


Social media in transition: AI, governance and the politics of participation

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The European Conference on Social Media (ECSM) has become an important hybrid annual event for social media scholars and practitioners. The conference was established in 2014 in Brighton, United Kingdom, to advance interdisciplinary research and dialogue around social media and has since been hosted by Academic Conferences International (ACI) in several European countries. This year the 12th Conference took place in Porto, Portugal, from 22 May 2025 to 23 May 2025 and attracted articles and attendees from all over the globe, including South Africa. Because of the varied impact of social media on society, the conference aims to enhance understanding of how it affects various sectors, including education, business and governance, thereby bridging the theoretical and practical divide. Ongoing shifts in social media platform policies, the rise of artificial intelligence, the spread of misinformation and continuous industry innovation all point to the need to reflect critically on the evolving role of social media.

Hosted by the Porto Accounting and Business School (ISCAP), the conference chair was Dr Susana Pinto, and the programme chair was Dr Luciana Oliveira, both from ISCAP. Professor Alexandre Duarte from the NOVA University of Lisbon presented the first keynote on the topic of *Behind the Scroll: Insights of the Social Media Era*. He reflected on how our scrolling habits guide emotional and communication responses. The second keynote was presented by Prof. Xabier Martínez Rolán from the University of Vigo on the topic *From Digital Violence to Disinformation on Social Media: A New Paradigm with Generative AI*. His questioning of AI's role in fuelling misinformation and communicative dysfunction was timely and well-received by the audience.

This year's conference demonstrated the complexities that surround current social media research, evident in the diverse topics. Scholars examined media literacy, public policy, digital marketing and consumer behaviour. Others analysed how humorous and personalised content affects brand performance, how food-related social media influences young adults' eating habits, and how social platforms drive purchasing decisions for luxury apparel. From the transformation of Twitter into X to the Reddit application programming interface (API) protest, the sessions revealed a sector coming to terms with questions of platform control, user autonomy, algorithmic governance, and the shifting boundaries of online participation. Simultaneously, studies on TikTok culture, influencer burnout, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ+) engagement during crises highlighted the emotional and psychological weight of social media participation. Rather than merely tools of connection, social media platforms have become online spaces for visibility, mental health and political resistance. Meanwhile, algorithms' increasing role in filtering content and spreading disinformation sparked necessary conversations about ethics and accountability.

Although European voices dominated the conference, five South African scholars provided perspectives from the Global South. Papers from Nelson Mandela University, the University of Johannesburg, two from the University of South Africa and Rosebank College addressed a wide spectrum of topics. This included the intersection of social media and environmental sustainability, the integration of digital platforms into higher education and library services, and the ongoing challenges related to password security in enterprise settings. Other papers addressed the complexities of social media regulation and liability, as well as platform governance and user autonomy. These presentations challenged the field to think beyond dominant narratives and demonstrated the value of considering regional and infrastructural differences in both research and practice. Global South perspectives are essential for advancing more equitable, locally informed approaches to social media research.

Collectively, the topics covered at the conference suggest a mature research field that recognises the urgent need to investigate not only how social media functions but also who it serves and at what cost.

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Among others, ECSM 2025 confirmed that social media is no longer simply a communication tool but a socio-technical space where power, identity and influence are contested daily. For practitioners and organisations, the conference delivered an important message, namely that social media strategies must now integrate ethical considerations, mental health implications and governance requirements alongside traditional marketing objectives. Sessions examining AI-generated disinformation and community activism demonstrated that effective interventions require both technological and social responsibility. Organisations can no longer prioritise consumer engagement metrics without considering social media's broader societal impact. Moving forward, policy frameworks must evolve to address the rapid development of social media platforms. Similarly, educational institutions should prioritise social media

literacy to enable students to effectively analyse and evaluate digital information (see Pinto & Oliveira 2025).

While the conference did not resolve all challenges, it successfully established a research and practice agenda for future consideration. Further discussions could explore important questions concerning equity, accountability and sustainability within the digital public sphere. Social media affects society in profound ways, and everyone involved, from organisations to educators to policymakers, need to adapt.

Reference

Pinto, S. & Oliveira, L. (eds.), 2025, *Proceedings of the 12th European Conference on Social Media (ECSM 2025)*, Porto, Portugal, May 22–23, 2025, vol. 12, no. 1, Academic Conferences International, Reading, UK.