Algorithmically Together: Platform Collectivity and the Memetic Politics of TikTok

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Finding Each Other Online

In the summer of 2022, millions of Americans watched as the Supreme Court announced its decision on *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*. The decision was monumental, as the Court indicated it was reversing *Roe v. Wade*, the historic ruling cementing the constitutional right to abortion for citizens of the United States of America. The decision was not quite a *surprise*: Reproductive justice advocates had been planning for its fall for many years and a leaked document from May 2022 appeared to reveal the will of the increasingly conservative Court almost two months before the official ruling. For some of the most committed members of the "pro-life" movement, the decision (and its leak some months prior) represented a culmination of decades of advocacy, politicking, and strategy. And yet, the reversal of *Roe* could be categorized as a *shock* for the majority of Americans who support abortion access "in all or most cases" (Hartig).

The *Dobbs* decision leak instigated ongoing public discourse regarding the political effects of abortion rights restrictions. After the circulation of the draft opinion, advocates on both sides of the debate flocked in droves to the Supreme Court (Bravin and Kendall). Op-eds and think pieces flooded American newspapers and blogs. Politicians braced for fallout or sought to capitalize on the national frenzy. On social media, users across platforms participated in the national conversation by sharing news articles, offering analysis and commentary, and circulating now ubiquitous Internet memes. Memes—digital and/or cultural shorthands that reference and iterate upon existing discourse or context—translate political discourse into easily sharable and remixable content that circulates within and across social media platforms. In the context of the *Dobbs* controversy, memes offered a particularly potent form of public commentary on social media platforms. Stitching together both advocacy and Internet culture, these memes mobilized the political power of shared, algorithmically-amplified aesthetics to reflect on *Roe*, imagine alternate realities, and organize collective action.

One of the most prolific sites of memetic discourse on the *Dobbs* decision and the fall of *Roe* was TikTok. TikTok is a short form, video- and audio-based platform that is tailor-made to support aesthetic remixing and cultural iteration on issues of public relevance. Using TikTok's built-in content creation tools and short-form video culture, users quickly launched a bevy of TikToks (short videos) related to abortion access and reproductive care. Some of these videos depicted protests and mobilizations in the nation's capital and in politically significant areas around the country. Others offered point-by-point explainers highlighting the textual significance of different parts of the leaked document (and, eventually, the final opinion of the court). Still other videos showed people calling their elected representatives to express their opinions on the decision. One TikToker, user @SarahBellumsn (later @sarahbellumcalls), went so far as to film her daily phone call to the office of U.S. Senator Mike Lee with "a daily uterus update." TikTok users, in turn, "dueted" the video to provide their live, side-by-side reactions to the series. The tone, tenor, and content of these videos was often distinct, depending on the user and their perspective. However, these TikToks were also often referential, sharing (or creating) collective imagery, sound, and aesthetic structure in service of consciousness-raising and political mobilization. In short, TikTok became a vehicle for aesthetic commentary on reproductive rights in America. Users' interests and agency were central to architecting this constellation of media. But so, too, were TikTok's platform affordances, which helped to circulate and amplify aesthetic messages. Indeed, TikTok's social and technical features fueled both the development of the memetic media and its widespread circulation, on and off the platform.

While popular media often describes it as an application for frivolity—think dancing, challenges, and other light-hearted trends—TikTok has become an important space for collective action on social and political issues, often through shared creation and re-creation of aesthetic content related to pop culture. After the death of George Floyd in 2020, for instance, TikTok became an important site for organizing and activating young people through the rallying cry and hashtag #BlackLivesMatter. In 2021, users engaged in political protest against unfair labor laws across Southeast Asia. Their actions were so widespread that it prompted one scholar to suggest that "TikTok has proven itself as the current platform for political activism in the region, at least for the younger generations, especially among Gen Z" (Jalli, "How TikTok"). Scholars have also noted that TikTok can shape politics by drawing together experts and everyday users around important issues, such as climate change (Hautea et al.; Zhao and Abidin 5).

In this theoretical essay, I contribute to this burgeoning field of scholarship on TikTok and political action. I argue that TikTok's socio-political platform affordances invite users to engage in collective action via the collaborative co-creation of memetic content. More particularly, I suggest that TikTok's multi-mediated platform creates conditions of possibility for activating and organizing collective

action through networked, memetic, aesthetic action on the app. Scholarship on memes has convincingly shown that they can be used to participate in politics (Greenwalt and McVey; Hawkins and Saleem; Silvestri). Scholars have also noted how memes have evolved and adapted over time, shifting from relatively simplistic image macros to complex, culturally-nuanced, multi-media artifacts (Woods and Hahner 4–5, 9–11; Sieffer-Brockmann et al.; Milner; Zulli and Zulli). Memetic adaptation results from changes in digital communication norms, user interests and engagement, and structural changes in the platforms on which memes are created, remixed, shared, and discussed. Indeed, the aesthetic and technical features of a particular platform shape the types of memetic expression distributed on it. As such, this article explores the intersection between social media platforms and meme culture to understand better how collective, political aesthetics emerge through political memes. TikTok, a platform that prioritizes aesthetic creation and remixing, is an ideal site to investigate the possibilities for collective action through memes.

Like many other social media platforms, TikTok allows users to connect with one another through creating, remixing, and reworking visual, audio, and written media. However, TikTok is unique in the crowded landscape of social media apps because its socio-technical infrastructure helps its users to architect aesthetically unbounded, infinitely remixable memetic content within the app (and frequently, off the app). Moreover, TikTok's video- and sound-based frameworks draw in (and upon) existing aesthetic features in the cultural zeitgeist, infusing memetic media with multiple layers of meaning. These features have prompted scholars to suggest that meme production is primary to social interaction on the platform. Zulli and Zulli, for instance, note that "imitation and replication are digitally and socially encouraged by the TikTok platform, positioning mimesis as the basis of sociality on the site" (1873). Further, while other platforms seek to hide the algorithmic curation of their social media interfaces, TikTok encourages users to partner with the app as an agent in producing memetic culture. Ultimately, the platform mobilizes algorithmic logics to draw together both the individual and collective through a carefully calibrated experience with a particular, intertextual, hypermobile, and circulatory form of memetic communication organized through the technical infrastructure of the platform as a socio-cultural infrastructure.

This essay will unfold in three parts. First, I will describe key features of platforms and how users can activate individual platforms' social, technical, and aesthetic affordances to create forms of digital collectivity. Second, I will introduce TikTok and briefly describe its capacity for fomenting collective political action through contingent, iteratively created collective aesthetics. Finally, I will analyze how TikTok's socio-technical and geopolitical affordances can also limit the capacity for sustained democratic action.

Platforms as Aesthetic Intermediaries for Collectivity

Platforms are technopolitical infrastructures that dominate the modern experience of the digital sphere. Platforms function socially and technically as intermediaries between users, developers, corporations, and the larger digital economy (Srnicek 43–48; Gillespie 349–239). More conceptually, platforms serve as nodal points between multiple collectives, stitching together people, processes, content, and technical logics in a bounded but ultimately participatory way. Liang, Aroles, and Brandl contend that "the main feature of platforms is the provision of an online interactive community, which facilitates interactions between users" (318). For example, social media platforms orient user engagement and creativity by constructing user tools and interfaces that support the generation of content or interaction on existing content. Although platforms frequently position themselves as *neutral* intermediaries, they shift our political, social, and economic futures in their image (Gillespie 348–9; Rodgers 404–12).

In the modern moment, platforms predominate as a primary organizational schema for relation. We can call this form of relationality *platform collectivity*, or the social condition of contingent, bounded togetherness characterized by shared affiliation in digital spaces. As I characterize it, platform collectivity operates in relationship to platforms as both a generalized organizing feature of digital life and as specific, discrete formations that cohere within particular social platforms. *Platform collectivity* manifests as an ongoing set of practices, experiences, activities, and infrastructures that mediate how humans experience the digital sphere and each other.

Platform collectivity organizes the technical and the social affordances of a platform to produce conditions of possibility for organized action in the digital sphere that can spill over into material contexts. Indeed, on certain social media sites, these discourses unfold memetically, through iteration, (re)creation, and circulation of ideas, content, images, and other shared vernaculars. Memes, Internet shorthands that are highly legible while also bounding communication to/within a particular digital culture, can serve as a communicative vehicle within and across platforms (Milner 159; Shifman). Yet, scholars also note that "different 'platform cultures' […] exist within social media; that is […] diverse vernaculars […] arise from a combination of the user practices and technical affordances at play with any given digital medium" (Pearce et al. 3). While some research on social movements in the digital sphere treats social media as a singular unit, focusing on individual platforms is necessary to understand how these platform cultures emerge relative to the technical affordances of the platform and how users take it up collectively (Pearce et al. 3). Memetic content—mediated, iterative, and collectively authored discourse—is both constitutive and reflective of these platform collectivities.

On their own, memes are collective communication artifacts, inventing and (re)creating novel discourses through iteration/circulation (Woods and Hahner 4–5, 138–142). While they often appear nonsensical or trivial, memes can characterize shared affect and aesthetics of communities and "invite broader discussion" among potential participants (Milner 159; Shifman). Memes are the result of networked communication from multiple human and non-human agents. As such, memes shape, define, bound, narrativize collectivities through their movement within and across platforms: slingshotting between individuals and the collective. Equally important, memes move ideas, concepts, and aesthetics from center to margin and back again. This communicative movement and memetic circulation help constitute both broad and narrow aesthetically-organized communities.

Elsewhere I have argued that individual social media platforms are networked with online collectives, institutions, news outlets, media outfits, and more. Memes transverse and connect these nodal points on the network (Woods and Hahner). However, TikTok's particular technical capacities foreground memetic action not as an *option* for engagement but as an *entrypoint* to the application, forming what Zulli and Zulli have called a "meme at the level of platform infrastructure" (1883). In the case of TikTok, platform collectivity forms in response to the aesthetic cultures and participatory affordances of the platform. In the following section, I examine in detail the communicative facets of TikTok's platform infrastructure that facilitate memetic remixing and platform collectivity.

Collective Aesthetics and the Technical Features of TikTok

TikTok is a widely used social media app that boasts over two billion users across the globe (Tidy and Smith Galer). TikTok's parent company, ByteDance, was founded in 2012, some eight years after the social media platform Facebook. Harnessing the power of artificial intelligence for curating content based on user engagement and related data, ByteDance produced a number of earlier platforms before it developed TikTok. In 2017, the company released TikTok as a stand-alone platform. Despite an initially sluggish uptake by audiences in the global West, TikTok's userbase grew exponentially and in rapid order. By 2020, TikTok was the most downloaded app, beating out social media hegemons like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram ("As TikTok Grows"). By 2021, TikTok had replaced Google.com as the most popular Internet domain (Tomé and Cardita). While some industry commentators have suggested that TikTok's growth has slowed in 2022, in 2023 TikTok reported having 150 million monthly active users (Shepardson).

Together, Apart: The Feed For Strangers to Find Each Other

Most generally, TikTok is a short-form, video-based platform with an emphasis on the creation of sharable, often self-referential, multi-media content. TikToks tend to be less than a minute in length, and some are even just a few seconds long. This shortness encourages brevity and topical focus. Because audiences experience the app in a steady stream of videos, content creators are encouraged to capture viewers' attention early. While TikTok as a company has been encouraging its users to experiment with longer videos, including several minutes in length, the majority of content circulating on the app remains quite temporally limited. In comparison to earlier video-based social media platforms, like YouTube or Vine, TikTok seems to operate in a sweet spot—long enough to develop an idea or build a connection, but not so long that it risks losing audiences' attention.

For our purposes, we might aptly say that TikTok is a meme factory, supporting the development of short, interconnected media that spreads rapidly across the platform and Internet culture writ large. Like other platforms, TikTok is part of a broader ecosystem of apps, devices, algorithms, media outlets, search engines, and more. People work in tandem with the socio-technical logics of the app to create highly memetic content that moves across audiences and, indeed, platforms. In turn, TikTok's algorithmic logics collaborate in creating temporally bounded communities by providing individual recommendations but help individuals find one another.

Users produce *TikToks*, or discrete video-based posts, that are then aggregated and placed in one of two feeds. Each feed is labeled at the top of the platforms' interface. The first feed is labeled "For You" and is the default for users opening the app. Like in other social media, media content on this feed is determined based on complex algorithms. Based on their engagement and other information, these algorithms offer users media content in anticipation of what will align with their interests. The "For You" feed (also known as the "For You Page" or #fyp) theoretically curates the seemingly infinite stream of TikToks for individual users. The other feed is labeled "Following." This feed comprises TikToks made by others that an individual user "follows." Users may follow other users on TikTok by clicking on a small "plus" icon underneath their profile picture, signifying that this action will "add" TikToks from this profile to the users' "Following" feed. Unlike other platforms that predominantly organize social media by privileging existing connections (e.g. "friends" on Facebook or "followers" on Instagram), TikTok's "For You" page prioritizes stranger relationality. Users need not have a large following to go viral on the app; users also do not need to "know" other users to encounter or engage with their content. Whereas other social media may orient users to find others they know "in real life," on TikTok, connections are not bound by these relationships. Instead, users *may find one another* through memetic co-creation and algorithmically-amplified connections.

TikTok's technical and cultural affordances incite the formation of communities of affiliation or interest, often through the memetic making and remaking of content-in-common. Colloquially known as reaching "[blank]Tok," virtual communities form through shared memetic content. Users can expect to find themselves on "free speechTok," "prolifeTok," "vinylTok," or "reproductive justiceTok." These communities are goaded into existence by an algorithmic infrastructure trained on finding and aggregating sameness and difference amongst demographic communities. Indeed, algorithms orient the formation and performance of collective aesthetics on TikTok in ways similar to and different from other social media platforms. TikTok employs certain technological features such as hashtags, a feed curated by a discovery engine, and an algorithm.

By virtue of its networked nature, platform collectivity orients the socio-technological affordances of a particular platform into a unique but interconnected and ongoing process of drawing together (and pulling apart) individuals into temporally limited but discursively powerful online collectives (McVey and Woods). Samantha Hautea and colleagues note that "[n]ew media such as social platforms have led to a variety of avenues for collective action […]. Although they lack the centralized organization of traditional activism, networked social movements can challenge the dominant gatekeeping of traditional media […] and are changing social discourse on an unprecedented level […]." In other words, TikTok creates conditions of possibility for a collective agency organized by and oriented through humans, socio-technical infrastructures, and the multi-mediated communication that moves between them.

TikTok's popularity as a tool for collective action may be attributed to the platform culture that forms alongside and through its technical features, including its powerful discovery engine and its easy-to-create content interface. Zhao and Abidin note that TikTok's "audiovisual affordances—including its technical and social capacity" (3) can create chains of discursive connection among users that can then be oriented toward collective action. For these scholars, the socio-technical affordances of TikToks as a multi-mediated platform "invite the production of personal narratives, connect them with each other in a dialogue, and collectively speak back against injustice" (3). Here, collective agency is characterized as shared aesthetic expression, facilitated by both human interaction and the platform logics of TikTok itself. This expression has a creative, communicative force: As Lee and Abidin argue, "[t]he participatory affordances of TikTok invite more users to perform and showcase their creativity in their participation of social movements […]. This everyday use of TikTok becomes a powerful weapon for social advocacy and political messages, formidable enough to make a 'real action' in the world through the platform's networkedness" (3). To be clear, it is not that TikTok itself generates the collective agency of users who create media on the app. Rather, the platform's mediated and participatory features help shape both collective discourse and the formation of communities of aesthetic

affiliation in short temporal order, facilitating the formation of collectivities based on algorithmically-assessed affiliation or interest.

Although other social media sites use algorithms to construct the user experience of their platforms, TikTok is distinct in that it invites the algorithm front and center. Bhandari and Bimo call this "the forefronted algorithm" (2). They remark that "of the major social media platforms on the market, TikTok is the only one to position its algorithm at the center of the social experience it engenders; the algorithm determines the type of video content the user is exposed to, and viewing this content makes up the majority of the experience on the platform" (2). TikTok prompts users to interact with the algorithm as a matter of practice, even encouraging users to see it as a helpful guide in finding the best communities on TikTok.

In many cases, users treat the algorithm as an invisible but very present agent shaping their experience on TikTok. In much the same way actors break "the fourth wall," users may break the "platform wall," recognizing the power and importance of an algorithm as an agent of creation and directing attention to it. It is not uncommon for users to "speak" directly to the algorithm in the comments section of a TikTok, thanking it for showing a user a particular video or helping them "find" a coveted TikTok community. When users find themselves algorithmically directed to a type of TikTok content with which they do not resonate, they may in turn chastise the algorithm (or otherwise question it for "putting them" there.) So visible is the forefronted algorithm that there are instructional TikToks for users to "train" the algorithm to access particular "parts" of TikTok—and particular collectives with shared interests. On TikTok, users may experience a sense of pride or privilege when they have sufficiently refined their algorithm to "find" a particular collective such as "bookTok," "bmxTok" "makeupTok" and more. Users may feel a sense of accomplishment at engaging with the algorithm in such a way that it helps them find communities of interest as an expression of their individual or collective identity. The elevated visibility and the forefronted nature of the algorithm contributes to the formation of collective aesthetic imaginaries in part by delivering users to communities with which they may share (or form) interest and affiliation. In turn, the TikTok community and the forefronted algorithm orients user towards particular aesthetic norms for collective action.

Multi-Media as Participatory, Memetic Media

TikTok's ability to draw people together across difference is based in large part on its multi-mediated, intertextual nature. That is, although TikTok is often described as a video app, it is not only that. Instead, TikTok is a multifaceted app that occurs through the repeated condensation of text, image, sound, and technical media such as hashtags. From a scholarly perspective, we might call each of these discrete elements *texts* that operate in relationship with each other, resulting in a richly intertex-

tual experience for both creators and viewers. Importantly, each of these individual textual formats is subject to creative engagement by App users. Changing one element of a TikTok video can dramatically alter the meaning or context of the video. In this way, TikTok draws upon iteration as a dominant framework for content creation in a way that supports memetic remixing of content.

TikTok's visual elements are partnered with sound, text, and technical features like hashtags. One feature that makes TikTok stand out among social media apps is that it allows users to playfully modify each of these media either individually or in combination to suit a user's vision for a video. Most generally, users can determine what is depicted in a post and easily capture it using a personal device. Even more than that, users can play with (and within) the images, ideas, and symbols depicted by the video by adjusting other aesthetic elements of TikTok.

For instance, TikTok videos might have diegetic sound, or sound that comes from and is directly related to what is happening in the video. In a video demonstrating protests, a TikTok might feature the sounds of marchers' feet on pavements, their protest chants, or the sounds of the police's armored bodies clashing with the crowd. But TikTok also makes it very easy to overlay this text with another, non-diegetic sound as background. In many cases, users deploy this secondary background set of sounds to complement (or contrast) the scenes depicted in the videos (Zhao and Abidin 9–10). More than that, a TikTok's audio component is inherently layered, meaning that each layer creates an opportunity for connection and creation. In a TikTok focusing on protests, a content creator might choose to deploy over diegetic sounds a background sound that captures the intensity of the moments shown in the video. Or, they may choose to take a well-known pop song to garner attention from those familiar with the music (if not the subject matter depicted). Users can choose from a wide variety of pre-existing sounds from well-known artists or they can borrow the sounds of content creators. The background sound against which videos are set is also subject to remaking. On TikTok, there is an entire genre of users who create viral sounds for others to use; these often exist in the form of music mashups, commentary overlayed on music, or funny soundbites. On other occasions, unintentional sounds can become memes themselves. In going viral, they are subject to further iteration and recreation as users make and remake content with them. Sound matches the importance of video on the visual app, such that each individual TikTok becomes a richly textured experience for both creators and users.

While both sound and moving image is foregrounded on TikTok, many users also choose to use written text to produce a multi-media post. Text can be deployed in many ways on TikTok. For instance, each TikTok can be captioned. These captions appear underneath the TikTok creators' user name, often flanked by a host of hashtags related to the caption or the video. Given the brevity of the TikTok genre, most of these captions are quite short. On the platform, captions may or may not be immediately descriptive of what is depicted in the video. In some instances, these captions

may provide additional context about the post, or they may only be anecdotally related. Text may also appear in the video itself. Here, the text may be used to move the internal structure of the video along (particularly necessary to establish context given short videos) or it can flag content for a scrolling user, letting them know in the first few seconds what the rest of the video will be about. Finally, text can be used by creators for closed captioning; this makes sound-based content accessible to those with hearing disabilities or those who are watching videos without sound. As with video and sound, textual usage on TikTok is another avenue to create new content (or iterate on existing ones.)

Often, TikTok communities lead in developing Internet culture, directing the ideas and conversations that occur off-site and even offline. It is not uncommon to see images, ideas, language, and aesthetics that first occurred on TikTok elsewhere on social media, the news, or in popular culture. This is remarkable insofar as it highlights the networked capacity of the platform and the aesthetic content that help architect it. In the case of memetic content, TikTok's affordances empower users to not only rework existing media, but actively participate in developing an evolving meme culture. This meme culture helps shape the norms and strategies used by users when making, remaking, or circulating memetic content.

Collective Iteration Built In

TikToks condense these discrete media (or texts) into a singular cohesive and coherent format. As the visual register is paired with other multimedia features, each element serves as a building block that can be made and remade iteratively. Indeed, remaking is built into the very structure of TikTok as a platform. The ease of use for filming, editing, and sharing content affords users the ability to craft content at a rapid rate with very few additional tools needed. The short format of the digital media added onto those accessible editing tools supports the circulation of media from the moment of its creation to its consumption.

Even after the initial moment of creation, TikToks are set up for persistent, consistent iteration. The platform organizes users through shared aesthetics; users may use the platform's built-in "duet" or "stitch" function to integrate other users' video in whole or in part to produce shared aesthetics anew. The duet and stitch functions effectively mean that users can provide additional commentary for an original video, incorporate new ideas or sounds, or build on the content within the video. For instance, a particular genre of TikToks on "musicTok" uses the duet feature to add additional instruments or singing to an existing musical performance. Such duets tend to occur within a chain: An original video of someone playing a song on guitar may be joined by someone on bass, then drums, then saxophone, then voice. In some instances, the duets are so complex that they feature multi-part harmonies and com-

prise a virtual multi-piece orchestra. Indeed, users have used this and other functions to write an entire musical (based on a meme).

Such features are not simply tools for distributing existing content across TikTok or the broader ecosystem. Rather, TikTok's particular brand identity and functionality are determined in large part by its droves of what it calls content creators, its social and technical infrastructure, which encourages participation in media creation, and relative ease of use for ordinary users. TikTok's multi-media audiovisual platform leads users to take up or curate both individual and shared aesthetics such that TikToks become "inherently intertextual in that the meanings of the content and style depend on those in other contexts" (Zhao and Abidin 11). In other words, TikTok operates at the intersection of user-made content, collective aesthetics, temporally-limited media, mixing and remixing of trendy images and sound from the cultural zeitgeist. In what remains of this article, I offer a brief example of platform collectivity architected through memetic relation on TikTok.

Memetic TikTok on *Dobbs* and *Roe*

The summer of 2022 was punctuated by the leak and subsequent announcement of the *Dobbs* decision. To be clear, the leak did not instigate deep partisan division over reproductive healthcare in America, but it shined a light on those divisions and made them (even more) public. Reproductive health care, particularly the right to an abortion, has increasingly become a dividing issue in the United States (Kretschmer 893–894). But abortion access was not a public conversation from the start. Sociologist Kelsy Kretschmer has argued that before the Supreme Court's initial ruling on *Roe* in 1973, abortion was largely considered a private, family matter (893–894). Indeed, part of the work of feminist groups in the middle of the twentieth century was to relocate reproductive health issues as political, subject to public deliberation. Doing so also meant reframing the stakes of discourse and deliberative action to focus less on individuals in positions of power and more on the power of the *collective*. Rhetorical scholars highlight such a communication strategy as "consciousness-raising discourse" or "collective rhetoric"—a collaborative form of discourse that can spur social change through collective meaning-making, aesthetics, and narrative action (Dubriwny 396–397).

Some fifty years later, the communicative power of collectivity through consciousness-raising persists in newly mediated forms. In the aftermath of the *Dobbs* decision and the fall of *Roe*, citizens turned to social media platforms to react to the criminalization of abortion in real-time. TikTok became an important hub for collective action on reproductive justice. Journalist Lindsay Dodgson noted, for instance, that "[i]n the hours after an initial draft majority opinion written by Justice Samuel Alito was leaked to Politico […] TikTok immediately became a

place for people to share their sorrow, commiserate, and call allies to action." Posts with hashtags like #reproductivehealth, #bansoffourbodies, #roevwade, #feminist, and #birthcontrol created a chain of interconnecting videos documenting users' reactions to the leak.

By the time the Court issued its controversial ruling on *Dobbs*, demonstrations across the nation (and the world) were well underway. Many users took to TikTok to plan, execute, and document public protests, including a number at the Supreme Court. One such TikTok video, viewed over 800,000 times, showed protesters with signs riding public transit in the nations' capital. After following several unidentified, unnamed people with signs walking to the protest, the video shows images of a growing crowd near the Washington Monument, various museums, and the Supreme Court Building. The video was set to a sound remixing a speech by Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio Cortez and the song "Humble" by Kendrick Lamar. Underneath the video, the caption reads "hands off. #roevwade #DC #washingtondc #abortionban #womensmarch #bansoffourbodies #supremecourt #protest" ("Em on TikTok"). Other users deployed the app to crowdfund for health care or legal funds or share resources related to reproductive health (Dodgson).

A related TikTok video posted by @OMGasho after the *Dobbs* decision relies on the aesthetic features of platform collectivity afforded by iterative remixing. The video shows a series of video and still shots of protesters against the decision, set to a remix of "This is America" by Childish Gambino and "Congratulations" by Post Malone. Some protest signs feature primarily written word (e.g., "Stop This War on Women") and others contain evocative imagery (red handprints on the curvy figure of a body, a hanger, images of recently deceased justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg and so forth). Still others are dressed in imagery, wearing red cloaks and white hats, gesturing towards the dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. While any one of these sounds, images, referents, or ideas can create an entry point for understanding the persuasive communication contained in the video, and while it is fairly easy to discern the position of the poster, what is most interesting is the memetic intertextuality of this video. By pairing an upbeat but equally dystopian Childish Gambino's warning about a racist, sexist, and oppressive America with a sardonic play on Post Malone's congratulations, the discursive context deepens. Through self-referential incongruity, posts such as these demonstrate dual communicative impact of memetic media: First, these examples elevate the overt persuasive messaging regarding the dystopian nature of reproductive healthcare in the United States, and second, they highlight the creation of bounded, temporary communities formed when users understand or apply one of the TikTok's many referents.

Here, platform collectivity is socially and technically incentivized by choices in shared mediated context. Iterative remixing is made easily possible (if not probable) by the myriad textual threads available to creators. The author of the video, for instance, has strategically aligned imagery with sound, such that Gambino's line "guns

in my area" narrates a protest sign held by a protester lamenting that guns are less regulated than healthcare. In so doing, the intertextuality serves as a multi-media invitation for viewers, whether or not they know @omgasho. The invitation is multiplicitous—one can duet or stitch the video, use the sound to make one's own video, engage in conversation in comments, feel a sense of solidarity and collectivity in a time of shared loss, and even join a local protest to participate in the action in real life. Given the TikTok's nearly 862,000 likes, 21,000 "shares" and thousands of comments, users have taken up this invitation in earnest.

Similar videos exist with different audios attached, including a viral sound from the latest season of the Netflix streaming series *Stranger Things*. Here, protesters are depicted as the featured song notes "Chrissy wake up, I don't like this." Although abortion rights, and protests, may not have anything in particular in common with *Stranger Things*, and although *Stranger Things* might not take a particular political stance as pertains *Roe v. Wade* or the *Dobbs* decision, memetic context stitches together these two distinct elements forming a new whole. By condensing shared aesthetics into a singular video, people who watch *Stranger Things* are invited into conversation around abortion care, and the viral nature of the sound helps to slingshot the imagery to nearly 2 million likes and 52 million shares.

Other videos offer similar yet distinct, but related aesthetic experiences for viewers. Some feature influencers reacting live to experts discussing the structural problems underlying healthcare (and, frankly, patriarchal violence) in the United States. Using a memetic format typical to TikTok, their heads float in the bottom third of the camera as they silently but visibly represent depicted narratives, express their dissent through placid but emotionally charged facial expressions. This video features no commentary in the description, simply the hashtags #RoeVWade and #WomensRights. Clicking through these hashtags—which is another pathway towards engagement of these ideas—shows young people reacting to the news of the overturn of *Roe v. Wade*, explaining possible effects, and even sharing "hypothetical" situations of imaginary.

These brief examples show how TikTok's technical and social tools draw users into active engagement with both content creation and the communities or movements founded through collective creation. These memetic media are exemplars of platform collectivity constituted through both individual actions of videomakers and algorithmic sorting of users into communities who may come into contact with the material. Through platform collectivity, online collectives cohere both algorithmically and autopoetically, meaning that they form autonomously of any individual actor or agent. From a techno-discursive perspective, what draws people together is the circulation of a shared text to which users direct their attention (Warner 49–50). Yet, what matters more than the individual text in itself is the fact that it exists, that it resonates with a certain group of people. More than that, the text must be shared, such that it can be "picked up at different times and in different places by

otherwise unrelated people" (Warner 51). Like the platform, platform collectivity is (1) distributed across any one individual, community, or technical location; (2) systemic and connected (that is to say, networked) and (3) engaged/participatory. Taken together, platform collectivity both evidences and facilitates the power of individuals working together across difference, facilitated by the affordances of platforms, often for a limited and unspecified amount of time.

The Future of Platform Collectivity

In this theoretical essay, I have examined how aesthetic forms of platform collectivity cohere on (or within) a particular social media platform: TikTok. While it is often dismissed in academic and popular culture as a space for irreverent performance (e.g., dancing), the application influences cultural landscapes on and off the platform. TikTok is a distinct communicative channel that mobilizes algorithmic logics to draw together both the individual and collective through a carefully calibrated experience with a particular, intertextual, hypermobile, and circulatory medium: memetic, iterative content.

From a cultural perspective, social media platforms hold a number of communicative affordances that make them useful for collective action. TikTok's invitational ethos, partnered with accessible tools for making and sharing media, creates conditions of possibility for building shared meaning online. In turn, the iterative, creative processes particular to platform culture foreground creation and participation on these networked platforms. The social and technological affordances endemic to the platforms subsequently encourage the transmission of both information and—whether intentionally or not—the creation of communities of affiliation or interest (McVey and Woods 1). By virtue of its particular mediation on/through platforms, this *platform collectivity* is distributed, connected, and participatory, spanning across individual media or any one platform. It thus exists as a portable social formation. At the same time, expressions of platform collectivity are discrete, architected by the unique social and technical affordances of the platform. This paradox is activated through memetic content that moves between and among particular communities and platforms.

As a technical logic of relation, platform collectivity gestures towards the power of interconnected subunits of community that form in response to internal and external algorithmic and social forces. Rather than forming "*the* public," a social relation that is defined in part by its omnipotence of "social totality" (Warner 49), platform collectivity provides a name to the non-random, often algorithmically-oriented organization of people, networks, platforms, news media, search engines, and media content that can flash in and out of existence with a certain quickness, or huddle together a little longer after the fact. Platform collectivity is neither

permanent nor entirely temporally liminal. Its transformative potential exists from the collectives that take it up together neither autonomously or through the direct actions of a single actor.

While social and other emerging media often appear to make communication easier fairly straightforwardly, in reality, many social media platforms significantly rework the structure of communicative action, necessitating new models for tracing and evaluating communication processes (van Dijck 4). Platforms support the sense of connectivity that seems to describe the online space since the rise of Web 2.0. As we look toward the formation of Web 3.0, it makes sense to reevaluate what connectivity is and can look like. Given the economic imperatives associated with platform culture, connectivity (or any social function) supported by individual platforms constrains social relations to the direct benefit of platforms.

While I endeavored to trace ways in which TikTok engenders platform collectivity, the platform's cultural and technical situatedness as a private platform in a politicized, racialized, gendered and surveillance-oriented economy of data certainly limits activist action. For example, TikTok has repeatedly been subject to complaint that it suppresses, deprioritizes, or otherwise limits certain topics and creators, including those related to the #BlackLivesMatter movements (Shead). More generally, for-profit platforms are obligated to shareholders and owners over their users. Liang and colleagues have argued that "the platform's neoliberalism is not just a set of economic policies; platform participants are forced to become 'homo economicus', and their behaviour is configured by the platform's sophisticated algorithms relying on market rationality" (318). Moreover, they suggest that "the themes of connectivity and exchange, central to platforms, obscure the neoliberalism ideology that runs free at the heart of platform capitalism" (Liang et al. 323). The neoliberalization of the public sphere is not specific to TikTok, platforms, or even the twenty-first century. Rather, mass consumption has been central to the political process and model of civic engagement and citizenship since at least World War II (Cohen 7).

As with other social media, TikTok's significance in popular culture has bled into geopolitical life. Because a foreign entity owns TikTok, it has faced significant—perhaps outsized—criticism for its data collection processes. In general, politicians critical of the app's impact focus in large part on bolstering national security in a fraught, digitally-mediated geopolitical sphere. That is, policymakers have repeatedly stated their concern about the implications of allowing ByteDance, a company based in China, to collect significant amounts of data on American citizens. This rhetorical framing highlighted how platforms could be politically advantageous for other countries, meaning TikTok would become a form of surveillance—"a Chinese spy tool" (Allyn). Such discourse has been particularly persistent, infiltrating the United States' local, regional, and national politics for several years. However, much of this rhetoric has been toothless, even at the uppermost echelons of American political infrastructure.

In July 2020, President Donald Trump advocated banning the platform, apparently for its connections to China, with which his administration had a strained relationship (Wong et al.). On August 6, Trump signed an executive order prohibiting economic transactions between TikTok's parent companies and U.S. entities (Lerman). The move encouraged TikTok to court American corporate entities to acquire or otherwise manage its U.S.-based operations (Lerman). Ultimately, attempts to ban the app were unsuccessful. Federal courts responding to complaints from both TikTok and TikTok users ruled that the Trump administration had been "arbitrary and capricious" in its attempt to ban the app. In addition to highlighting the potential political motivation against TikTok (and China), courts also ruled that Trumps' executive order could infringe upon freedom of speech (Allyn).

The platform continues to be plagued by its geopolitical associations and, more particularly, by political posturing about China. In 2022, FCC Commissioner Brendan Carr called on Google and Apple to remove the social media application from their app stores, a move that the *Washington Post* calls the latest "chapter in TikTok's complicated dance with the U.S. government" (Gregg). In March 2023, lawmakers in the USA introduced a bipartisan bill (the RESTRICT ACT) that would give the executive branch significant powers to curtail platforms like TikTok. The Electronic Frontier Foundation strongly opposes the bill, which they note would undermine federal statutes that "protec[t] the free flow of information in and out of the United States and supports the fundamental freedom of expression and human rights concerns" (Kelley and Greene). Of particular interest, the RESTRICT Act is predicated on potentially limiting or controlling technologies based on the popularity, distribution, and widespread use of possible communication platforms.

While TikTok as a platform has an economic investment in creating and forming collective cultures on the app, users have demonstrated that the app can be used to generate collective affect despite technical or cultural fragmentation. Whether we call them crowds or affiliative publics, TikTok's communicative capacities allow users to find one another—to overcome the individualizing and individuating effects of the platform's algorithms in a way that might support resistance or at least the imagining of politics otherwise.

TikTok represents a fascinating case study in platformed collective action—one that is indeed complicated, not only because of its associations with particular geopolitical actors, but because it represents the further inculcation of democratic action in the privatized digital sphere. Moreover, this case study can reveal key elements of the future of collective agency in digital media, particularly when we study the platform's functionality relative to aesthetic creation in communities and subcommunities. In other words, TikTok's private but public, geopolitical and localized, collective and individualized features highlight the paradox of organizing in the twenty-first century.

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