in communicational flows (Porter, 2017), the *phatic* becomes a key defining site for diagnosing the shifting boundaries of agency, presence and relationality.

Future research can fruitfully examine *phatic imbalances* as an effect of media evolution and correlated communication processes where phaticity is arrayed as *a priori* vector or condition. Three lines of inquiry are suggested. First, the politics of presence (*communion* vs. *contact*) in concrete social settings (e.g., political engagement, mental health, spatiality of violence and memory): as platforms increasingly govern visibility, reach and responsiveness, phatic utterances can become decisive mechanisms of social stratification, shaping who is heard, who is acknowledged and who remains peripheral. Second, the evolution of phatic technologies: the rise of generative AI, automated messaging systems and synthetic agents demands new conceptual tools for understanding how *phatic work* is ensured in environments where human and machine agencies intertwine. Third, the reconfiguration of human-machine interfacing: as artificial systems increasingly participate in communicational rhythms, the distinction between phatic maintenance and communicational automation becomes increasingly blurred, raising questions about authenticity, responsibility and future directions of social differentiation.

Taken together, these directions point toward a broader research agenda that situates *phatic imbalances* at the center of contemporary debates on digital sociality, offering a conceptual framework for understanding how hypermediated environments reshape the conditions of presence, attention and relational life.

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