

## **Rethinking context in the age of platforms: A vision for advancing comparative research in a transnationally connected world**

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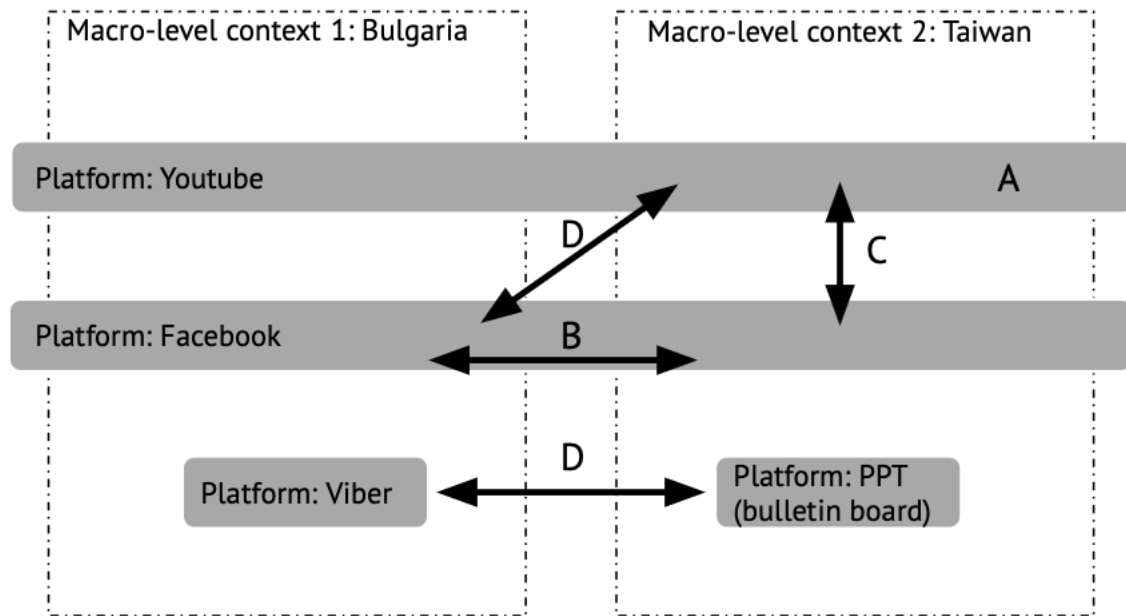
### **Relevance**

In view of a transnationally networked world, platforms such as TikTok, Twitter or Instagram are becoming a central object of research (van Dijck et al., 2018). Different subdisciplines are researching contents, users, or effects on social media, for example in relation to political communication or journalism. This conceptual submission argues that social media research needs to better acknowledge issues pertaining to the *comparability* of platforms and their *contextual embeddedness*, as two issues currently hamper theory building: First, there is still little systematic reflection on differences and similarities between platforms (Heft et al., 2023). Second, scholars often assume—rather than establish—that platforms are used universally across macro-level contexts (e.g., countries) due to their partly global distribution. However, platforms are often contextually embedded in different language or cultural communities (Costa, 2018), so their context-bound nature still needs to be considered. Extending previous reflections (Matassi & Boczkowski, 2021), the aim of this submission is to systematize platform-related research and derive requirements for more context-sensitive research, with the goal of advancing analysis of problems fueled by platforms such as hate speech or polarization that impede the “good life”.

### **Systematization of studies**

Most social media research employs a single-platform approach with a focus on Western-centric platforms (Jünger et al., 2021). Yet, as the field expands, a growing trend toward examining multiple platforms, also across countries (Dvir-Gvirsman et al., 2023), can be observed. In Figure 1, we illustrate how platforms (e.g., Youtube) and macro-level contexts (e.g., Taiwan) intersect and systematize four prototypical study types: studies of a *single platform* within a *single context* (A), a *single platform* across *multiple contexts* (B), *multiple platforms* within a *single context* (C), or *multiple platforms* within *multiple contexts* (D). With an increase in cross-platform and cross-country perspectives, analytical complexity in terms of requirements for comparability of platforms and contextual sensitivity increases.

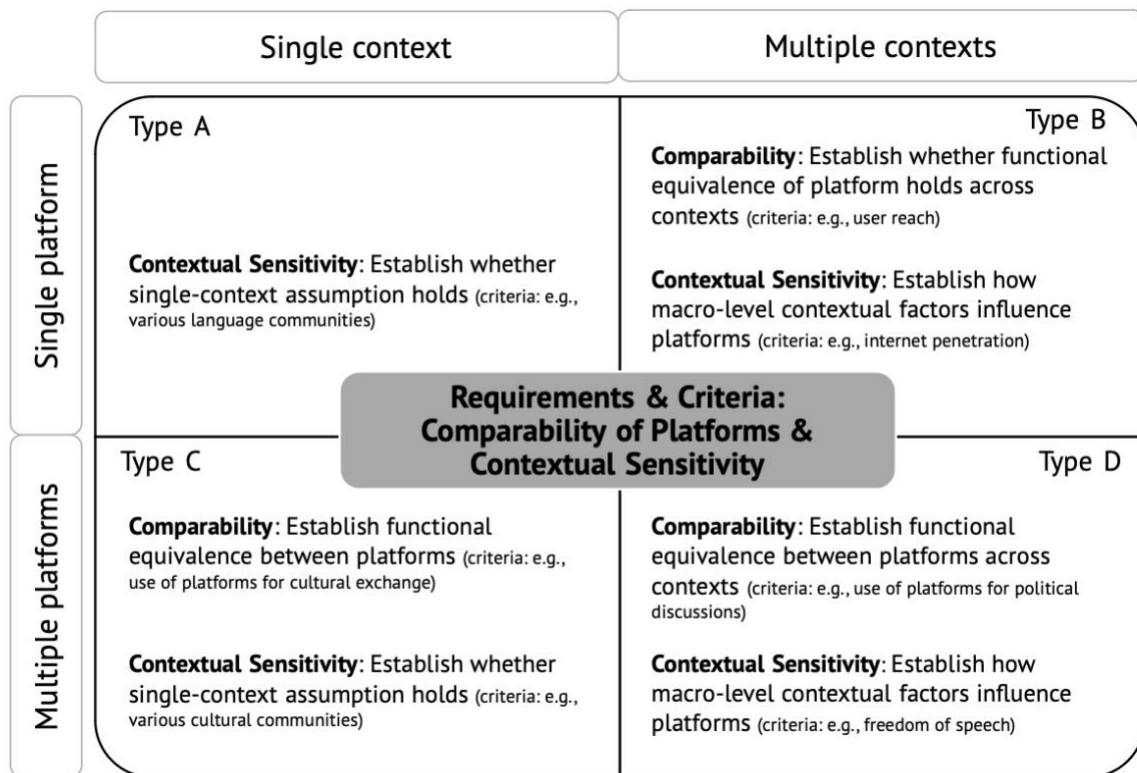
**Figure 1.** Systematization of studies in social media research



### Requirements for comparability and contextual sensitivity

To address this complexity, researchers can draw on theoretical inspiration from comparative research (Nielsen & Fletcher, 2023): While comparativists have long discussed *comparability* and *functional equivalence* (Esser & Hanitzsch, 2012; Van Deth, 1998), such issues are still seldom discussed in social media research—despite platforms differing considerably concerning business models, affordances, technical architectures (Schemer et al., 2023) or audiences (Newman et al., 2023). In addition, *contextual factors* of macro-level cases such as freedom of speech, platform regulations or cultural values (see Esser, 2013) may influence platforms differently. Ignoring the role of context may result in a “context collision” (Davis & Jurgensen, 2013) and assumed “digital universalism” (Willems, 2021) that hampers testing whether theories are generalizable across platforms or contexts. Figure 2 illustrates the juxtaposition of comparability and contextual sensitivity in the four prototypical study types and outlines respective requirements and criteria by which comparability of platforms and context can be considered (see similarly Heft & Buehling, 2022), building on a secondary analysis of a dataset of 430 comparative social media studies (Authors, forthcoming).

**Figure 2.** Requirements for comparability and contextual sensitivity



In sum, this paper aims to contribute to a vision for more cross-disciplinary reflections on the problems of the comparability and contextual embeddedness of platforms in social media research and beyond.

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