

System Error: Dance, Puppet

Examining the structures behind the pressure to perform online, and imagining alternatives

by

Dania Idam

Submitted to OCAD university in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Design in Strategic Foresight & Innovation

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2026

Copyright Notice

This document is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution–NonCommercial–NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/

You are free to:

Share — copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format.

Under the following conditions:

Attribution — You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use.

NonCommercial — You may not use the material for commercial purposes.

NoDerivatives — If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you may not distribute the modified material.

With the understanding that:

No additional restrictions — You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits.

Cover image: licensed via Canva.

Abstract

Content culture — the everyday production, circulation, and consumption of digital media that defines contemporary online life — has become inseparable from the platforms that host it. What began as personal expression has hardened into a system in which visibility requires performance, attention is monetised, and opting out carries social and professional cost. This Major Research Project (MRP) examines how that system functions, what it does to the people inside it, and what alternatives are possible.

Using the Double Diamond framework, the research combines literature review, qualitative interviews, and netnographic observation of public discourse on X (formerly Twitter) to map contemporary content culture from the inside. Thematic, stakeholder, and Causal Layered Analyses, together with system mapping, reveal a set of reinforcing feedback loops between algorithms, advertisers, creators, and users that produce the fatigue, performance, and disconnection participants describe. The system is governed less by deliberate design than by the cumulative effect of incentives that make any individual's withdrawal costly.

Building on this analysis, the paper applies Dator's Four Generic Futures to project four scenarios for content culture in 2045 — Continued Growth, Collapse, Discipline, and Transformation — and selects Transformation as the preferred future: a "Commons" model in which content production is decoupled from advertising-attention metrics, and digital connection is governed by communities rather than platforms. Backcasting from this future, the paper outlines a three-phase pathway and a set of strategic interventions spanning regulation, platform architecture, and creator practice.

The contribution is less a forecast than a redirection; a way of seeing content culture not as inevitable, but as a system that was built, and can be remade.

Acknowledgments

This research argues that no actor in a system stands alone. The same is true of the researcher.

To my Principal Advisor, Michele Mastroeni — thank you for the guidance that shaped this work, and for the questions that made it sharper than I could have made it on my own.

To my Strategic Foresight & Innovation cohort — thank you for the conversations, the growth that comes from working through projects over three years, and the generosity of thinking out loud together. The arguments in these pages owe much to yours.

And to the system that holds me: my family, my friends, the colleagues, the people who listened, and the ones who reminded me to step away when I needed to. Every person is a system, and I am the result of the one I'm lucky to belong to. This document is mine, but the conditions that allowed me to write it are not.

Thank you, all of you.

For my mother —

the first system that held me;

the one who always believed.

Table of Contents

COPYRIGHT NOTICE **2**

ABSTRACT **3**

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS **4**

TABLE OF CONTENTS **6**

LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES **8**

CHAPTER 01 ..... **9**

INTRODUCTION **9**

1.1 The Problem in Plain Sight 9

1.2 Research Context and Positionality 9

1.3 Research Questions and Objectives 10

1.4 Why This, and Why Now 10

CHAPTER 02 ..... **12**

METHODOLOGY **12**

2.1 Research Design 12

2.2 Discover Phase: Data Gathering 12

2.3 Define Phase: Analysis 15

2.4 Develop Phase: Foresight 16

2.5 Deliver Phase: Application 17

CHAPTER 03 ..... **20**

LITERATURE REVIEW **20**

3.1 Introduction 20

3.2. Platformisation and the Political Economy of Content 21

3.3 Algorithmic Governance and the Structuring of Visibility 23

3.4 Performativity, Identity, and the Curated Self 25

3.5 Generative AI, Aesthetic Convergence, and the Future of Content 26

3.6. Synthesis, Gaps and Research Contribution 27

CHAPTER 04 ..... **29**

NETNOGRAPHIC OBSERVATION **29**

4.1 The Performance Imperative, Made Visible 29

4.2 Fatigue, Critique, and the Pushback from Within 30

4.3 The Degradation of Community and Trust 31

4.4 Generational Positioning 32

4.5 Synthesis 33

CHAPTER 05 ..... **34**

INTERVIEWS **34**

5.1 Overview 34

CHAPTER 06 ..... **36**

SYSTEM ANALYSIS **36**

6.1 Thematic Analysis: Everyday Experiences of Content Culture 36
6.2 Stakeholder Analysis: Actors and Incentives in Content Culture 42
6.3 Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) 48
6.4 Visualizing the System 59
6.5 Synthesis 70

CHAPTER 07 ..... **73**

FUTURES OF CONTENT CULTURE **73**

7.1 From Analysis to Imagination 73
7.2 Signals and Drivers of Change 74
7.3 Dator's Four Futures: Content Culture in 2045 81
7.4 Selecting and Articulating the Preferred Future 89
7.5 Backcasting: What Would Need to Change? 92
7.6 Chapter Summary: From Diagnosis to Direction 97

CHAPTER 08 ..... **99**

FROM FUTURES TO ACTION **99**

8.1 Introduction: The Deliver Phase 99
8.2 Regulatory and Policy Interventions 100
8.3 Platform Design and Technical Architecture 103
8.4 Creators, Communities, and Cultural Workers 105
8.5 A Design Agenda for Transition 107
8.6 Chapter Summary: A Direction Worth Holding 108

CHAPTER 09 ..... **109**

CONCLUSION **109**

What the Research Found 109
The Contribution 110
Limitations and Open Questions 110
A Final Note 111

BIBLIOGRAPHY **112**

List of Figures and Tables

Figure 1. Double Diamond Design Framework 18
Figure 2. Posts from X/Twitter (January–April 2026). 30
Figure 3. Posts from X/Twitter (January–April 2026). 31
Figure 4. Posts from X/Twitter (January–April 2026). 32
Figure 5. Posts from X/Twitter (January–April 2026). 33
Figure 6. Stakeholder Power and Impact Matrix. 44
Figure 7. Causal Layered Analysis: Iceberg Model 49
Table 1. Causal Layered Analysis of Content Culture 57
Figure 8. The "Content Culture Circus". 61
Figure 9. Performance Pressure Loop (R). 64
Figure 10. Algorithmic Amplification Loop (R). 65
Figure 11. Monetisation Loop (R). 66
Figure 12. Trust & Authenticity Erosion Loop (B). 67
Figure 13. "The Glass Stage" illustration. 82
Figure 14. "The Empty Circus" illustration. 84
Figure 15. "The Visible Hand" illustration. 86
Figure 16. "The Commons" illustration. 88
Figure 17. Backcasting timeline from the preferred future. 97
Figure 18. Donella Meadows' Places to Intervene in a System 100

CHAPTER 01

Introduction

1.1 The Problem in Plain Sight

It used to be that we would share our lived experiences with our networks on social media. The going-ons offline dictated what was shared online. We lived and shared. These days, I find that a subtle shift has occurred and we are increasingly curating our lives for social media. We go to certain types of places, and capture certain types of pictures with the thought in mind: how will this look on my feed? Online positioning dictates offline. We live to share.

The when, why and how of this shift — from social media as a space for connection to social media as a stage for performance — is the subject of this research.

It is not a new observation. Scholars of platform studies, digital labour, and algorithmic governance have been documenting its contours for over a decade (Gillespie, 2010; Marwick, 2013; boyd, 2014). What remains less developed is a systemic account of how the shift is sustained, what is keeping it in place, and what conditions would need to change for a meaningfully different system to emerge. This Major Research Project (MRP) is an attempt to provide that account, and to move from diagnosis toward design.

1.2 Research Context and Positionality

This research was conducted within the Strategic Foresight and Innovation (SFI) program at OCAD University. The methods and frameworks it draws on — causal layered analysis, systems dynamics, scenario development, backcasting, and leverage point analysis — are tools for understanding how systems work in order to change them.

My positionality as a researcher is also part of the design. As a millennial who has inhabited social media since its early, less structured form, I remember when posting was reflexive and unoptimised, and have watched, from the inside, as that environment has been progressively reconfigured by platform design, monetization, and algorithmic governance. I believe this positioning — close enough to the current system to be fully inside it, and old enough to remember what preceded it— puts me, and millennials in general, in a unique position to feel the benefits as well as the costs, and imagine an alternative future.

1.3 Research Questions and Objectives

This MRP is organised around a primary research question:

What systemic forces cause and sustain the shift from connection to performance in digital content culture, and what conditions would enable a different system to emerge?

Four secondary questions inform the inquiry:

1. How do everyday users — not only professional creators — experience the pressures of content culture, and what coping strategies or acts of resistance do they develop in response?
2. What structural dynamics, platform incentives, and cultural narratives combine to sustain performance-oriented participation, and where do the most meaningful leverage points for change lie?
3. What role does generative AI play in accelerating the dynamics of content culture — and might it also serve as a tool for reclaiming authenticity, nuance, and meaning?
4. What alternative futures for digital participation are possible, and what structural conditions and transitions would be required to reach the most desirable one?

The objectives of the research are fourfold: to map the systemic dynamics of content culture through empirical grounding in literature review, participant experience and netnographic observation; to identify the deep structural and cultural forces that sustain those dynamics; to develop plausible futures scenarios that open the space of possibility beyond the current trajectory; and to translate that futures thinking into specific, actor-oriented recommendations for change.

1.4 Why This, and Why Now

The urgency of this research is not manufactured. The regulatory landscape is shifting consequentially: the EU's Digital Services Act (European Union, 2022), the UK's Online Safety Act (UK Government, 2023), and an emerging generation of platform accountability measures represent the most significant governance intervention in the history of digital platforms. The cultural landscape is shifting too: fatigue with the performance model is visible in the platforms themselves and circulating at scale. The technological landscape is being transformed by generative AI in ways that are simultaneously accelerating the dynamics this research critiques and raising new questions about authenticity, authorship, and what it means to express something that is genuinely yours.

There is a further dimension to this urgency that has received less attention in public discourse: the insufficiency of opt-out as a viable response. For much of the past decade, the dominant framework for addressing social media's harms was built around individual choice — curate your feed, take a break, disengage. That framing, as this research highlights, is largely untenable. Content platform participation has become structural: embedded in hiring and professional visibility, in government services and civic participation, in dating and community formation. LinkedIn has become a proxy for employability; social media presence a condition of access to opportunities that were once available through other means. The pressure is no longer only psychological, but now architectural. This research takes that shift seriously: not merely as a question of what is wrong with the current system, but of why disengagement has become, for most people, genuinely not an option.

These pressures are converging at a moment when the futures of digital participation are still open. The current system is not inevitable. It is a design, built from choices about what to optimize, who to centre, and what to measure. The choices that produced it can, in principle, be made differently. This research is an argument that they should be, and a map of what doing so would require.

Chapter 02

Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study adopts a design-led, qualitative research approach to explore the systemic dynamics of platform content culture and the pressures associated with visibility, performance, and expertise. The research is structured using the Double Diamond framework (Design Council, 2019), which provides an organising logic for moving from broad exploration to focused synthesis and application.

The Double Diamond consists of four phases—Discover, Define, Develop, and Deliver—which are used here not as a strict linear process, but as a guiding structure to support iterative sensemaking. In this study, the Discover phase focuses on gathering diverse forms of insight into contemporary content culture, including lived experiences, observed behaviours, and existing scholarship. The Define phase synthesizes these inputs into themes, system dynamics, and points of tension. The Develop phase applies foresight methods to explore possible futures, while the Deliver phase articulates a preferred future and identifies pathways toward it.

This structure supports a systems-oriented and futures-informed inquiry, enabling the research to move beyond descriptive analysis toward identifying leverage points and strategic interventions.

2.2 Discover Phase: Data Gathering

Literature Review

A literature review was conducted to situate the study within existing scholarship on influencer culture, platform economies, visibility labour, and algorithmic governance. This review provides the theoretical grounding for understanding how content production has evolved from a mode of expression and connection to one increasingly shaped by metrics, monetization, and platform incentives. It informs both the design of the research and the interpretation of findings.

Qualitative Interviews

This study received ethics approval from the OCAD University Research Ethics Board prior to data collection.

Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with nine participants to explore lived experiences of engaging with content culture across different platforms and contexts. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to capture a range of perspectives, including individuals who actively create content, those who primarily consume content, and those who engage with platforms in professional contexts.

The sample consisted of five men and four women, ranging in age from their mid-twenties to early forties, with the majority in their thirties. Participants were based across six countries—Canada, Nigeria, the United States, the United Kingdom, Spain, and Belgium—and represented a range of professional backgrounds, including business strategy, finance, risk management, supply chain management, communications, and cultural research. The sample also reflected a spectrum of platform engagement, from active content creators to predominantly passive or "ghost" users, ensuring that experiences of both visibility-seeking and deliberate withdrawal from participation were represented.

Interviews were conducted virtually and ranged from approximately 60 to 90 minutes in duration. A semi-structured format was used to allow for consistency across interviews while also enabling participants to elaborate on topics most relevant to their experiences. Questions explored themes such as platform use, perceptions of content creation, experiences of pressure or performance, and reflections on changes in social media over time. In addition to these open-ended questions, participants were invited to describe social media using a place metaphor—to characterise it as a type of space or environment. This technique was designed to elicit more intuitive and affective responses that might be difficult to articulate through direct questioning, and the resulting metaphors form the basis of a dedicated analytical section.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed with participant consent. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. To protect anonymity, participants are not referred to by name in the analysis; instead, each is assigned a participant code (P1–P9), used consistently throughout to identify the source of interview data. An additional participant (P10) contributed informally, providing quotes incorporated into the analysis with their explicit permission. Interview data serves as the primary empirical foundation of this study.

Netnographic Observation

In addition to interviews, this research draws on my ongoing, embedded participation in social media as both a personal and professional user. Observation was conducted primarily on X (formerly Twitter), which served as the central site given its text-forward format, high discursive density, and the visibility of public conversations about platform culture, creator labour, and algorithmic governance. Instagram, TikTok,

Threads, and YouTube were also monitored for patterns of visual content production, creator community dynamics, and platform policy discourse. This native netnographic approach (Kozinets, 2020) positions me not as an outside observer entering a digital field site, but as an already-immersed participant whose lived experience of the environment constitutes a continuous and naturalistic form of data collection.

This approach is particularly appropriate given the study's focus on the everyday, felt experience of content culture—a phenomenon most authentically accessed through inhabiting the system rather than visiting it. To document observations arising from this embedded participation, screenshots were collected throughout the study period (October 2025–April 2026) when platform content, interface patterns, or public discourse were noted as analytically relevant. Where visible, engagement data—including view counts, reshares, and likes at the time of capture—was recorded alongside each screenshot to provide a sense of the post's reach and resonance within the platform. These captures surfaced moments of visibility pressure, algorithmic behaviour, contentification, and platform governance debates as they arose organically through ordinary use. Screenshot material was reviewed alongside interview findings to identify points of convergence, and selected examples are used in the analysis as illustrative evidence where they concretely illuminate dynamics described by participants.

Positionality and Reflexivity

As a communications professional and active participant in digital content ecosystems, I occupy a position of close proximity to the subject of this study. My interest in this research is not neutral; it is shaped by both professional expectations and personal experiences of engaging with content culture.

I was drawn to this topic in part due to a growing sense of frustration with the evolution of social media platforms. Over time, I became increasingly aware of my own behaviour shifting in response to platform incentives—particularly the tendency to monitor engagement metrics after posting and to subconsciously evaluate content based on performance. This awareness led me to intentionally reduce my own participation in social media. Where social media once felt like a space for connection and chronological sharing among a defined community, it now often feels shaped by algorithmic prioritisation, performative norms, and an undercurrent of inauthenticity.

This tension is further compounded by my professional context. As a communications practitioner, there is a prevailing expectation to build visibility, particularly on platforms such as LinkedIn, where audience growth and consistent content production are often framed as indicators of professional value. I find myself resisting this expectation. I hold a personal belief that expression should be driven by having something meaningful to

say, rather than by the pressure to remain visible or to perform thought leadership. This raises broader questions that underpin this research: if everyone is positioned as a "thought leader," who is listening? If everyone is producing content, what happens to attention, depth, and meaning?

These experiences do not function as primary data within the study, but they do inform the lens through which I came to the research. To address this and prevent my own bias from influencing the research, I maintained a reflexive stance throughout the research process. This involved ongoing awareness of how my perspectives might shape the framing of questions, interpretation of data, and identification of themes. I made deliberate efforts to ground insights in participant accounts and to remain attentive to perspectives that differed from my own.

By explicitly acknowledging this positionality, I aim to enhance transparency and to situate the research findings within the broader context of lived experience, rather than presenting them as detached or purely objective observations. This dual position—as both participant and critic of content culture—enables a form of embedded observation, while also requiring deliberate reflexivity to avoid over-identification with the problem space.

2.3 Define Phase: Analysis

Thematic Analysis (Affinity Mapping)

Interview data was analysed using affinity mapping, also known as the KJ method (Kawakita, 1991), to identify patterns, themes, and relationships across participant responses. Transcripts were reviewed, and key observations were extracted and grouped iteratively based on similarity and conceptual alignment.

Through this process, themes emerged from the data, allowing for the identification of recurring experiences, tensions, and perceptions related to content culture. These themes were then synthesised into insights that capture underlying dynamics rather than surface-level observations.

Stakeholder Analysis

A stakeholder analysis was conducted to identify the key actors within the content ecosystem and to examine their roles, incentives, and influence. Stakeholders include content creators, platform companies, advertisers and brands, everyday users, adjacent service providers, malicious actors, and regulatory bodies.

This analysis highlights how different stakeholder groups both shape and are shaped by platform dynamics, and how their incentives contribute to reinforcing or challenging existing patterns within the system.

Causal Layered Analysis (CLA)

To deepen the analysis, Causal Layered Analysis (Inayatullah, 1998) was applied to examine the issue across multiple layers: the litany (surface-level trends), systemic causes (structures and mechanisms), worldview (dominant ideologies), and myth/metaphor (underlying narratives).

This approach enabled the research to move beyond observable behaviours to interrogate the deeper cultural and ideological drivers of content performance and visibility. It also provided a framework for identifying shifts in how social media is understood—from a space of connection to one of performance and commodification.

System Mapping

Building on thematic and layered analysis, system maps were developed to visualise the relationships, feedback loops, and reinforcing dynamics within the content ecosystem. The maps illustrate how platform algorithms, user behaviours, economic incentives, and cultural expectations interact to produce and sustain performative content practices.

This systems perspective supports the identification of structural dynamics rather than isolated issues, enabling a more holistic understanding of the problem space.

Leverage Points

Using Meadows' (1999) framework, potential leverage points within the system were identified. Derived from the system maps and analysis, they represent areas where targeted interventions could lead to meaningful shifts in system behaviour.

2.4 Develop Phase: Foresight

Signals and Trends

Signals were gathered from multiple sources: participant accounts in the interviews, netnographic observation, the literature review, and a structured environmental scan of platform, regulatory, and cultural developments. Signals were understood as early indicators of change—specific, concrete moments or articulations that hinted at shifts in platform behaviour, user attitudes, or cultural norms.

For the environmental scan, signals were organised using the STEEPV framework—examining Social, Technological, Economic, Environmental, Political, and Values dimensions—to assess the forces acting on the current system from multiple directions simultaneously. This provided a structured basis for identifying

which pressures were reinforcing the existing trajectory and which were creating conditions for change. Signals from the primary research were then brought into dialogue with the STEEPV scan, and the combined picture was used to identify broader trends: recurring patterns with sufficient coherence and momentum to shape plausible futures.

This step serves as a bridge between present-day analysis and future-oriented exploration, grounding the scenarios in dynamics already observable within the system.

Scenario Development (Dator's Four Generic Images)

Scenarios were developed using Dator's Four Generic Images of the Future (Dator, 2009): Growth, Collapse, Discipline, and Transformation. These archetypal frameworks were selected for their capacity to generate genuinely divergent futures rather than incremental variations on a single trajectory, and because they are particularly well-suited to complex sociotechnical systems where multiple competing dynamics—in this case, platform capitalism, user agency, regulatory intervention, and technological change—could plausibly dominate.

Each scenario was developed by applying one of the four images to the content culture system as mapped in the Define phase, extrapolating the identified trends and leverage points under the assumptions implied by that archetype. The Growth scenario extends the current logic of optimisation and monetisation toward its further consolidation. The Collapse scenario traces the conditions under which the system becomes unsustainable for the majority of participants. The Discipline scenario explores how external governance—regulatory, institutional, or social—might constrain platform behaviour and rebalance power within the ecosystem. The Transformation scenario imagines the emergence of genuinely alternative models of digital expression organised around different values.

The scenarios are not predictions, but tools for expanding the range of considered futures and surfacing which system dynamics—and which stakeholders—are implicated in each trajectory.

2.5 Deliver Phase: Application

Preferred Future

Building on the scenario analysis, a preferred future is articulated to reflect a more desirable and balanced relationship between content, identity, and value creation. This future emphasises authenticity, nuance, and meaning over performance and optimization.

The preferred future is informed by insights from the analysis phase and reflects both participant concerns and broader societal implications.

Backcasting

Backcasting is used to identify pathways from the preferred future to the present. This involves working backwards to determine the conditions, shifts, and interventions required to move toward the desired state.

This approach ensures that the preferred future is aspirational and actionable.

Strategic Implications and Interventions

Finally, strategic implications and interventions are proposed, informed by identified leverage points and system dynamics. These recommendations consider how different stakeholders can contribute to reshaping content culture.

Together, these interventions aim to support a transition toward a more sustainable and meaningful content ecosystem.

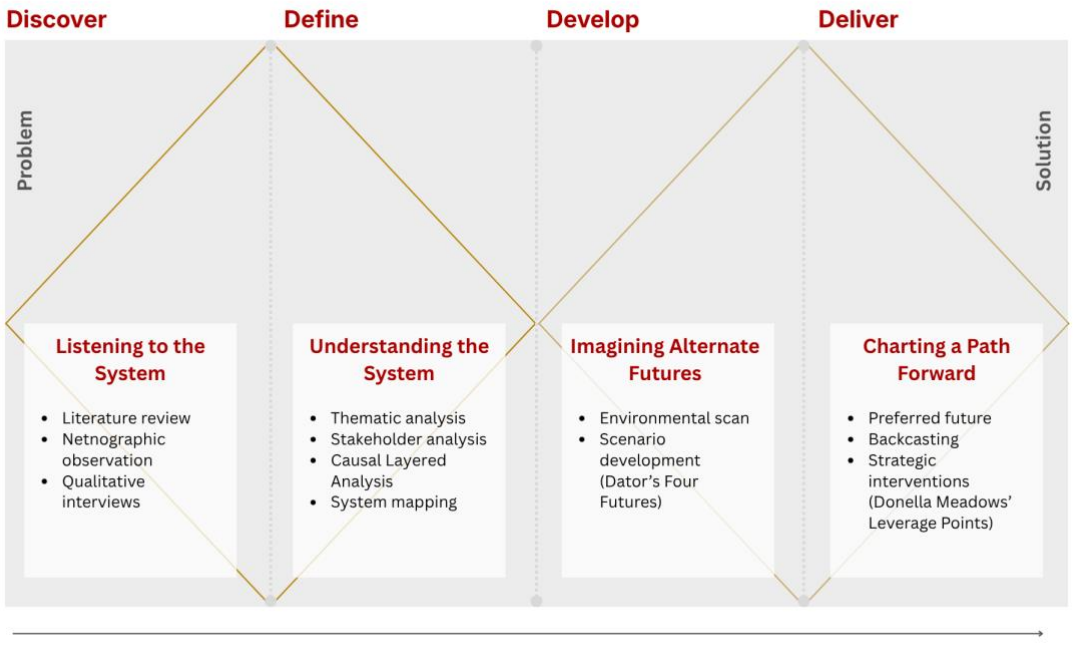


Figure 1. Double Diamond Design Framework

PHASE 01

DISCOVER

Listening to the System

Chapter 03

Literature Review

3.1 Introduction

Social media has evolved into a complex sociotechnical system in which visibility, self-presentation, and algorithmic legibility increasingly shape how individuals communicate and understand themselves. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and newer generative-AI-integrated systems no longer function solely as communication tools; rather, they operate as infrastructures that mediate cultural production, identity formation, and social participation. Scholars have described this environment as a platform society or platform economy, one in which digital expression is conditioned by commercial imperatives, algorithmic governance, and evolving cultural norms (Poell & van Dijck, 2015; Gillespie, 2010; Nieborg & Poell, 2018).

Within this economy, content creation is no longer the exclusive domain of professional influencers or media producers. Ordinary users increasingly participate in practices of visibility, self-branding, and audience management. Abidin (2016) characterises this diffusion as "micro-micro celebrity," while Marwick (2013) documents how everyday individuals adopt self-branding techniques as part of networked sociality. At the same time, platform algorithms prioritise content that maximises engagement, shaping both what users see and how they perform their identities (Bucher, 2012; Cotter, 2019). Together, these dynamics produce a cultural logic in which performance becomes an expectation, authenticity becomes strategic, and visibility functions as a form of social capital.

The stakes of visibility have intensified further with the rise of generative AI. AI-assisted tools accelerate content production, automate optimization practices, and introduce new forms of aesthetic convergence (Brüns & Meißner, 2024). As these tools proliferate, concerns have emerged around homogenization, loss of nuance, and the erosion of meaningful online expression.

This literature review synthesizes research from platform studies, sociology, identity theory, digital labour, algorithmic governance, psychology, human–computer interaction, and futures studies. It is organised into four interrelated domains:

1. Platformisation and the political economy of content
2. Algorithmic governance and the structuring of visibility

3. Performativity, identity, and authenticity
4. Generative AI, aesthetic convergence, and futures of content culture

The review concludes by identifying key conceptual gaps this MRP addresses—namely, how everyday users, rather than professional creators alone, experience pressure to perform, optimize, and aestheticize their identities within an increasingly algorithmic and AI-mediated content ecosystem.

3.2. Platformisation and the Political Economy of Content

To understand how platform environments shape cultural practices, it is necessary to examine three interconnected dynamics: the platform logics that structure public communication, the architectural affordances and algorithmic systems that distribute visibility, and the forms of labour and self-presentation that emerge in response.

Platform Logic and the Reorganization of Public Communication

Digital platforms increasingly function as global intermediaries shaping economic exchange, communication, and cultural production. Poell, Nieborg, and van Dijck (2019) describe this process as "platformisation": the penetration of digital platforms into economic sectors, governance systems, and everyday cultural practices. Through this process, platforms extract value from user behaviour, transforming social interactions into calculable inputs for revenue generation and predictive analytics (Zuboff, 2015).

Gillespie (2010) argues that platform owners strategically adopted the term "platforms" to assume a rhetoric of neutrality—presenting themselves as "open" conduits for information—while actively shaping information flows through moderation systems, ranking algorithms, and interface design. This framing obscures their role as regulators of visibility, positioning them to occupy a strategic middle ground between political protections that benefit them and obligations that do not.

Bruns (2015) describes social media as contemporary public spheres in which information and debate can circulate widely and unpredictably. Yet these spaces are not neutral arenas of participation. Platform architectures and ranking algorithms actively shape what becomes visible and what remains unseen, structuring participation through systems of algorithmic gatekeeping (Bucher, 2012; Gillespie, 2010).

Together, these scholars demonstrate that platforms are not passive intermediaries but active gatekeepers. Their commercial models, anchored in what Zuboff (2015) terms surveillance capitalism, incentivize

content that maximises engagement, producing cascading effects on user behaviour, cultural norms, and expectations of participation.

Platform Affordances, Architecture, and Evolution

Platform affordances—such as likes, shares, comments, duets, and stitches—encode normative expectations into user action (Bucher & Helmond, 2018). These affordances signal which behaviours are desirable, replicable, or rewarding, subtly shaping how users participate.

Four structural shifts are particularly significant in the evolution of social media platforms. First, the shift from social graphs to interest graphs, most prominently exemplified by TikTok's "For You" page, decouples visibility from users' existing social networks, enabling virality while intensifying algorithmic gatekeeping (Zulli & Zulli, 2022). Second, the rise of short-form, high-velocity video has encouraged fast-paced, emotionally charged content optimised for rapid engagement (Zulli & Zulli, 2022). Third, algorithmic feeds have largely replaced chronological timelines, prioritizing engagement-maximizing ranking systems over user control (Eslami et al., 2015). Finally, platforms increasingly employ retention-driven design, emphasizing watch time, pacing, and pattern interruption, which in turn shape how creators and users craft content.

These shifts underscore that platform architecture is not neutral. Rather, it conditions expression, nudging users toward forms of communication most compatible with platforms' commercial imperatives. Because platform visibility is allocated through engagement-based ranking systems, users quickly learn—often through trial and error—which forms of content are rewarded with reach, and which disappear into algorithmic obscurity. In this way, platform design structures incentives that shape not only what content circulates widely, but how users learn to communicate within the system.

Creator Labour, Precarity, and the Diffusion of Influencer Norms

Research on influencers highlights that content creation is often precarious, emotionally taxing, and highly dependent on platform rewards (Duffy, 2017; Abidin, 2016). Influencers engage in ongoing practices of self-branding, audience maintenance, aesthetic consistency, and the constant performance of authenticity.

Despite these challenges, many creators continue to pursue influencer work because platforms offer the possibility of economic income, social visibility, and professional opportunity. In this sense, influencer labour operates as a form of aspirational work in which individuals invest time and emotional energy in the hope of future recognition, monetization, or career advancement (Duffy, 2017).

Although this literature focuses primarily on professional creators, its insights increasingly apply to everyday users as "creator-like" behaviours diffuse across social contexts. As Duffy (2017) argues, social media encourages individuals to frame creative expression as aspirational labour, regardless of whether monetization is achieved. This diffusion sets the stage for examining how non-influencers internalize similar pressures. As influencer practices become normalized within platform culture, behaviours once associated with professional creators increasingly shape expectations of everyday online participation and self-presentation.

3.3 Algorithmic Governance and the Structuring of Visibility

The diffusion of creator practices across social media is closely tied to how platforms allocate visibility. While platform architectures create the conditions that shape participation, algorithmic systems ultimately determine which content is amplified, circulated, or rendered invisible. These ranking systems therefore function as powerful mechanisms of governance, structuring not only what users see but how individuals learn to produce content within platform environments.

Algorithms as Systems of Power and Gatekeeping

Algorithms structure visibility by determining which content is amplified and which is rendered invisible. Bucher (2012) describes the social media feed as a technological drama in which users confront the threat of invisibility—the fear that their posts may not reach audiences at all. Algorithms operate as opaque systems, prompting users to speculate, interpret, and adapt their behaviour accordingly.

Gorwa et al. (2020) conceptualize algorithmic content moderation as a hybrid of technical, political, and human processes. They argue that automation obscures value judgments, reinforcing inequality and systemic bias. From a broader political-economic perspective, Couldry and Mejias (2019) situate these systems within the logic of data colonialism, in which human life is continuously extracted and rendered as data for profit.

Within such regimes, visibility becomes both a reward and a disciplinary mechanism, shaping what is perceived as valuable, appropriate, or worthy of attention.

Folk Theories and User Adaptation

If algorithmic systems structure visibility, users must learn to interpret and navigate these systems in order to remain visible within platform environments. One way this occurs is through the development of "folk theories"—informal beliefs about how algorithms operate and how content should be optimised for visibility.

Users therefore do not engage passively with algorithmic systems. Instead, they actively attempt to "game" the algorithm based on these folk theories (Eslami et al., 2015; DeVito et al., 2017). These beliefs inform decisions about when to post, which aesthetics to adopt, how to modulate tone or vulnerability, what hashtags or sounds to use, and how frequently to appear online.

Empirical studies of creators illustrate how these dynamics unfold in practice. Cotter (2019) shows how Instagram influencers interpret platform algorithms as a "visibility game," strategically modifying posting behaviour, aesthetic style, and engagement strategies in an effort to maintain reach. Similarly, Bishop (2019) documents how YouTube creators experience "algorithmic anxiety," continually adjusting content strategies in response to perceived changes in platform ranking systems.

These findings demonstrate how algorithmic governance shapes cultural production not only through technical systems but also through users' interpretations of those systems. DeVito (2021) argues that individuals often conceptualize the algorithm itself as an audience—an entity whose preferences must be anticipated and satisfied. Through such processes, algorithms influence expression indirectly by shaping how users imagine and respond to platform incentives.

Algorithmic Aesthetics and Template Culture

As users adapt their behaviour to perceived algorithmic incentives, these practices also shape recognizable aesthetic patterns across platforms.

Zulli and Zulli (2022) argue that TikTok popularizes "networked templates"—repeatable formats, sounds, and visual sequences that structure content creation. While template culture enables participation and lowers creative barriers, it also narrows expressive possibility.

Empirical work by Herman (2023) shows that TikTok's algorithmic and interaction design influence the creative processes and stylistic features of videos on the platform, shaping elements such as sound selection, timing, format, and participation in trends. Creators often adapt their creative choices in response to

perceived algorithmic preferences in order to increase visibility. These dynamics support broader critiques of aesthetic sameness, which become especially salient in discussions of generative AI (Section 5).

3.4 Performativity, Identity, and the Curated Self

As platforms shape visibility through algorithmic systems and engagement-driven incentives, participation increasingly involves producing content and performing identities that remain legible to both audiences and algorithms. The dynamics of visibility, optimization, and creator practices discussed in the previous section therefore intersect with longstanding sociological theories of performance and identity. Understanding how users present themselves within platform environments requires examining how identity is performed, curated, and evaluated in digitally mediated contexts.

Classical Foundations: Goffman and Butler

Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework conceptualizes social life as performance, distinguishing between frontstage (public) and backstage (private) selves. Social media collapses these stages, creating persistent performance spaces with merged audiences (boyd, 2014). Butler's (1990) theory of performativity further emphasises that identity is constituted through repeated acts rather than expressed as a fixed essence, an insight that becomes particularly salient in digital environments where identity is continually enacted through visible online practices.

In networked environments, these acts include posting, editing, filtering, tagging, and curating digital feeds. Over time, such performances stabilize—or destabilize—digital identity (Cover, 2012), particularly when they are shaped by algorithmic feedback and platform visibility metrics.

Authenticity Work and the Anxiety of Visibility

Marwick (2013) argues that authenticity in networked culture has become a strategic practice—carefully curated yet framed as spontaneous. Abidin (2017) describes this phenomenon as "calibrated amateurism," in which relatability is performed through controlled imperfection. Abidin (2016) further introduces the concept of visibility labour, capturing the emotional and creative effort required to maintain an online persona.

While much of the literature on visibility labour focuses on influencers and professional creators, these dynamics shape broader social media participation. Ordinary users increasingly manage feed aesthetics, self-branding, vulnerability performance, identity maintenance across platforms, and success metrics such as

likes, saves, and views. Psychological research indicates that such visibility metrics correlate with anxiety, depression, and diminished well-being, particularly among young people (Valkenburg et al., 2022).

Emotional Consequences of Performance Culture

The performative dynamics of social media do not only shape identity presentation but also have measurable psychological consequences. Digital self-presentation has been linked to heightened social comparison, perfectionism, body dissatisfaction, identity instability, and pressure to appear "interesting" or "valuable" online. Chou and Edge (2012) link these dynamics to processes of social comparison, in which individuals perceive others' lives as more successful or fulfilling than their own.

Taken together, this literature underscores that performance culture entails significant emotional labour, even for users who engage with social media primarily for social connection rather than professional gain.

3.5 Generative AI, Aesthetic Convergence, and the Future of Content

Recent developments in generative artificial intelligence introduce a new technological layer to the dynamics already shaping platform content production. While platforms and algorithms structure visibility and participation, generative AI tools increasingly influence how content itself is produced and optimised.

Emerging research suggests that these systems may simultaneously expand individual creative capacity while reducing diversity at the collective level. In an experimental study of short story writing, Doshi and Hauser (2024) found that writers using generative AI produced higher-quality stories on average, yet the resulting outputs became significantly more similar to one another. Although AI assistance enhanced individual performance, it reduced the overall diversity of creative outcomes. These findings echo earlier observations of template culture on social media platforms, suggesting that AI may further compress stylistic variation within already optimization-driven content environments.

Questions of authenticity also emerge in relation to AI-assisted production. Brüns and Meißner (2024) find that audiences perceive AI-generated social media content as less authentic than content created without AI assistance. As AI tools become increasingly integrated into everyday creative workflows, this raises broader concerns about authorship, trust, and the cultural value of authenticity within digital expression.

Generative AI also automates many of the practices previously required for maintaining visibility within platform ecosystems, including editing, caption writing, aesthetic filtering, and trend prediction. In this sense, AI systems extend the optimization logics already embedded in social media platforms, transforming what was once a manual process of experimentation and adaptation into a semi-automated one. Scholars

have argued that such systems operate primarily through large-scale pattern recognition and replication, raising concerns that AI-generated outputs may reproduce existing aesthetic conventions rather than expand them (Pasquinelli & Joler, 2020).

These developments suggest that generative AI may intensify existing pressures toward optimization, imitation, and aesthetic convergence within digital content environments. As tools for automated content production become more accessible, the boundaries between human expression, algorithmic optimization, and machine-assisted creativity may become increasingly blurred.

3.6. Synthesis, Gaps and Research Contribution

The literature reviewed above reveals a sociotechnical environment in which platform infrastructures, algorithmic visibility systems, identity performance norms, and emerging AI tools collectively shape how individuals participate in digital culture. Platforms structure the economic and architectural conditions of participation, algorithms allocate visibility and influence user behaviour, cultural norms of authenticity and self-branding shape identity performance, and generative AI introduces new dynamics of automation and aesthetic convergence.

Within this environment, several key tensions emerge. First, users face a persistent struggle between authenticity and optimization, attempting to express themselves meaningfully while remaining algorithmically legible. Second, creativity and homogenization exist in tension, as template culture and generative AI increasingly narrow expressive variation. Third, autonomy and algorithmic control are continually negotiated, as users adapt to opaque systems that simultaneously enable and constrain identity performance. Fourth, participation in digital platforms increasingly adopts logics once associated with professional content production, blurring boundaries between everyday self-expression, personal branding, and forms of aspirational labour. Finally, the growing emphasis on efficiency and optimization threatens depth, nuance, and meaning in digital expression.

Despite a robust and expanding body of scholarship on platforms, algorithms, digital labour, and online identity, several important gaps remain. Much of the existing research focuses on influencers, professional creators, and platform governance, leaving comparatively limited understanding of how everyday users experience and internalize these dynamics. While scholars have examined platformisation, algorithmic visibility, and identity performance separately, fewer studies consider how these forces interact to shape the pressures ordinary users face when participating in digital content environments.

Additionally, while platforms and algorithms are often examined as drivers of visibility pressures, less attention has been paid to how these dynamics intersect with broader social and professional expectations that encourage individuals to perform expertise, authenticity, or influence in digital spaces. Finally, while research on generative AI is rapidly emerging, its implications for content culture, expertise, and meaning making remain underexplored.

CHAPTER 04

Netnographic Observation

Rather than entering digital platforms as an outside observer, this research draws on embedded, ongoing participation in content platforms including Twitter (now X), Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, TikTok, Threads, and YouTube. Screenshots were collected between October 2025 and April 2026 when platform content, interface patterns, or public discourse were noted as analytically relevant. This chapter presents the principal themes that emerged from that observation, illustrated by selected captures. The analytical interpretation of these findings — in relation to interview data, systems dynamics, and the broader literature — is taken up in Chapter 6.

4.1 The Performance Imperative, Made Visible

Among the most consistent patterns observed was the open normalisation of strategic performance as a condition of platform presence. Coaching content — instructing users on how to maximise impressions, optimise posting frequency, and convert personality into reach — circulated at scale. One widely shared post on X laid out the arithmetic plainly: achieving five million impressions in two weeks requires 350,000 impressions per day, fifteen posts daily, and five hundred replies. "The 500 replies daily is the real engine here," its author explained (X, March 2026). Another, from November 2025, distilled the logic of platform self-investment to a sequence: "Buy blue tick... Post what you do everyday... Rinse. Repeat. Watch how your life will change in 6 months" (1,300,000 views; 3,900 likes; 1,900 bookmarks at the time of taking the screenshot).

What these posts reveal is a widely circulated framework in which platform presence is understood as a practice of continuous, quantified self-optimisation.

A similar logic surfaced in more explicitly professional registers too. A post observed on X in April 2026 asked plainly: "what type of content do I need to position myself for a board seat?" The question strips away any residual ambiguity: content here is not self-expression, not community, not even brand — it is a calculated instrument for accessing institutional power. That this was posed openly, casually, and without apparent irony is itself part of what the observation records.

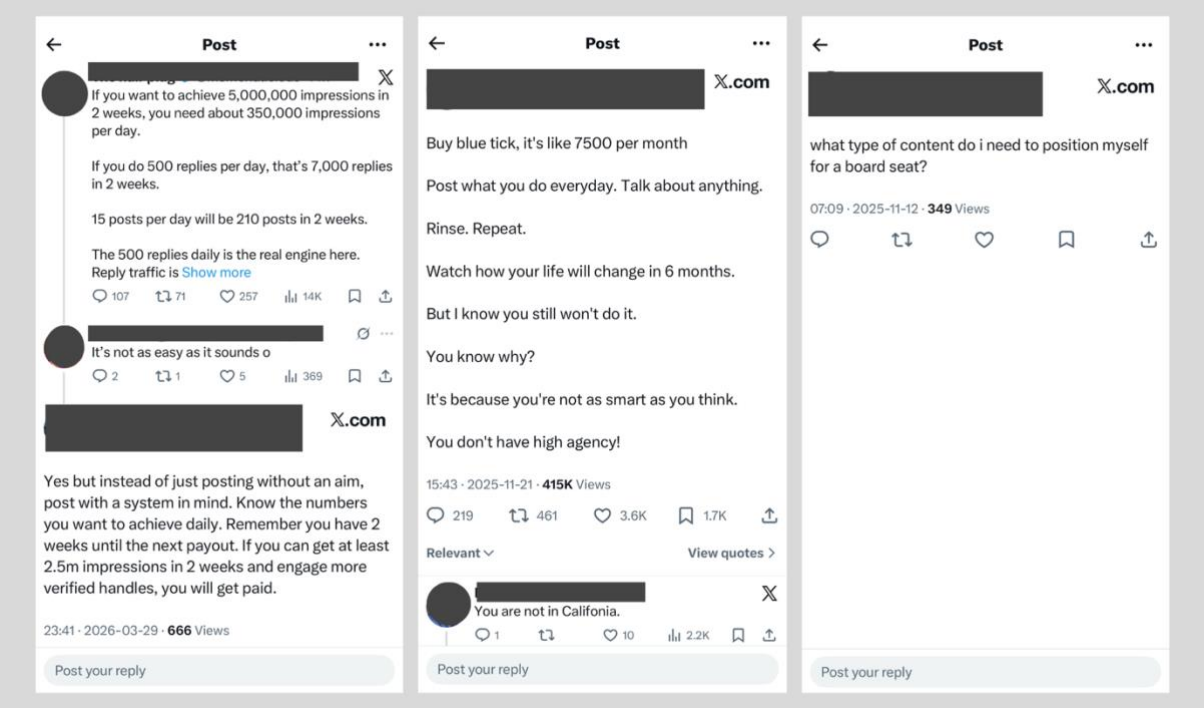


Figure 2. Posts from X/Twitter (January–April 2026), collected through netnographic observation. Display names, handles, and profile photos have been blurred to protect user privacy.

4.2 Fatigue, Critique, and the Pushback from Within

Running alongside this performance discourse was a striking and increasingly visible counter-current: expressions of exhaustion, resistance, and explicit critique from within the platforms. A post shared in January 2026 (reaching 692,000 views, 8,300 reshares and 38,000 likes at the time of taking the screen shot) stated simply: "I need someone to write a book titled: We Can't All Be Content Creators." One reply elaborated: "Exactly. A project team cannot consist of 100% Marketing Leads. We need Ops, Devs, and actual workers to keep the world running. Please write this." The observation points to fatigue with the expectation of content as well as a structural tension: the logic of universal content production is incompatible with the full range of work that sustains daily life.

The critique extended to the category itself. A post from April 2026, reaching 834,000 views (3,200 reshares and 11,000 likes), collected responses to the proposition that "'Content' was the worst thing to ever happen to society" — with one reply saying, "It turned people into products." Yet another reply offered the analysis that "social media didn't make us products, it made attention a marketplace." The ubiquity of content creation at live events surfaced separately: "There's literally a mobile device shoved in your face from all angles. It's exhausting" (April 2026). A post referring to the Substack platform captured the same

discomfort in the register of writing: “I think more people should write personal essays not shitty articles… Writing is an art that should belong to you not a tool to perform” (March 2026).

These observations collectively suggest that resistance to the performance model is not a minority position. It circulates widely, finds resonance, and is articulated by platform users themselves, often from within the same environments it critiques.

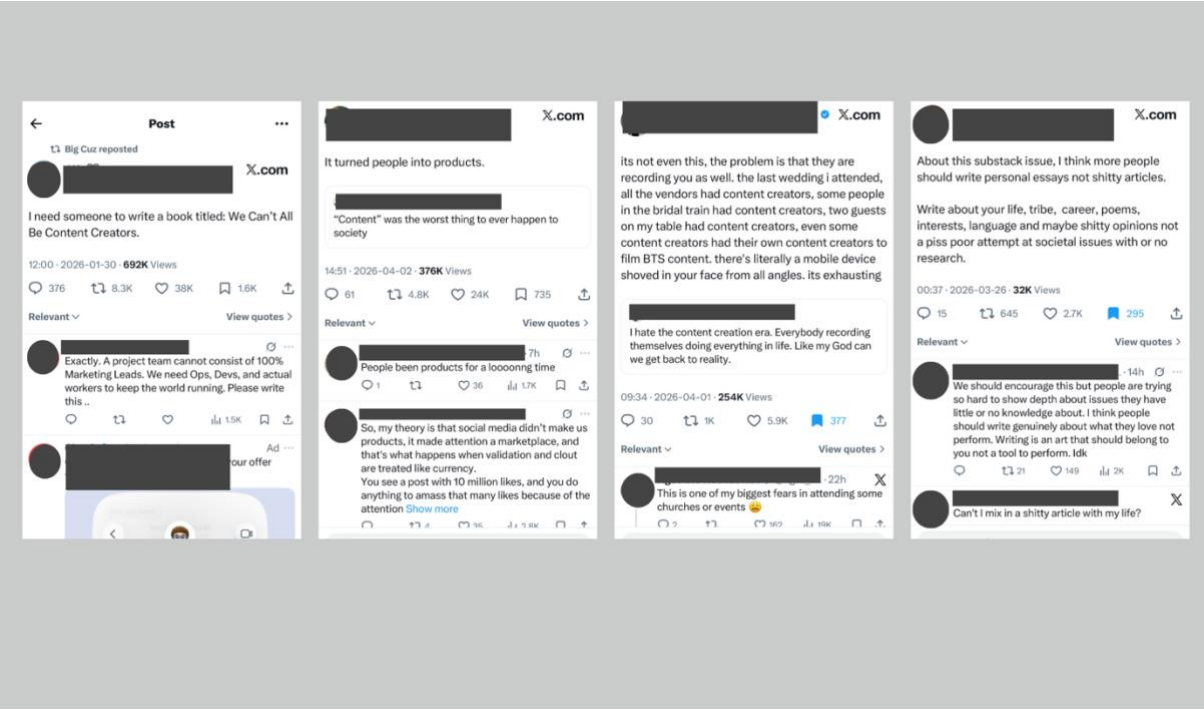


Figure 3. Posts from X/Twitter (January–April 2026), collected through netnographic observation. Display names, handles, and profile photos have been blurred to protect user privacy.

4.3 The Degradation of Community and Trust

A third pattern concerned the felt experience of community loss. A post from January 2026, accumulating 683,000 views described the consequences of platform ownership change at X: “I almost never see tweets from my friends, just endless misinformation and rage bait and ai slop.” The replies amplified the sentiment — “There really is no sense of community at all, I feel so disconnected from everyone on here now” — alongside uncertainty about whether the change was attributable to algorithmic design or to the platform’s shifting culture. The distinction itself is analytically significant: users have difficulty locating the cause, which is consistent with the diffusion of responsibility identified in the systems analysis.

The blurring of private and public life emerged as a related concern. A February 2026 post framing “The contentification of our lives: a thesis” was followed by the observation: “why do I know the inside of your house?” — a wry articulation of how platform norms have eroded the boundary between expression and

exposure. A post on algorithmic resistance captured the broader stakes: “Your brain is under attack by a trillion dollar adversary intent on destroying it. This is your David vs Goliath. Resist the algorithm” (March 2026).

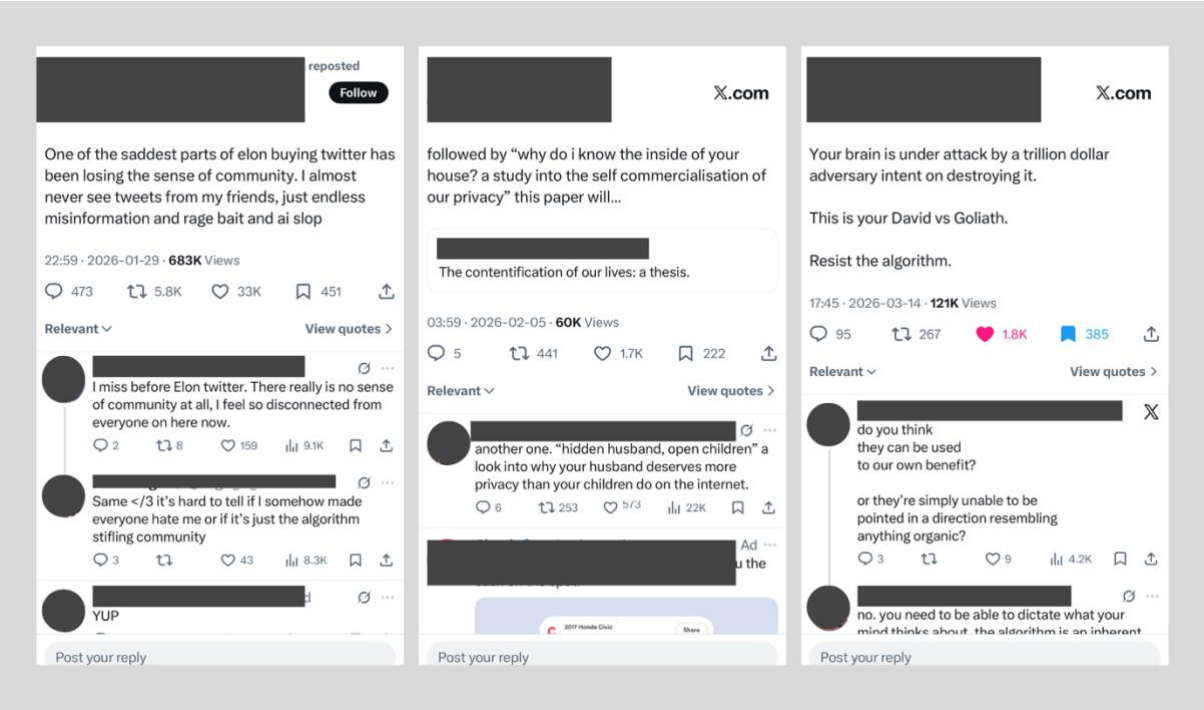


Figure 4. Posts from X/Twitter (January–April 2026), collected through netnographic observation. Display names, handles, and profile photos have been blurred to protect user privacy.

4.4 Generational Positioning

Two posts observed in December 2025, collectively reaching over half a million views, articulated the generational positioning assumed in this research. The first, characterised millennials as “the real AI sweet spot — digital natives with just enough experience to prompt well and sanity-check the output,” contrasting this with Gen Z (“too inexperienced, trusts AI like it’s gospel”) and older generations. The second offered a complementary framing: “Millennials are the last generation in human history to have known a childhood without the internet, and also experienced the internet early enough in high school/college that we are full digital natives — and still remember when the internet was good.”

These posts are significant as evidence that the generational self-understanding described by the researcher and some participants in this study — as a bridge generation with a particular form of awareness — is actively circulating in wider public discourse.

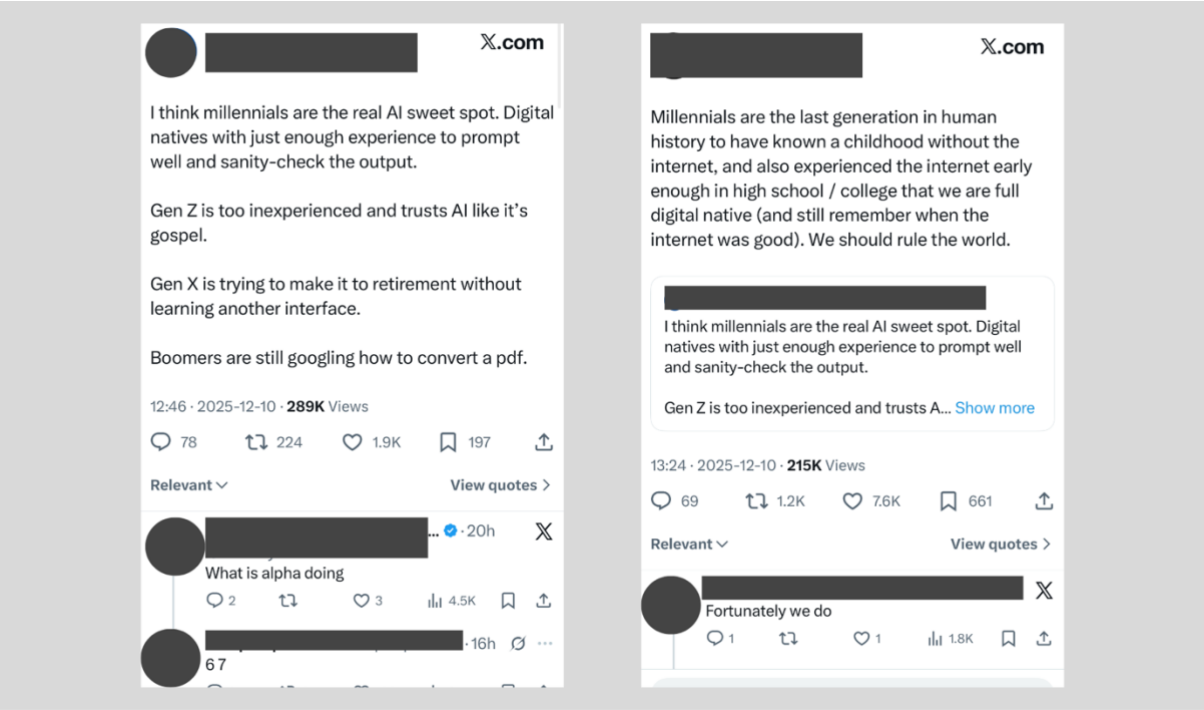


Figure 5. Posts from X/Twitter (January–April 2026), collected through netnographic observation. Display names, handles, and profile photos have been blurred to protect user privacy.

4.5 Synthesis

The netnographic observation surfaced four analytically coherent themes: the normalisation of quantified self-performance; an emerging and increasingly vocal counter-discourse of fatigue and critique; the degradation of felt community and trust; regulatory and values-based pressure on the dominant platform model; and a generational self-positioning as a generation equipped to recognise and contest the shift. These themes do not stand alone — they map closely onto what participants described in interviews. The following chapter presents those interview findings before Chapter 6 brings both sources together in a unified analytical frame.

CHAPTER 05

Interviews

5.1 Overview

Nine semi-structured interviews were conducted between October 2025 and January 2026 with participants selected through purposive sampling to capture a range of relationships to content culture. The sample comprised five men and four women, ranging in age from their mid-twenties to early forties, with the majority in their thirties. Participants were based across six countries — Canada, Nigeria, the United States, the United Kingdom, Spain, and Belgium — and brought professional backgrounds spanning business strategy, finance, risk management, supply chain management, communications, and cultural research. The sample was designed to include the full spectrum of platform engagement: active content creators, predominantly passive or "ghost" users, and those who engage primarily in professional contexts.

Across these conversations, a consistent set of themes emerged: the experience of performance pressure, the negotiation of identity and authenticity online, the felt but opaque influence of algorithmic systems, and a widespread ambivalence about participation that persisted alongside continued use. What was most striking was not hostility toward platforms but a more complex fatigue — an articulateness about the costs of participation coexisting with an inability or unwillingness to leave.

PHASE 02

DEFINE

Understanding the System

CHAPTER 06

System Analysis

Chapter 6 presents the analytical findings of this study, drawing on data from nine semi-structured interviews to examine how everyday users experience content culture across social media platforms. The analysis is organised into four interconnected sections, each employing a distinct analytical method: thematic analysis (Section 6.1), stakeholder analysis (Section 6.2), Causal Layered Analysis (Section 6.3), and systems mapping (Section 6.4). Together, these methods provide a multi-layered account of the content culture, moving from individual experiences through systemic structures to the cultural narratives that sustain them.

These sections are designed to be read in dialogue with one another. Each analytical lens illuminates a different dimension of content culture—from how it is lived, to how it is structured, to the worldviews and metaphors that anchor it. The chapter concludes with a synthesis that identifies core tensions and recurring dynamics, establishing the analytical foundation for the foresight work presented in Chapter 7.

6.1 Thematic Analysis: Everyday Experiences of Content Culture

This section presents the key themes emerging from the analysis of nine semi-structured interviews. Using an affinity mapping approach, participant responses were coded and clustered to identify recurring patterns, tensions, and shared experiences. While individual relationships with social media varied, participants consistently described navigating an environment that is increasingly structured, pervasive, and difficult to disengage from.

The analysis specifically examines how participants experience shifts in self-expression, the pressures shaping participation, and the role of structural and technological forces—including algorithms, monetization, and generative AI—in transforming everyday content practices.

Rather than a singular or uniform experience, content culture emerges as a dynamic system in which users simultaneously benefit from, contribute to, and feel constrained by platform dynamics. The themes below reflect this complexity, highlighting shifts in how social media is experienced, the pressures associated with participation, and the structural forces shaping behaviour.

From Expression to Performance

Across interviews, participants described a clear shift in the nature of social media—from casual self-expression to more curated, performative engagement.

Early experiences of social media were often framed as spontaneous and socially grounded. Over time, however, participants became increasingly aware of implicit expectations around how content should be presented. One participant articulated this transition directly: "It's self-expression, but it moves into... performance and... showing off." Another, P9, described the shift in starker terms: "It's almost like 'dance monkey'. Like you have to go, you have to show." These accounts suggest that the impulse to share has not disappeared but has been refracted through a lens of audience awareness and self-presentation. This dynamic resonates with Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework, in which social life is understood as performance—a logic that extends with particular force into digital environments where frontstage presentation is constant, persistent, and visible to merged audiences (boyd, 2014).

Others echoed this discomfort, describing platforms such as Instagram as requiring a level of "curation and polishing" that made participation feel effortful rather than natural. These perceptions contributed to reduced posting, heightened self-consciousness, and a growing sense that content must meet certain standards to be worth sharing.

Participants also linked this shift to broader structural changes within platforms—particularly the rise of monetization and the visibility of influencer practices. As content creation becomes tied to brand partnerships, audience growth, and economic opportunity, it is increasingly framed as a form of labour rather than casual participation. In this context, content is not only shared but produced—strategically, intentionally, and with awareness of audience reception. This transformation echoes what Marwick (2013) describes as the diffusion of self-branding norms, in which everyday users adopt practices once associated with professional identity management as a mode of networked sociality.

Together, these dynamics suggest that the shift from expression to performance is not simply cultural, but structurally reinforced through platform design, monetization pathways, and evolving norms of visibility.

Performing for Visibility: Pressure, Obligation, and Professional Presence

Building on this shift, participants described a growing sense that content creation is not only performative, but increasingly expected—particularly in professional contexts.

Several participants noted that maintaining an online presence, especially on platforms such as LinkedIn, is perceived as necessary for career visibility and opportunity. One participant, P6, captured this plainly: "I feel that in today's world, you can't be absent from any platforms. If you want to get new business... it's like out of obligation that I'm curating my LinkedIn." Another, P9, described the expectation to share content publicly as "a bit oppressive"—and "a bit fake," given the pressure to construct a professional persona that may not reflect one's actual self.

At the same time, participants acknowledged that participation is often tied to employability and professional relevance, creating a tension between personal preference and perceived necessity. As P9 explained, maintaining visibility on LinkedIn now requires more than a passive profile: you "basically need to... actually be actively creating and sharing content"—a threshold many described feeling unprepared or unwilling to meet, yet unable to ignore. Duffy (2017) frames such participation as aspirational labour—creative and expressive work undertaken in anticipation of future recognition or economic return. Where visibility is tied to professional opportunity, even reluctant participation takes on the character of labour, with users managing presence, tone, and output in ways that mirror practices once confined to professional creators (Abidin, 2016).

Reconfiguring Interaction: The Migration of Social and Professional Life Online

Participants' accounts suggest a fundamental shift in how interaction is structured across online and offline contexts.

Some noted that their engagement with platforms increases during periods of reduced offline activity, while decreasing when their offline lives are more active or fulfilling. At the same time, others described being required to engage online precisely because professional opportunities and networks are increasingly mediated through these platforms—indicating that the online-offline tradeoff was not simply a matter of substitution.

Instead, participants highlighted how social and professional interaction has increasingly migrated online. In professional contexts, individuals described needing to establish and maintain a presence on platforms such as LinkedIn in order to access opportunities, networks, and visibility—activities that were previously facilitated through in-person interactions.

This shift also extends to everyday social life. While not always explicitly articulated by participants, broader discussions on digital life highlight how even in situations of physical co-presence, attention is often

directed toward digital devices, with interaction occurring through or alongside online platforms. In this sense, offline spaces can become organised around digital engagement (Raza, 2025).

These accounts suggest that online participation does not merely replace offline activity, but reconfigures it. Interaction is no longer anchored primarily in physical co-presence, but is increasingly mediated through platforms that shape where, how, and with whom engagement occurs.

Active Consumption and the Expanding Function of Platforms

While participants widely acknowledged the pressure to create content, most did not identify as active creators. Instead, they described themselves as consistent consumers who engage with platforms regularly but contribute minimally to content production.

Several participants used the term "ghost user" to describe their relationship with platforms. As P2 put it: "I don't post content, I don't engage with content... I'm just more of like a ghost user." Others reported similar patterns of frequent use paired with limited content creation, while still noting that maintaining a passive presence requires its own form of effort.

However, this consumption was not passive in a simplistic sense. Participants described using platforms for a range of functions beyond entertainment, including information-seeking, decision-making, and learning. P3 described using TikTok as a direct substitute for traditional search: "I use it like a search engine now—if I want to look for restaurants in downtown Toronto... that's my go-to instead of going to Google." Another highlighted TikTok's role in expanding awareness and exposing users to perspectives beyond their immediate environment.

This expansion—from social interaction to education, discovery, and professional navigation—positions social media as an increasingly integral part of everyday life. As platforms absorb these functions, they become infrastructural in a deeper sense — not simply convenient, but structurally difficult to exit.

For several participants who had moved countries, platforms served a further and distinctly different function: maintaining relationships that geography had made harder to sustain. One participant described posting a story and finding herself in a full conversation with a friend in India that "wouldn't have happened otherwise." Another described Twitter as a tool for staying connected to events and conversations in Ghana. This diaspora function — platforms as infrastructure for cross-distance community maintenance — complicates a reading of social media as purely extractive or performative. For these participants, the platform still meaningfully delivers connection, even as the broader system exerts the performance pressures described throughout this chapter.

Platform as Infrastructure: The Inescapability of Participation

Participants also described a broader shift in how social media is positioned within everyday life—from an optional tool to an embedded system that is difficult to avoid.

P9 captured this shift with particular clarity: "It feels like the world's operating system. It's not so much a personal relationship I have with it... it is unavoidable." This framing was accompanied by a recognition of dissonance between values and behaviour: individuals may be aware of negative impacts, yet continue to engage due to the perceived necessity of participation.

Participants described this tension as a conflict between rational awareness and emotional or habitual engagement, driven in part by platform design and the desire to remain connected, informed, and relevant. As platforms increasingly mediate access to information, opportunities, and social interaction, opting out becomes not simply a personal decision but one with potential social and professional consequences.

Algorithmic Authority and the Displacement of User Judgement

A central theme emerging from the analysis is the shifting locus of control over what users see and engage with. While following accounts suggests an intentional act of selection, participants' experiences indicate that this choice is increasingly mediated—and at times overridden—by algorithmic systems.

Participants described feeds populated not only by content from accounts they chose to follow, but also by recommended, promoted, and prioritized posts. P9 noted an unsettling dimension to this: "It's kind of scary how the algorithm knows what you're watching." And more directly: "Our attention is a form of currency nowadays... that's what algorithms are designed to do—they want to grab your attention and maximize the time you spend on their app."

These observations point to more than a technical adjustment; they signal a reconfiguration of authority. Rather than simply assisting users in filtering content, platforms actively redefine what is relevant and visible. Implicit in this process is an assumption that users' own judgment is insufficient—that platforms are better positioned to determine what users should see.

As a result, visibility becomes something to be competed for rather than assumed, encouraging users to produce content that aligns with algorithmic preferences. In this context, users are not only navigating content, but operating within a system that partially displaces their ability to determine what they encounter. Bucher (2012) describes this as the "threat of invisibility"—an algorithmic logic that compels users to adapt behaviour in response to opaque ranking systems. These adaptations often take the form of

what DeVito et al. (2017) call “folk theories”: informal beliefs about how algorithms operate that shape decisions about what, when, and how to post. In this way, algorithmic authority does not only curate content but disciplines content production itself (Cotter, 2019).

This informal reasoning was also evident in netnographic observation (Figure 2), where users openly speculated about platform logic and its effects on their content—demonstrating how folk theories circulate within the very systems they attempt to explain.

Diffusion of Responsibility Under Conditions of Benefit

Closely linked to this sense of embeddedness is a diffusion of responsibility across the platform ecosystem. Participants implicitly identified multiple actors—including users, creators, platforms, and institutions—as both contributors to and beneficiaries of content culture.

One participant, P2, described this dynamic with particular bluntness, likening social media to a public toilet where "nobody cleans up, people just come and just dump rubbish. Everybody just dumps there." The image is precise: a shared infrastructure that everyone uses, that everyone contributes to degrading, and that no one takes responsibility for maintaining. It captures not only the volume and noise of content culture, but the structural condition underneath it — a system in which collective participation produces collective harm, while accountability remains diffused.

P2 further articulated this tension in terms of unintended consequence: “Now you’ve created a monster,”—a phrase that captures how a system built around connection and expression has evolved into something that feels difficult to govern or redirect. Another, P6, noted that while many actors derive value from the system, the principal beneficiaries remain those at the centre of it: “the ones who benefit the most are the ones who are selling our data.”

This dual positioning complicates notions of accountability. Rather than a clear distinction between actors responsible for harm and those affected by it, participants described a system in which individuals are both participants and subjects. As a result, users experience a form of constrained agency: they actively engage with platforms while simultaneously feeling limited in their ability to influence or exit the system. This dynamic reinforces the persistence of content culture, as responsibility is distributed across actors who are each, in different ways, embedded within and dependent on it.

AI and the Intensification of Content Culture

Generative AI emerged across interviews as a significant, though unevenly interpreted, development within content culture. Participants expressed a range of perspectives, reflecting both acceptance and concern.

Some participants viewed AI as a practical tool for efficiency. As P2 put it, drawing an analogy to having support staff: "If I have an assistant that helps me, why can't AI do that? I don't have an issue with using AI to post on social media." However, others expressed concern about its broader implications, noting that AI-generated content can feel repetitive and contribute to a perceived sameness in online discourse.

Participants also highlighted a loss of emotional resonance, explaining that knowing content is AI-generated can reduce its impact, even when the content itself appears compelling. In addition, several described increasing difficulty in distinguishing between authentic and AI-generated content, contributing to uncertainty and skepticism. Concerns around trust were particularly pronounced, with some participants questioning the reliability of AI-generated outputs and noting that widespread disclaimers about potential inaccuracies undermine confidence in the content itself.

In this sense, AI does not fundamentally transform content culture, but intensifies its existing dynamics—amplifying tensions between efficiency and authenticity, scale and meaning, and accessibility and trust.

These thematic findings describe how content culture is experienced at the individual level—as pressure, obligation, and constrained agency. To understand how these experiences are produced and sustained, however, it is necessary to examine the actors and incentive structures that constitute the system. The following section takes up this question through a stakeholder analysis.

6.2 Stakeholder Analysis: Actors and Incentives in Content Culture

Overview of the Stakeholder Ecosystem

Building on the thematic findings presented in Section 6.1, this section identifies and analyses the key stakeholders shaping and sustaining content culture. While participants' experiences provide insight into how content culture is lived and perceived, a stakeholder lens reveals how it is structured through the interactions, incentives, and dependencies of multiple actors operating within the platform ecosystem.

Content culture does not emerge from the actions of any single group. Rather, it is produced and maintained through the interdependent activities of platform companies, users, creators, advertisers,

employers, and a broader ecosystem of supporting actors. Each stakeholder both contributes to and benefits from the system, often in ways that reinforce its continued expansion.

These stakeholders operate across multiple layers—technological, economic, social, and institutional—and their incentives frequently converge around visibility, engagement, and growth. At the same time, tensions emerge within and between groups, particularly where participation is experienced as both beneficial and constraining. The sections below outline the primary stakeholder groups identified through the analysis, along with their roles, incentives, and points of tension within the system.

Figure 6 below maps each stakeholder group across two dimensions: the degree of power or influence they hold over the system, and the degree to which the system impacts them. The resulting distribution reveals a core asymmetry: the actors most affected by content culture—everyday users and content creators—are those with the least structural power to change it, while the actors with the greatest power—platform companies and advertisers—are also those least subjected to its pressures.

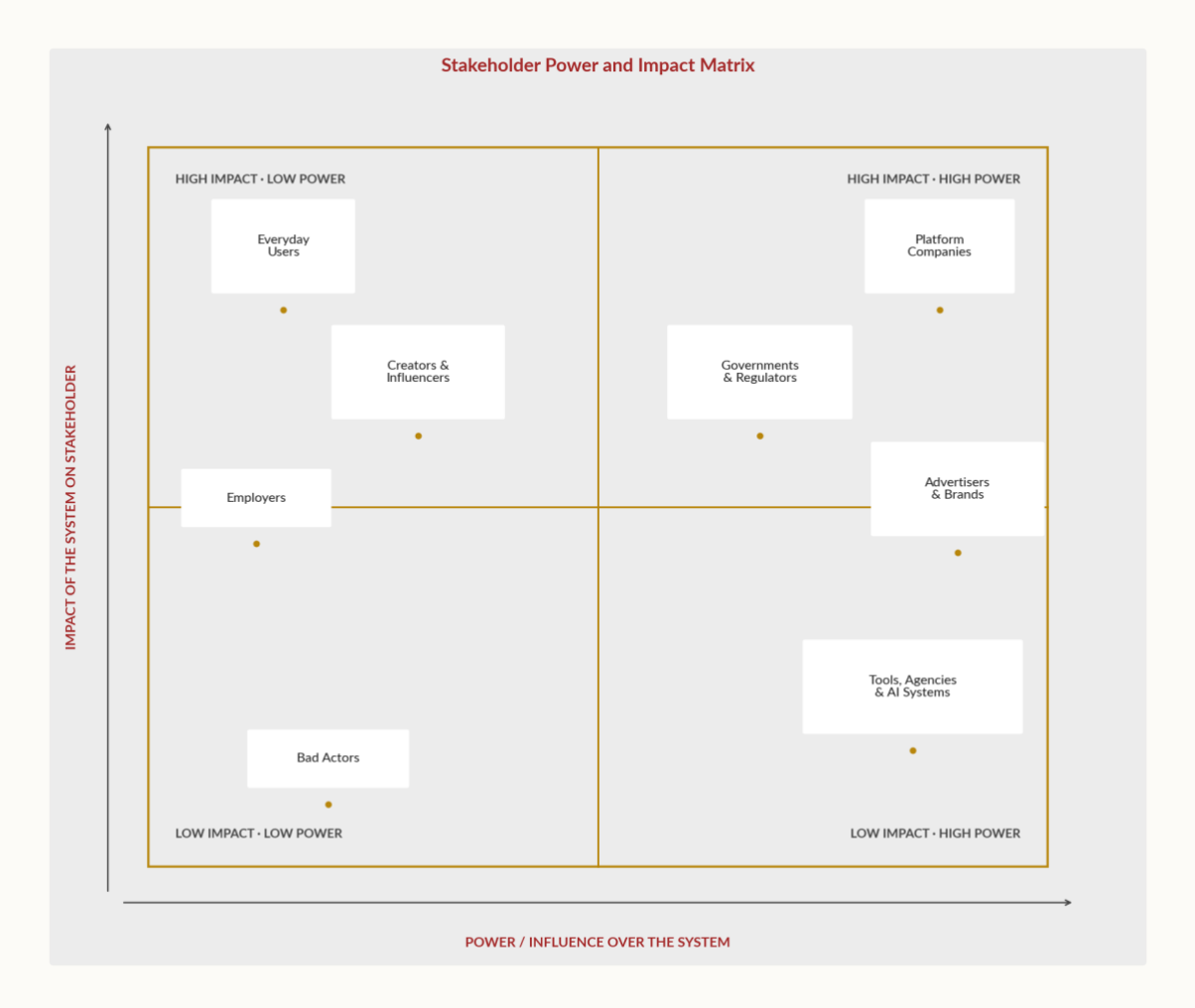


Figure 6. Stakeholder Power and Impact Matrix. Mapping of key actors in the content culture ecosystem by degree of influence over the system (x-axis) and degree to which the system impacts the stakeholder (y-axis).

Key Stakeholder Groups

Everyday Users (Consumers, Contributors, and Reluctant Participants)

Everyday users represent the largest and most diverse stakeholder group within content culture. While often framed as passive consumers, findings from this study suggest a more complex role, in which users actively sustain the system through both attention and participation.

Role in the system: Users consume content, generate engagement (likes, comments, shares), and—at times—produce content themselves. Even those who do not actively post contribute through attention, which is central to platform value creation.

Incentives and benefits: Participants identified a range of benefits associated with platform use, including entertainment, connection, education, and access to information. Platforms were also described as tools for discovery, professional awareness, and exposure to diverse perspectives. In addition, participation enables the accumulation of social capital, including visibility, recognition, and status within both personal and professional networks.

Tensions: Despite these benefits, users frequently experience tension between participation and resistance. Many described pressure to maintain visibility, particularly in professional contexts, while simultaneously expressing discomfort with performative norms. This results in a form of constrained agency, where users continue to engage with platforms despite recognizing potential harms.

Content Creators and Influencers

Content creators and influencers occupy a highly visible role within the ecosystem, producing the content that drives engagement and sustains platform activity.

Role in the system: Creators generate and distribute content designed to attract attention, build audiences, and maintain engagement. Their output populates feeds, shapes trends, and influences norms around content production.

Incentives and benefits: Creators may derive economic benefits through monetization pathways such as brand partnerships, sponsorships, and platform-based revenue models. In addition to financial incentives, creators gain visibility, social capital, and professional opportunities.

Tensions: While often positioned as beneficiaries, creators are also subject to significant pressures. Maintaining visibility requires consistent output, responsiveness to platform trends, and alignment with

engagement-driven metrics. As a result, creative expression is often shaped by performance expectations and algorithmic visibility constraints. Duffy (2017) describes such work as aspirational labour, noting that creators invest significant time and emotional resources in the hope of future economic or social reward. Abidin (2016) further identifies the ongoing effort required to maintain an online persona as visibility labour—creative and emotional work that is often invisible, contingent, and unevenly compensated.

Platform Companies

Platform companies function as the central organising actors within content culture, designing and governing the systems through which content is created, distributed, and consumed.

Role in the system: Platforms provide the infrastructure that enables content creation and interaction, while determining how content is surfaced, prioritized, and monetized. Through algorithmic curation, platforms shape what users see, how long they engage, and which content gains visibility.

Incentives and benefits: Platform companies are primarily driven by engagement and growth. Increased user activity generates data and advertising revenue, reinforcing business models centered on attention capture and retention.

Tensions: While platforms often position themselves as neutral intermediaries, their design choices actively shape user behaviour and content norms. This creates tension between user autonomy and platform control, particularly where algorithmic systems override user preferences and encourage performative or optimised behaviour. As Gillespie (2010) argues, platforms adopt a rhetoric of neutrality—positioning themselves as open infrastructures for expression—while actively structuring what becomes visible through moderation systems and ranking algorithms.

Advertisers and Brands

Advertisers and brands play a critical role in sustaining the economic model of content culture, leveraging platforms to reach targeted audiences.

Role in the system: Brands produce and sponsor content, often collaborating with creators to integrate marketing into platform-native formats. Their presence contributes to the blending of commercial and personal content within user feeds.

Incentives and benefits: Platforms offer advertisers access to highly targeted audiences, enabling efficient and measurable marketing strategies. Influencer partnerships allow brands to embed messaging within content perceived as authentic or relatable.

Tensions: The integration of advertising into everyday content blurs distinctions between authenticity and promotion. Participants described varying degrees of trust in branded content, often relying on engagement signals or perceived transparency to assess credibility.

Employers and Professional Institutions

Employers and professional institutions represent a key stakeholder group extending platform dynamics into the labour market.

Role in the system: Employers encourage, incentivize, or implicitly require employees to maintain a visible online presence, particularly on professional platforms. This may include sharing content, engaging with company messaging, or building personal brands aligned with organizational goals.

Incentives and benefits: Organizations benefit from increased visibility, brand reach, and perceived thought leadership, while individuals may gain access to professional opportunities, recognition, and network expansion.

Tensions: Participants frequently described discomfort with these expectations, particularly where personal and professional boundaries become blurred. The expectation to produce content as part of professional life introduces a new form of labour, where visibility becomes tied to employability and career progression. In this sense, platform participation extends beyond voluntary engagement into the domain of economic necessity.

Adjacent Ecosystem (Tools, Agencies, and AI Systems)

Content culture is supported by an expanding ecosystem of tools and services, including content creation platforms, analytics tools, scheduling software, and generative AI systems.

Role in the system: These actors facilitate and optimize content production, enabling users and organizations to create, manage, and distribute content more efficiently.

Incentives and benefits: The growth of content culture drives demand for tools that streamline production and enhance performance. Generative AI, in particular, lowers the barrier to content creation and enables faster, more scalable output.

Tensions: While these tools increase efficiency, they may also contribute to homogenization and reduced originality, as noted by participants. The ease of content generation can intensify expectations around frequency and output, reinforcing existing pressures within the system.

Bad Actors and Malicious Participants

Bad actors—including scammers, bots, and misinformation agents—represent a critical but often overlooked component of the content ecosystem.

Role in the system: These actors exploit platform dynamics to gain visibility, manipulate engagement, and extract value from users.

Incentives and benefits: Bad actors benefit from the same mechanisms that support legitimate participation, including algorithmic amplification, large audience reach, and low barriers to entry.

Tensions: While often framed as external threats, these actors are enabled by the structural conditions of the system itself. The same dynamics that reward engagement and scale also create opportunities for exploitation. Their presence contributes to declining trust, increased skepticism, and heightened concerns about authenticity and credibility.

Governments and Regulators

Governments and regulatory bodies represent structural actors that seek to shape and constrain platform behaviour.

Role in the system: These actors develop policies related to data privacy, content moderation, competition, and emerging technologies such as AI.

Incentives and benefits: Governments are motivated by public safety, economic stability, and the need to balance innovation with accountability.

Tensions: Although not frequently discussed by participants, the role of governments is increasingly visible in broader policy developments. For example, recent policy shifts in the United States have required visa applicants to submit social media profiles for review, with limited or absent platform presence treated as a potential risk signal. Such developments suggest that participation in platform ecosystems is becoming intertwined with institutional processes of evaluation and legitimacy.

At the same time, participants raised concerns about the relationship between governments and large technology firms, noting that financial and political ties may influence regulatory priorities. This introduces a tension between the responsibility of governments to protect public wellbeing and the economic incentives tied to supporting dominant platform actors. Additionally, regulatory efforts often lag behind technological change, and enforcement is further complicated by the global nature of platforms. As a result, governance mechanisms may struggle to effectively address the pace and scale of platform-driven dynamics.

Interdependencies and System Reinforcement

The stakeholders outlined above operate within an interconnected system characterized by mutual dependence and reinforcing dynamics.

Platforms rely on user engagement to generate value, while users depend on platforms for connection, information, and visibility. Creators produce content that sustains user attention, while advertisers fund the ecosystem by monetizing that attention. Employers extend platform logic into professional life, further normalizing participation, while adjacent tools and technologies increase the efficiency and scale of content production.

Importantly, boundaries between stakeholder roles are increasingly blurred. Users become creators, employees become content producers, and consumers engage in promotional behaviour through sharing and engagement. This fluidity reinforces participation across the system, as individuals occupy multiple roles simultaneously.

Actors often perceived as external to the system—such as scammers or malicious participants—are, in fact, enabled by the same structural conditions that support legitimate participation, including scale, visibility, and low barriers to entry. This further illustrates how the system's core logic extends beyond intended use, producing unintended but structurally consistent outcomes.

The stakeholder analysis reveals who is in the system and what they are doing. But it does not fully account for why the system holds together as powerfully as it does. To reach that level of explanation, it is necessary to go deeper: below the visible actors and interactions, into the worldviews, assumptions, and narratives that give the system its staying power. This is the work of Causal Layered Analysis.

6.3 Causal Layered Analysis (CLA)

Causal Layered Analysis (CLA), developed by Sohail Inayatullah (Inayatullah, 1998), is a futures-oriented method used to explore complex issues across multiple layers of meaning. Rather than focusing only on surface-level symptoms, CLA enables deeper analysis by examining systemic structures, underlying worldviews, and the myths or metaphors that shape collective understanding.

In the context of this study, CLA was used to unpack the phenomenon of content culture beyond observable behaviours — such as posting frequency or platform use — and to explore the deeper cultural, social, and ideological drivers that sustain it. This approach is particularly useful given the complexity of the

system under study, where individual actions are shaped by platform design, internalized norms, professional expectations, and broader cultural narratives around visibility and value.

The analysis draws on both secondary literature and primary interview data, allowing for a layered understanding that connects lived experience with systemic conditions.

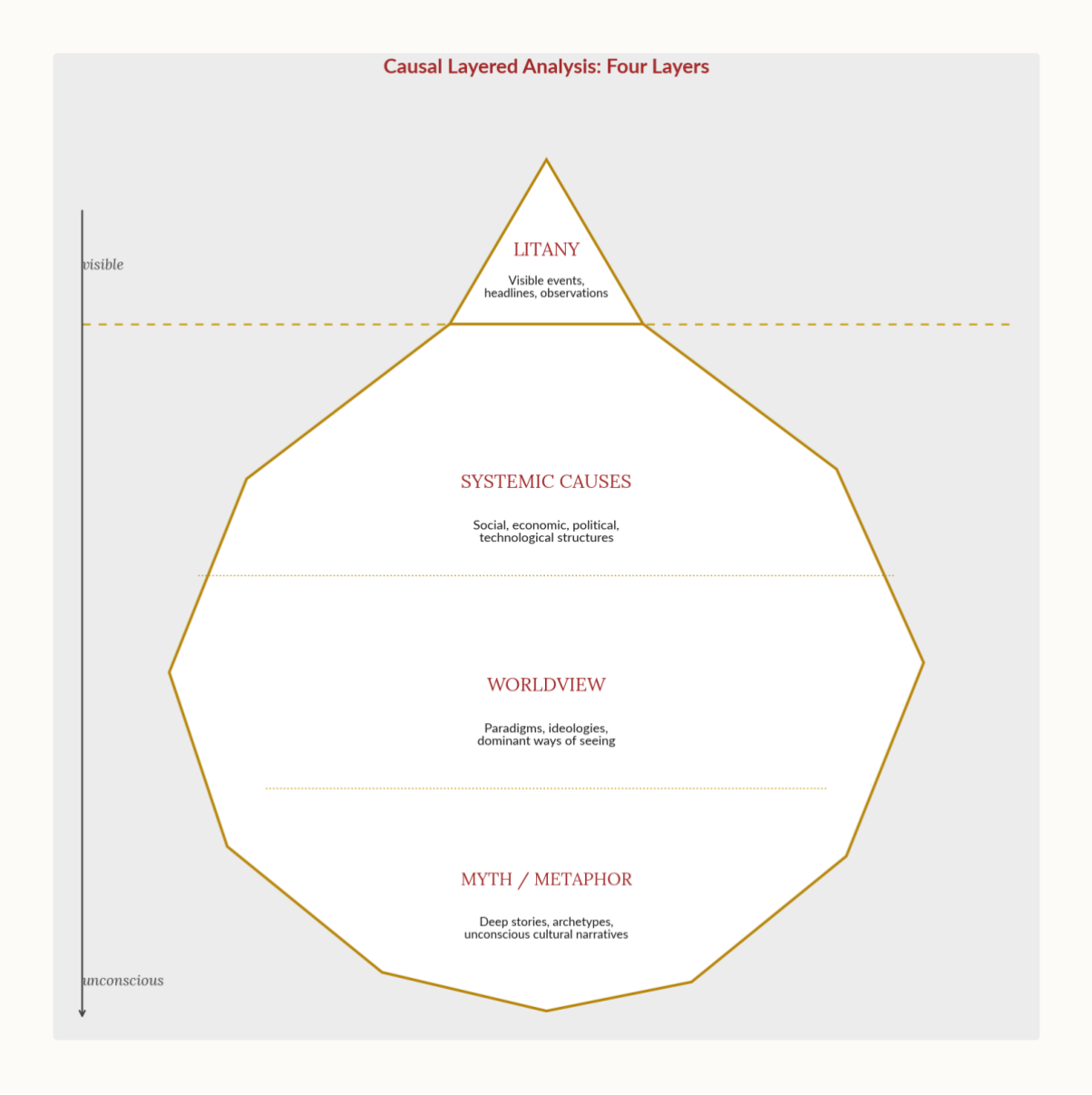


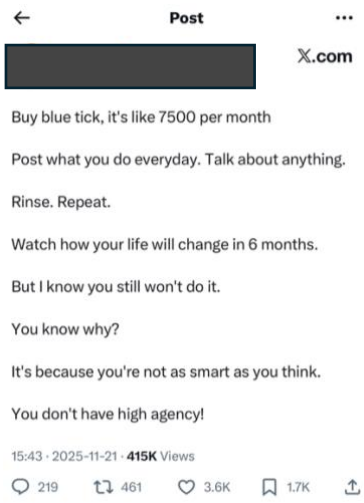
Figure 7. Causal Layered Analysis: Iceberg Model

CLA of Content Culture

Layer	Description	Evidence (Interviews & Literature)
Litany (Surface Level)	At the surface level, content culture is experienced as pressure to post, remain visible, and stay relevant. Users describe fatigue, obligation, and a growing sense of performativity and sameness in online spaces. Participation is often framed as unavoidable, even where it is experienced as uncomfortable or inauthentic. A recurring tension surfaces at this level: many participants described social media as "not real," yet continued to engage with and derive meaning from what they encountered — a contradiction that reflects the system's hold even on those who are critical of it. Participants also described an unsettling awareness of algorithmic surveillance: a sense of being watched and responded to in ways that feel intrusive despite being normalized.	Participants described the pressure in visceral terms: "it's kind of like dance monkey — like you have to go, you have to show." (P6) Several identified themselves as "ghost users" — present but not producing — while still feeling the weight of expectation. Others noted the discomfort of algorithmic familiarity: "it's kind of scary how the algorithm knows what you're watching."

Systemic Causes (Social/System Level)	Beneath these experiences are platform structures that incentivize visibility, consistency, and engagement. Algorithmic systems reward frequent posting and interaction, shaping not only what is seen but how individuals understand their own relevance within the system. Professional and economic structures increasingly tie opportunity — career advancement, network access, brand recognition — to online presence, making participation both a social norm and a strategic necessity. Critically, platforms are not simply tools that users may take or leave; they are engineered for sustained engagement. Variable reward schedules, notification design, and infinite scroll are borrowed directly from behavioural psychology, creating conditions in which disengagement is neurologically difficult rather than merely socially costly. Competition for visibility is structurally embedded: finite attention is distributed algorithmically rather than equitably, continuously raising the threshold for what counts as meaningful presence. Generative AI tools lower the barrier to content production while intensifying	Participants described platforms as the "world's operating system" — unavoidable infrastructure rather than optional tools. Others referenced algorithmic influence on their feeds and behaviour, and described LinkedIn as a space where visibility is tied directly to professional opportunity, making passive presence insufficient.

	this competition and accelerating the homogenization of output. In some contexts, institutional actors reinforce the centrality of digital presence — for example, through requirements that incorporate social media profiles into processes such as visa applications — extending platform logic into the domain of civic life.	

Worldview (Discourse/Ideology)	Three interlocking beliefs sustain content culture at the ideological level. The first is that **visibility equals value**: being seen functions as a proxy for credibility, relevance, and success. Within this logic, individuals are not simply users but potential creators, brands, or thought leaders. The corollary is significant: non-participation becomes legible as passivity or lack of ambition — transforming absence from a neutral choice into a perceived deficiency of character or self-investment. The second, and perhaps more foundational, is the capitalism-derived **commodification of expression**: a dominant cultural logic in which creativity, connection, and self-presentation must be converted into measurable, monetizable outputs to be considered worthwhile. Art for art's sake, or connection for connection's sake, has become culturally insufficient within this frame. This worldview is encoded in language itself: the widespread shift from "sharing," "expressing," or "communicating" to “producing content” is not incidental. It marks the moment when creative and social acts on platforms	Participants described social media as a "marketplace" where visibility and popularity operate as social currency. Others acknowledged the implicit expectation that presence must be active and productive to be professionally legible.  One participant articulated the competitive logic directly: framing vacation photos as tools for generating envy — content designed not to document experience, but to engineer the awareness of what others are missing.

	were reframed as industrial inputs — things to be produced, distributed, and consumed at scale. A third worldview operates alongside these: that **social life is a competitive arena**, and that visibility is not only a form of recognition but a form of social leverage. Within this frame, sharing is not simply expressive but strategic — a means of positioning oneself relative to others. Other people's attention is a resource to be captured; their emotional responses are outcomes to be managed.	

Myth/Metaphor (Deep Narrative)	At the deepest level, content culture is anchored in interlocking narratives that link visibility to existence and legitimacy. A dominant myth — if it is not seen, it does not count — positions visibility as a prerequisite for recognition, such that sharing becomes not only communication but a way of affirming identity and experience. The participant metaphors explored in 6.4.1 — circus, trampoline room, gymnasium, city, swampland — give this myth a spatial form: social media is a structured environment in which one must perform to be present, and in which not everyone gets the main ring. These metaphors are not incidental; they are the myth made legible through lived experience. It is worth noting, however, that the myth does not operate identically across cultural contexts. Several participants from collectivist cultural backgrounds — where visibility carries communal expectations, not only personal ones — described an added layer of pressure: posting visible markers of success could invite financial solicitation from one's network, making self-expression a social and economic risk as much as an opportunity. One participant described deliberately not posting attractive images	Participants expressed discomfort with the need to curate and present themselves publicly, while recognizing that visibility shapes how they are perceived professionally and socially. The "monster" description emerged in the context of reflecting on how platforms evolved from spaces of casual connection into something that felt difficult to govern or exit.

	of her apartment to avoid DMs asking for money; another described going “cold” on platforms after career success prompted unwanted outreach. For these participants, the myth of visibility is inflected by communal obligation in ways that Western-centric accounts of social media performance tend to overlook. Alongside the performance narrative runs a myth of unintended consequence. One participant's description of the system as having "become a monster" — something built for connection that evolved beyond the intentions of its creators and the influence of its participants — captures a deeper narrative of lost control. An additional narrative operates beneath the surface, concerning the erosion of the private self: when everything is potentially shareable, private experience begins to function as raw material awaiting transformation into content. The question of whether to post arrives before experience is fully processed, reordering the relationship between living and sharing. **The self is no longer the primary audience of its own experience.**	

	A fourth quieter but just as powerful narrative exists: if you can't beat them, join them. This is the myth of resignation, the cultural logic that keeps people participating not because they believe in the system, but because they have accepted that the cost of staying out is higher than the cost of going along. Unlike the aspiration myth, which pulls people toward visibility, this one simply pushes them to comply. It explains the ghost users, the reluctant posters, the people who describe social media as a "monster" and then open the app anyway.	

Table 1. Causal Layered Analysis of Content Culture

Interpretation

Viewed through a CLA lens, content culture reveals itself not simply as a set of behaviours, but as a deeply embedded system of meaning — one sustained as much by what people believe as by what platforms require.

At the surface level, individuals experience pressure, fatigue, and a persistent sense that participation is both necessary and uncomfortable. The tension many participants described — knowing that social media is constructed or "not real," yet continuing to engage with it as meaningful — is not a failure of critical awareness. It is the predictable outcome of a system whose structural requirements and cultural narratives are powerful enough to shape behaviour even among those who see through them.

These experiences are produced by systemic conditions: platforms engineered for sustained engagement through variable reward schedules and notification design; professional cultures that tie opportunity to visibility; and economic structures that continuously extract value from user behaviour, regardless of what users intend when they participate. The system is difficult to disengage from not only because of social and professional stakes, but because disengagement is neurologically resisted by design.

These structures, however, do not sustain themselves through architecture alone. They are held in place by worldviews that make them feel natural and inevitable. Two beliefs in particular anchor the system, both identified through the CLA analysis above The first — that visibility equals value — positions being seen as a proxy for credibility and legitimacy, and transforms absence into a legible social failing. The second — that expression and connection must justify themselves through measurable, monetizable outputs — reflects a commodification logic in which creativity and social life become inputs to a value extraction process.

A third worldview complicates the picture of users as passive subjects of these pressures. The deliberate cultivation of envy — posting not simply to share but to engineer others' awareness of what they are missing — reveals that participants are also active strategists within the system. Visibility is not only sought for recognition; it is wielded as social leverage. This dimension of content culture, in which attention is a resource to be captured and emotional responses are outcomes to be managed, sits uneasily alongside narratives of authentic self-expression.

At the deepest level, these dynamics are anchored in myths that link visibility to existence itself. To be seen is to count; to be absent is to risk irrelevance. The CLA also surfaces a less visible casualty of the system's logic: private experience. When everything is potentially shareable, the private self becomes raw material, and the impulse to document intrudes before experience is fully lived. Running alongside this aspiration myth is its mirror: if you can’t beat them, join them. This is the logic that sustains participation through resignation,

and it explains something the aspiration myth alone cannot: why people who see through the system, who know it is constructed and extractive, keep showing up anyway.

Content culture persists not simply because individuals choose to participate, but because structural incentives, internalized beliefs, and cultural narratives have aligned to make visibility both desirable and necessary, and to make disengagement feel not like freedom, but like disappearance.

The CLA moves through layers of increasing depth — from what can be observed, to what is structurally produced, to what is culturally assumed. The myths and metaphors at the deepest layer do not remain abstract; they surface concretely in the language and images participants reached for when asked to describe the system they inhabit. The following section examines these metaphors directly, tracing how they illuminate the system's dynamics and provide the generative foundation for the system maps that follow.

6.4 Visualizing the System

Social Media as a Place: Participant Metaphors

Across interviews, participants were asked to describe social media as a "place." This prompt elicited a range of metaphorical responses that moved beyond functional descriptions of platforms as tools or technologies, instead framing them as environments with distinct structures, dynamics, and emotional qualities.

Participants described social media as a **circus**, a **trampoline room**, a **swampland**, a **big city**, a **middle school gymnasium**, a **party or event space**, a **homeless shelter or busy train station**, and an **unattended public toilet**, among others. While varied in form, these metaphors were not arbitrary. Each pointed to different aspects of how the system is experienced in practice.

The metaphor of a circus emphasized performance, spectacle, and the presence of both performers and observers. A trampoline room suggested amplification, where content and interactions are echoed, intensified, and difficult to escape. Descriptions such as a swampland or gymnasium highlighted messiness, lack of structure, and the challenge of navigating overlapping interactions. The city metaphor pointed to scale, diversity, and uneven experiences across different spaces, while party or event analogies emphasized visibility, social comparison, and the coexistence of multiple roles and personalities. A description of social media as a homeless shelter or busy train station—"full of people who are trying to belong and literally using that spot as a transit point, moving from one place to the other, trying to see what works and trying to see what will stick"—offered a different register entirely: not spectacle or chaos, but transience and searching, a

space of temporary habitation in which connection is sought but not guaranteed. A description of social media as an unattended public toilet — where "nobody cleans up, people just come and just dump rubbish. Everybody just dumps there" (P2)— offered the sharpest critique of the set. Unlike the circus or the city, which carry some ambivalence, this metaphor is unsparing: a shared space actively degraded by collective use, with no mechanism for maintenance and no actor willing to take responsibility for the mess left behind.

These metaphors suggest that social media is not experienced as a neutral medium, but as a structured environment that shapes behaviour. Common across descriptions were themes of performance, amplification, unpredictability, and uneven visibility. Importantly, participants' accounts also reflected a blurring of roles within this environment. Individuals may enter as observers, but are often drawn into participation, navigating shifting expectations around visibility and engagement.

Rather than converging on a single shared image, the diversity of metaphors points to the complex and multi-layered nature of the system itself. Social media is simultaneously a stage, a network, a marketplace of attention, and a space of interaction that is both enabling and constraining.

Among these, the metaphor of the circus — offered by P6 — emerged as particularly resonant, and is adopted here as an organizing frame for the analysis that follows. It captures the centrality of performance, the presence of distinct roles, the orchestration of attention, and the interplay between visible and invisible forms of control. For this reason, it serves as the primary framing for the system map that follows.

The Content Culture Circus

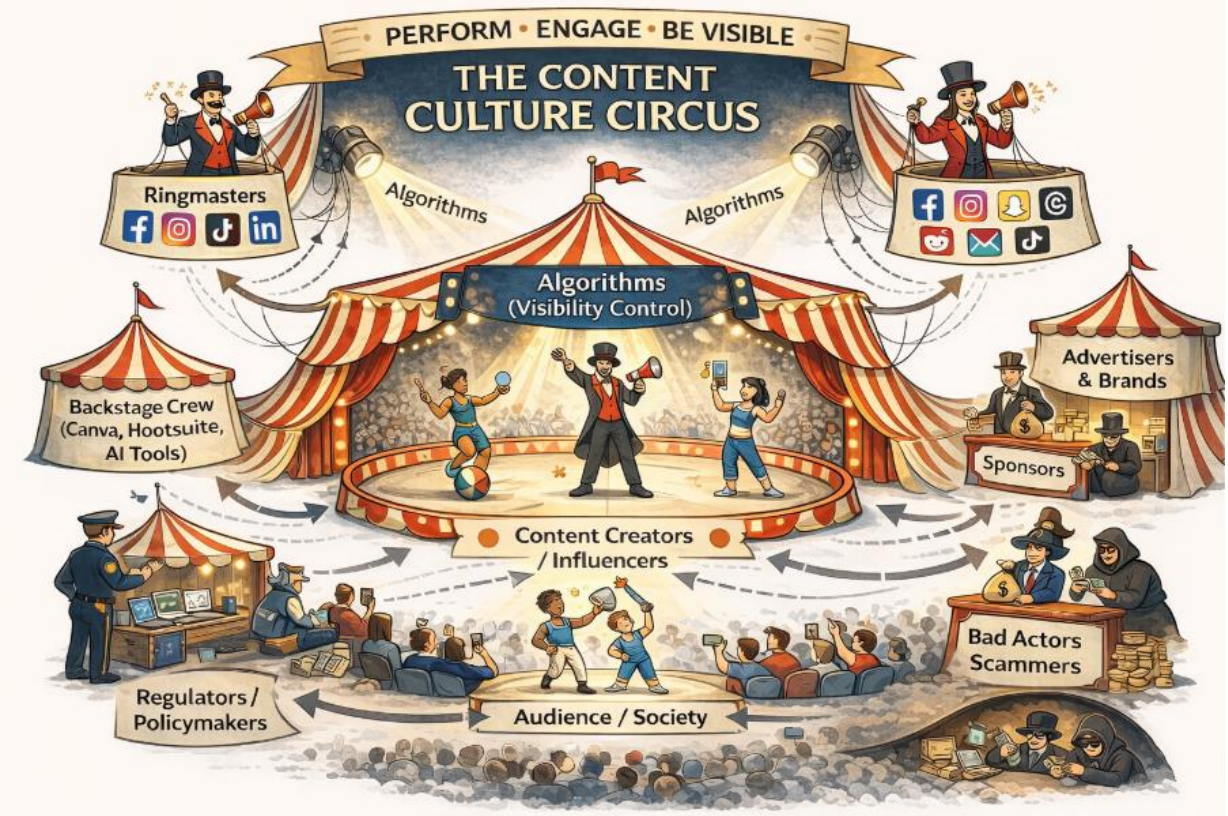


Figure 8. The "Content Culture Circus." Generated with ChatGPT.

The circus metaphor captures several key characteristics identified across participant accounts. It reflects the centrality of performance, where individuals engage in acts designed to attract attention and response. It also highlights the presence of directed visibility, where attention is unevenly distributed rather than neutral or organic. Finally, it points to a system composed of multiple roles and interactions, operating simultaneously within a shared environment.

Importantly, the metaphor also allows for a distinction between what is visible and what operates behind the scenes. While content creation and engagement are highly visible, the mechanisms that shape visibility—such as algorithmic curation and monetization structures—are less apparent, yet foundational to how the system functions.

Based on these characteristics, the system map presented in Figure 7 uses the circus as a structuring device to make these dynamics legible. The metaphor is not intended as a literal representation, but as an interpretive tool that translates complex interactions into a more accessible visual form.

The figure provides a holistic view of the ecosystem, illustrating how participation, visibility, and value are produced through interconnected processes rather than isolated actions. The specific actors and relationships within this system are examined in detail in the following section.

System Structure and Stakeholder Roles

The system map illustrates content culture as a network of interdependent actors, each occupying distinct yet in some cases overlapping roles within the broader ecosystem. While the circus metaphor provides a visual framing, the map itself reveals how stakeholder relationships and power dynamics shape participation and outcomes within the system.

At the centre of the system are **content creators and influencers**, represented as performers within the main ring. This positioning reflects the central role of content production and participation in sustaining the ecosystem. Importantly, the map does not distinguish sharply between "creators" and "users." Instead, it highlights a blurring of roles, where individuals who were once primarily observers increasingly engage in content creation, adopting performative behaviours in response to platform norms and expectations.

Overseeing the system are **platform companies**, represented as ringmasters. These actors structure the environment in which participation occurs—establishing the rules, interfaces, and incentive systems that shape user behaviour. Their influence is further extended through **algorithmic systems**, depicted in the map as spotlights and controlling mechanisms. These algorithms determine which content is amplified and which remains unseen, effectively shaping visibility, reach, and perceived relevance. As such, they function as a critical point of control within the system, despite operating largely outside of users' direct understanding.

Surrounding the central performers are **brands and advertisers**, represented as sponsors of the circus. These actors inject financial incentives into the system, rewarding visibility and engagement and influencing not only what types of content are produced but how content is framed and distributed. In parallel, a range of **adjacent industries and tools**—including content creation platforms, analytics services, and influencer management agencies—operate as backstage support, enabling content production at scale while reinforcing norms around optimization and performance.

At the base of the system are **audiences**, representing the broader public who consume, engage with, and circulate content. However, as reflected in the map, the distinction between audience and performer is increasingly unstable. Audience members actively shape the system through their engagement behaviours—

liking, sharing, and commenting—which in turn signal value to platform algorithms and influence what becomes visible.

The map also includes **bad actors**, who exploit system dynamics for personal gain, often through misleading or manipulative practices. Their presence highlights vulnerabilities within the system, particularly in relation to trust and visibility. Additionally, **governments and regulators** are positioned outside the immediate boundaries of the circus, reflecting their role as external actors attempting to influence or govern the system—though their distance from the core dynamics underscores the challenges of regulating a fast-moving, globally distributed digital environment.

Taken together, these roles reveal a system characterized by both **interdependence and asymmetry**. While all actors contribute to sustaining the ecosystem, they do so with differing levels of influence and control. Platforms and algorithms hold disproportionate power in shaping visibility, while users and creators adapt their behaviour within constraints they do not fully control. At the same time, the fluidity of roles—particularly between audience and performer—complicates clear distinctions between participation and influence.

This structural overview sets the stage for examining how these interactions give rise to recurring patterns of behaviour within the system, which are explored through feedback loops in the following section.

System Dynamics and Feedback Loops

While the system map illustrates the structure of the content culture ecosystem, its behaviour is shaped by a set of reinforcing feedback loops that sustain and intensify participation over time. These loops emerge through the interactions between actors, technologies, and incentives, producing patterns that are difficult to interrupt once established.

The feedback loops framework applied here draws on systems dynamics methodology (Meadows, 2008). The specific loops and their names are my analytical constructs, derived from the participant data, stakeholder analysis, and supporting literature.

A central dynamic is what I term the **performance pressure loop**. As content receives visibility and engagement, it is validated through metrics such as likes, views, and shares. These signals of recognition encourage continued participation, prompting individuals to post more frequently or more strategically. Over time, this contributes to a normalization of performance, where maintaining visibility becomes an expected mode of participation rather than an optional activity.

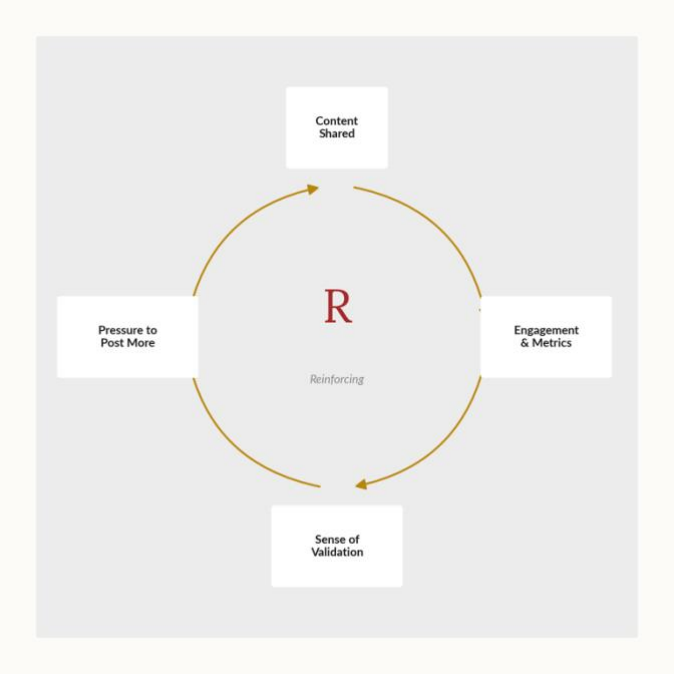


Figure 9. Performance Pressure Loop (R). Content sharing generates engagement metrics, which produce a sense of validation, which increases pressure to post more frequently or strategically.

Closely linked to this is what I call the **algorithmic amplification loop**. Content that generates higher engagement is prioritized and distributed more widely by platform algorithms, increasing its reach and influence. This visibility signals to other users what types of content are likely to succeed, encouraging imitation or adaptation. As similar forms of content are reproduced, patterns become reinforced, contributing to a narrowing of variation and the emergence of recognizable formats or trends—what participants described as a sense of repetition, where content begins to feel formulaic or predictable.

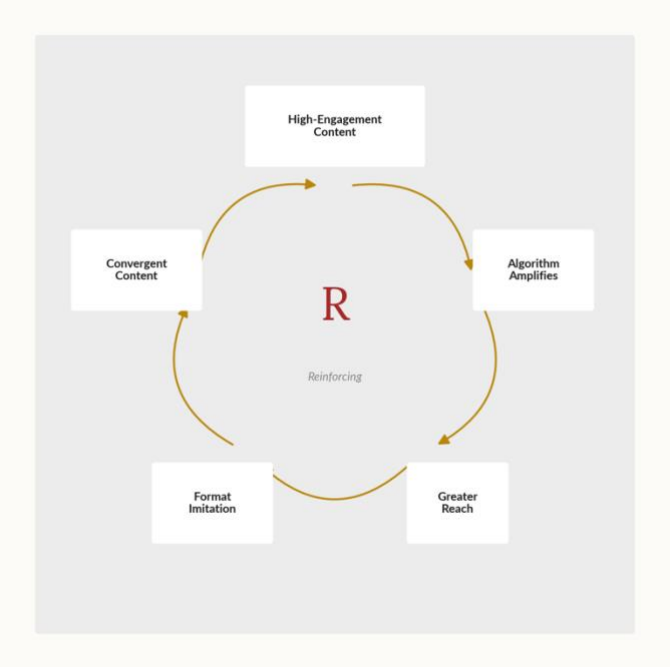


Figure 10. Algorithmic Amplification Loop (R). High-engagement content is amplified by platform algorithms, increasing reach and prompting others to imitate successful formats, producing increasingly convergent content.

A third reinforcing dynamic is what I call the **monetization loop**, driven by the relationship between attention and economic value. As engagement increases, content becomes more attractive to brands and advertisers, creating opportunities for sponsorship, partnerships, and financial gain. These incentives further encourage content production, often aligning it with marketable formats or brand expectations. As more actors enter the system with the aim of capturing attention, competition intensifies, raising the threshold for visibility and reinforcing the need for continued performance and optimization.

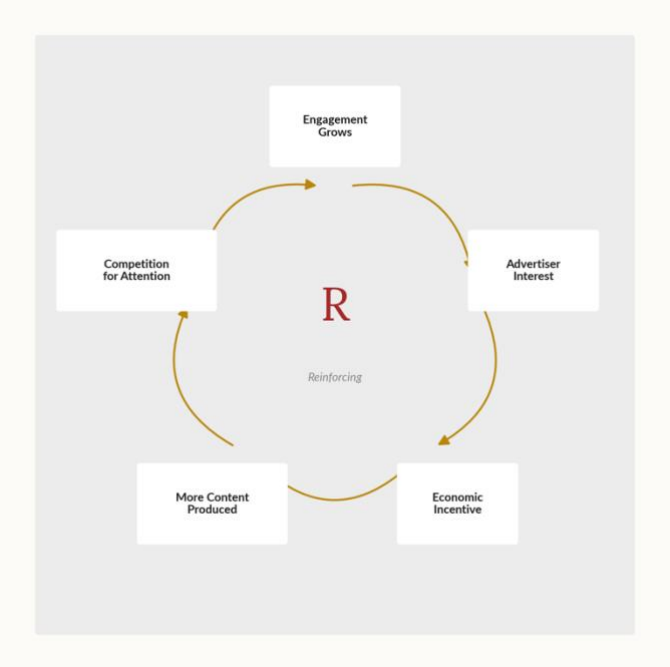


Figure 11. Monetisation Loop (R). Growing engagement attracts advertiser interest, generating economic incentives that drive more content production, intensifying competition for attention.

A fourth dynamic—this time a balancing loop—is what I call the **trust and authenticity erosion loop**. Creators and users build audience trust through authentic presence and genuine engagement. That trust becomes a monetisable asset: brands seek access to engaged, trusting audiences, and platforms benefit from the credibility that authentic creators lend to the environment. However, the act of monetising trust—through sponsored content, brand deals, or platform-incentivised posting—gradually compromises the authenticity that produced it. As audiences perceive content as increasingly commercial or strategic, trust erodes. This self-limiting quality distinguishes it from the reinforcing loops above: it does not accelerate indefinitely but depletes its own resource. Importantly, this loop activates whether or not a creator intentionally sought an audience. Everyday users who build followings through casual, genuine sharing can find themselves subject to the same dynamic the moment monetisation enters the picture.

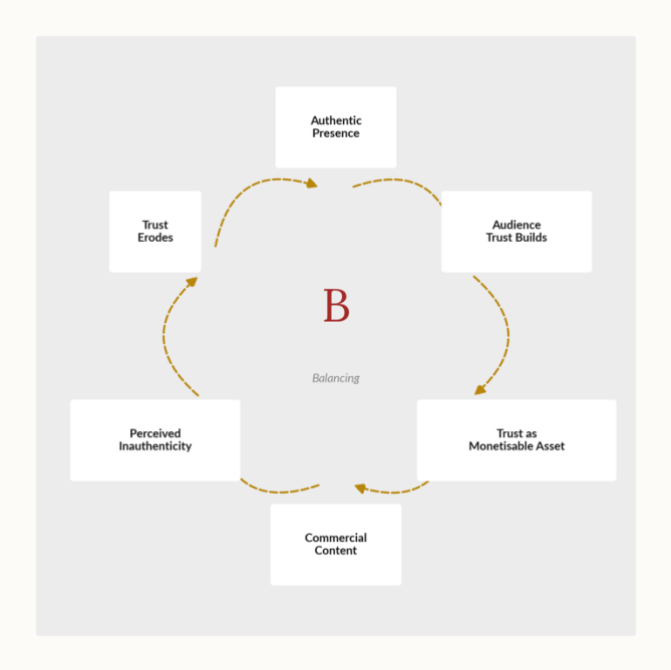


Figure 12. Trust & Authenticity Erosion Loop (B). Authentic presence builds audience trust, which becomes a monetisable asset. Commercial content, however, is perceived as inauthentic, eroding the trust that made monetisation possible in the first place.

Two further dynamics are worth noting, though they operate at a different scale. What I callthe **social comparison and escalating standards loop** is a reinforcing dynamic driven by visibility rather than algorithms alone. As users are exposed to increasingly polished or strategic content, the implicit standard for what is "worth sharing" rises. Users and creators adapt upward, producing more curated content, which raises the perceived bar further. Unlike the algorithmic amplification loop, this dynamic is socially driven—it operates through observation and internalization rather than platform ranking—but the effect is the same: a gradual convergence toward higher-effort, more performative participation.

What I call the **withdrawal and return loop** is a balancing dynamic that helps explain why individual acts of resistance rarely disrupt the system. As platform pressures accumulate, users periodically withdraw—deleting apps, taking breaks, or reducing posting frequency. Participants described periods of withdrawal, fatigue, or intentional distancing from platforms, often driven by dissatisfaction with the pressures of visibility or the perceived inauthenticity of content. However, these individual acts of resistance do not significantly disrupt the broader system, as the underlying loops continue to operate through other participants. Moreover, the professional, social, and informational costs of absence tend to build during periods of disengagement, generating anxiety that eventually brings users back. When they return, the

system is unchanged: the same pressures, the same loops, the same expectations. Withdrawal functions as a pressure valve rather than an exit, releasing tension without altering the underlying dynamics.

These loops do not operate independently; they intersect and compound one another. Even when participants recognise the pressures or limitations of the system, they remain embedded within dynamics that are difficult to exit or alter at an individual level.

Interpreting System Patterns

The dynamics identified in this system are not isolated. Rather, they reflect what Senge (1990) calls *system archetypes* — recurring structural patterns that produce predictable outcomes regardless of the specific actors involved or the context in which they operate. These archetypes offer a lens through which to better understand how and why system dynamics persist over time. Three are particularly visible in content culture.

In particular, the system exhibits characteristics of what Senge calls the **"Success to the Successful,"** archetype, where content that gains visibility is further amplified, reinforcing its dominance and shaping broader participation. This contributes to unequal visibility and the emergence of dominant content norms. At the same time, elements of his **"Tragedy of the Commons"** archetype are visible across two distinct shared resources. The first is audience attention: as more actors compete for finite engagement, the environment becomes saturated, reducing the distinctiveness and impact of individual contributions. The second, and perhaps more consequential, is trust. The authentic relationships between creators and their audiences—built gradually through genuine presence and sustained engagement—represent a shared resource that is progressively depleted through monetisation. Each sponsored post, brand deal, or platform-incentivised behaviour draws down a commons that no single actor replenishes, and that no platform has an incentive to protect. Once trust erodes, it cannot be quickly restored, making this a particularly costly form of collective depletion.

Most notably, the system reflects patterns consistent with Senge's **"Shifting the Burden,"** where responses to systemic pressures are redirected toward individual adaptation rather than structural change. Users are encouraged to manage their participation through self-regulation, while platforms introduce partial measures—such as monetization—to address critiques without fundamentally altering the underlying dynamics. These responses alleviate immediate pressures but leave core system structures intact.

Together, these archetypal patterns suggest that the persistence of content culture dynamics is not simply the result of individual behaviour, but of reinforcing structural tendencies within the system itself. The

following section examines how these dynamics manifest as observable outcomes and tensions in everyday participation, before turning to the leverage points where intervention is possible.

System Outcomes and Tensions

The system produces a set of outcomes that reflect how its dynamics play out in everyday life. Most consistently, participation has become normalized as expected rather than chosen — an implicit standard that many users described internalizing without recognizing it as externally driven. This compounds with the blurring of personal and professional identity: on platforms such as LinkedIn, and increasingly Instagram, individuals are simultaneously people, brands, and professionals, navigating decisions about what to share across contexts that were once distinct. Algorithmically amplified content narrows the range of what gets produced — as platforms reward formats that perform well, expression converges toward repeatable structures that Zulli and Zulli (2022) describe as "networked templates," a dynamic intensified by generative AI tools that accelerate aesthetic convergence while lowering the barrier to production (Brüns & Meißner, 2024). These pressures extend even to those who do not create: simply being present within the system exposes passive users to its expectations.

Underlying these outcomes are tensions that participants navigated consistently. The most central is the conflict between authenticity and optimization: the desire to share something genuine pulling against the awareness that visibility requires strategy. Closely related is the shift from connection to visibility as the primary purpose of participation — where early social media was described as relational and communal, current experiences centre on broadcasting and being seen. A third tension concerns autonomy: users perceive themselves as making independent choices, yet those choices are shaped by algorithmic systems they cannot fully see or understand, producing what participants described as a partial and uneasy awareness of constrained agency. These tensions do not resolve — they accumulate, producing the fatigue and ambivalence that runs through the thematic analysis.

Leverage Points in the System

Drawing on Meadows' (2008) framework, several leverage points are identifiable within the content culture system — locations where a relatively small shift in structure or rules could produce significant change in system behaviour.

The most accessible leverage points operate at the level of **information flows**. Platform algorithms determine what content reaches audiences and under what conditions. The design of these feedback signals — engagement metrics, visibility scores, reach statistics — shapes what individuals post and how they

understand their own value within the system. Restructuring what these flows measure and reward has the potential to alter participation behaviour at scale without requiring changes to individual behaviour.

A more structural leverage point lies in the **rules of the system**: the terms, incentive structures, and monetization models that platforms use to define participation. Current rules systematically reward volume, emotional intensity, and engagement over accuracy, depth, or wellbeing. Altering these rules — whether through regulatory pressure, platform redesign, or alternative economic models — would change the conditions under which individuals compete for visibility.

The deepest leverage point operates at the level of **goals and paradigm**: the assumptions driving the system that visibility equals value, that attention is the primary currency of social life, and that self-expression must be optimised for an audience. These assumptions are embedded in platform design, professional culture, and individual behaviour alike. Shifting them requires structural intervention and a cultural reimagining of what participation could mean. The design implications of these leverage points are explored in Chapter 7.

6.5 Synthesis

The analysis presented in this chapter has approached content culture from multiple methodological positions — not to produce redundancy, but because the system is multi-layered in ways that no single method can adequately capture. Each framework has illuminated a different dimension of the same underlying phenomenon.

The interview findings established the lived texture of the system: the performance pressures, the negotiated identities, and the exhaustion and ambivalence that characterise everyday participation. The stakeholder analysis revealed that this experience is not incidental but produced through the interactions of actors whose incentives are structurally misaligned — platforms optimizing for engagement, advertisers optimizing for reach, and individuals navigating expectations they did not create. The Causal Layered Analysis showed that these conditions are not merely behavioural or economic but culturally embedded, sustained by worldviews that equate visibility with legitimacy and by narratives that frame participation as both opportunity and obligation. The systems analysis made visible the mechanisms through which these dynamics reproduce themselves: reinforcing loops that intensify competition, archetypes that resist correction, and leverage points that indicate where the system is most sensitive to intervention.

What emerges from this analysis is a system that is not experienced as a system by those inside it. Participants feel individual pressures, individual choices, and individual fatigue — yet these are the consistent, patterned

outputs of a structure that is working as designed. The challenge is not that the system is broken, but that it is functioning in ways that serve some stakeholder interests at the expense of others, and in ways that are increasingly difficult to see clearly from within.

These findings do not on their own tell us what ought to change, or how. But they clarify what any meaningful intervention must contend with: a system embedded across social, professional, and cultural domains, sustained by reinforcing dynamics, and anchored in assumptions about value and visibility that operate largely beneath conscious awareness. Because the dysfunction is embedded at the level of myth and narrative — not just in policy failure or individual behaviour — it requires a different order of response. Technical interventions and regulatory mandates can modify surface conditions; they cannot, on their own, shift the stories people tell about what it means to be seen, or why participation feels like necessity rather than choice. Chapter 7 takes up these questions through a foresight lens, asking not merely how the existing system might be regulated or optimised, but what it would take to imagine and move toward alternatives grounded in fundamentally different assumptions.

PHASE 3

DEVELOP

Imagining Alternate Futures

CHAPTER 07

Futures of Content Culture

7.1 From Analysis to Imagination

The preceding chapter mapped content culture as it currently operates — its actors, incentive structures, feedback loops, deep myths, and points of potential intervention. That analysis revealed a system shaped by technology, economics, internalized beliefs, and cultural narratives: a worldview in which visibility has become synonymous with value, and participation a form of necessity rather than choice. Understanding how a system works is a prerequisite for imagining how it might be otherwise.

This chapter makes that turn. It applies futures thinking to the same terrain, asking why the system operates as it does and what other configurations are possible — and what conditions those futures would require.

Two complementary foresight methods structure this inquiry. The first is scenario building using Jim Dator's Four Futures framework (Dator, 2009), which provides a generative basis for exploring the full range of alternative trajectories for content culture. Rather than projecting a single path forward, Dator's framework acknowledges that complex systems can evolve in fundamentally different directions depending on the values, disruptions, and decisions that shape them. Applied here, it yields four distinct future worlds, each coherent in its own logic, each with different implications for how everyday digital participation is experienced.

The second method is backcasting, applied once a preferred future has been selected and articulated. Where Dator's framework opens the space of possibility, backcasting narrows the focus: beginning from the preferred future and working backward to the present, it identifies the conditions, shifts, and decisions that would need to occur for that future to become reachable. This retrospective orientation connects speculative imagination to practical insight, bridging the futures work of this chapter with the leverage points identified in Chapter 6.

The chapter proceeds as follows. Section 7.2 identifies the signals and drivers of change already detectable within the current system, drawing on participant accounts and the broader landscape of emerging practices. Section 7.3 applies Dator's Four Futures framework to content culture, developing four distinct scenarios. Section 7.4 selects and articulates the preferred future, grounded in participant voices. Section 7.5

applies backcasting to map the transition from the present toward that future. A closing synthesis bridges the futures work of this chapter to the recommendations that follow in Chapter 8.

7.2 Signals and Drivers of Change

Before constructing futures scenarios, it is worth examining the forces already pushing against the current arrangement — the signals and structural pressures suggesting the dominant equilibrium is under stress.

This section draws on two sources: participant accounts, which reveal how individuals are already responding to and imagining beyond the current platform environment; and broader structural developments in the regulatory and technological landscape that are reshaping the conditions under which digital participation operates.

Signals from Within: Practices of Resistance and Withdrawal

One of the most consistent patterns to emerge across interviews was the prevalence of deliberate disengagement — acts of withdrawal, friction, and boundary-setting that represent informal resistance to the pressures of the current system. While these behaviours are typically understood as personal coping strategies, they also function as signals: evidence that the system is generating enough friction that individuals are actively developing workarounds.

Several participants described repeatedly deleting social media applications from their devices, only to reinstall them later. One participant, P9, described this as a cyclical pattern — frustration building until the app is removed, followed eventually by return — noting that even after deleting an application, the muscle memory of opening it persisted. “I realized when I opened my phone for something else I automatically would just open it,” they observed, describing the moment of deletion as a recognition of unconscious habit rather than a clean break from the system.

Others described more sustained forms of withdrawal. One participant spoke of taking annual social media hiatuses, explaining that the extended breaks helped them manage attention difficulties exacerbated by constant scrolling. Another described a two-week vacation entirely disconnected from technology, noting: “the busyness of my mind just sort of calmed... I feel like I should do that more often.” A third had gone further, transitioning key social relationships from mainstream platforms to encrypted messaging tools with smaller, more intentional audiences — and was actively developing an application designed to enable “much richer and deeper connections with fewer people,” motivated by the belief that dominant platforms had “hollowed out actual connection.” (P4) (P6) (P8)

Not all acts of withdrawal were motivated by personal cost. One participant (P4) left TikTok on explicitly political grounds — uncomfortable with both the concessions the platform made during its near-ban in the United States and the subsequent acquisition of significant shares by investors he described as "right wing apologists." His reasoning was not self-protective but principled: a refusal to participate in a platform whose ownership he found ethically objectionable. He applied the same logic to Twitter/X but stayed, recognising that the community he had built there had not migrated to its alternatives — a reminder that principled withdrawal runs into the same structural constraint as all other forms of exit: network effects mean that leaving costs more than the platform itself, because what you lose is the network. This represents a distinct register of user agency: withdrawal motivated not by what the system does to individuals, but by who controls the system and what that control represents. And yet even that agency meets its limit at the network's edge.

These practices — deletion, detox, migration to smaller and more private channels, and in at least one case, actively building alternatives — are not simply expressions of individual frustration. They reflect a growing mismatch between what participants described wanting from digital social life and what the current system provides. The signal, in aggregate, is one of latent demand for something different: platforms or practices that prioritise depth over scale, and connection over visibility.

Alongside these behavioural responses, participants also described cognitive and emotional forms of resistance. Several noted exercising increasingly strict curation of their feeds, actively removing content that felt irrelevant, toxic, or performative. One participant described becoming "a lot stricter" in their curation as a form of self-preservation. Others described a growing awareness of algorithmic influence over their behaviour, and in some cases, attempts to consciously resist or redirect it. The recognition that one's choices are being shaped by systems one does not fully understand or control represents an emerging form of critical platform literacy, itself a signal that the current relationship between users and platforms is becoming less taken-for-granted.

Imagined Alternatives: Participant Visions of a Different Place

The most direct evidence of emerging alternative imaginaries came from a specific question posed to each participant: if the social media environment they had described could be redesigned, what would it look like instead? These responses function as participant-generated weak signals — intuitive, grounded expressions of what a different system might feel like from the inside. Taken together, they point toward a set of consistent values that a preferred future would need to embody.

The desire for intimacy and scale reduction was the most pronounced thread across responses. One participant envisioned moving from the chaos of a "middle school gymnasium" to something more like a house party or food court — spaces governed by shared norms, mutual respect, and a degree of accountability absent in the current environment. The distinction they drew was significant: a house party, unlike a club or an open public square, carries an implicit social contract. "You're not going to throw things around because you trust, you respect the owner and you know what the regulations are," P7 explained. The imagined future is one in which participation carries consequence and context, rather than the sense of impunity that characterises much of the current environment.

Another participant's (P6) vision was spatial and tactile: a large green space in which distinct pods or communities are visible and reachable — not algorithmically assigned, but discoverable by interest and intent. "I imagine like different pods," they described. "Something a little bit more intimate... a little smaller, a little bit more helping you find the people you're wanting to connect with that actually align and could be genuine connections for you." This image of purposeful smallness — of finding the right people rather than the most people — stands in direct contrast to the scale and virality logic of the current system.

A third participant, P9, who had described the present system as a trampoline room where everything echoes and amplifies, articulated the redesigned place in terms of restored agency: a space where the user's "rational mind has more space" to operate, where behaviour is not "so strongly influenced by an emotional addiction," and where people can be "more intentional" in their choices. Their vision was less about the aesthetics of the space and more about the conditions of engagement — a platform designed to slow down rather than accelerate, to support deliberation rather than reaction.

Others were more restrained in their imagining, suggesting that the problems were less about the form of the platform than about the intentions animating it. P6 described the ideal as simply what LinkedIn was supposed to be: "a space where people are sharing and connecting in a meaningful way." The gap, in their view, was not structural but motivational — a shift from platforms optimised for attention to platforms genuinely organised around value. "The intention would have to change," they said, describing the move from the circus to something quieter and more purposeful as contingent on a willingness to relinquish the logic of performance.

These visions are not utopian. They do not imagine the elimination of social media, nor do they propose a return to pre-platform forms of sociality. What they describe, consistently, is a modulation of the current system: smaller in scale, slower in tempo, more accountable in structure, and more oriented toward genuine connection than optimised visibility. They suggest that participants already hold a relatively coherent sense

of what a better system might feel like — and that this sense is grounded in the tensions and frustrations of their current experience.

An Environmental Scan: External Signals and Drivers of Change (STEEPV)

The signals emerging from individual experience do not exist in isolation. They are accompanied — and in some cases, amplified — by a set of structural developments that are reshaping the conditions under which content culture operates. This environmental scan applies the STEEPV framework (Hines & Bishop, 2006) — examining Social, Technological, Economic, Environmental, Political, and Values dimensions — to assess the forces acting on the current system from multiple directions simultaneously.

Social

At the level of culture, the most prominent signal is a broadly documented and growing fatigue with the norms of visibility, performance, and optimization that define content culture. The "de-influencing" trend — in which creators actively discourage overconsumption and call out the inauthenticity of sponsored content — gained significant traction from 2023 onward, reflecting a shift in the relationship between audiences and the influencer economy (Sánchez-Torres et al., 2025). More broadly, digital minimalism has moved from a niche philosophical position to a mainstream lifestyle orientation, with growing numbers of individuals deliberately restricting their platform use, curating feeds more aggressively, and seeking out digital environments that feel quieter and more intentional.

Scholarly and public attention to the mental health dimensions of social media use has intensified considerably, with researchers and clinicians pointing to relationships between heavy platform use and anxiety, depression, and diminished attention spans, particularly among younger users (Murthy, 2023). These concerns have generated both individual behavioural responses — of the kind documented in participant accounts — and institutional ones, including school-level restrictions on device use and growing public debate about the appropriate design of platforms accessed by minors.

Technological

At the level of technology, the most consequential development is the accelerating integration of generative AI into content production. As Chapter 6 documented, participants already described growing difficulty distinguishing authentic from AI-generated content — a dynamic that is intensifying as AI tools become more capable and accessible. This disruption operates as a driver in at least two directions. On one trajectory, AI accelerates the volume and homogenization of content, deepening the dynamics already identified in the analysis. On another, the saturation of AI-generated material may create conditions for a

revaluing of human-generated, contextually situated expression — a counter-pressure within the system toward authenticity.

Participants themselves anticipated this dynamic. One described worrying that AI content would make everything "sound the same," but wondered whether this might trigger a backlash — even imagining a future in which posts carry a "human generated" stamp as a marker of distinction. Another drew an analogy to vinyl records and artisanal food preparation, suggesting that human-made content might come to feel charming precisely because of its scarcity: "I wanna go to a human-run kitchen. That's so cool. I think that's what it's gonna be like." (P6) (P7)

Alongside AI, the emergence and growth of decentralized and federated platforms represents a meaningful, if still marginal, technological signal. Platforms built on open protocols such as ActivityPub — including Mastodon and, most recently, Bluesky — allow communities to set their own moderation standards and governance structures, operating outside the centralized control of any single corporate actor. Bluesky's growth has been particularly notable, surging dramatically in late 2024 (NBC News, 2024), continuing to grow through 2026 following repeated controversies on X, with a user base drawn significantly from those seeking an environment with different values and accountability structures. Similarly, Substack has emerged as a model for direct creator-to-audience relationships that explicitly prioritise depth of engagement over algorithmic reach — a structural inversion of the dominant platform logic. Smaller, interest-specific platforms such as CARA, which had built a community of over one million artists around a commitment to human-generated work and an explicit rejection of AI content (TechCrunch, 2024), demonstrate that audiences exist for alternatives organised around different values.

None of these alternatives has yet achieved the scale to displace dominant platforms. But their growth — and the specific reasons users cite for migrating toward them — functions as a signal: that a meaningful segment of the platform population is actively seeking environments organised around different priorities.

Economic

Within the creator economy, there are signs that the dominant model — in which creators produce at high volume, optimize for algorithmic visibility, and monetize through brand partnerships — is generating unsustainable conditions. Research indicates that approximately 80% of content creators experience burnout, with 66% reporting that it directly impacts their mental health (Awin Group, 2022), suggesting that the current model extracts significant personal cost from those it most visibly rewards. In response, a growing proportion of creators are deliberately reducing their output, introducing rest periods, or shifting toward community-led models that prioritise long-term relationships over viral reach. Subscription and

direct support platforms — Substack, Patreon, and their equivalents — are growing as creators seek economic models that do not require constant performance for algorithmic systems. The broader shift, as one industry analysis describes it, is from "influencer-for-hire" toward creator as owner and community steward — a reorientation of the creator's relationship to their work and their audience.

Environmental

A less visible but increasingly significant driver is the growing environmental cost of AI-driven content production. The energy demands of large-scale generative AI systems — including the data centres that power them — represent a substantial and growing carbon footprint (IEA, 2024). As regulatory and public attention to the environmental impact of digital infrastructure increases, the energy intensity of content culture's AI-driven expansion is becoming harder to ignore. Several jurisdictions are beginning to develop reporting requirements for the carbon footprint of digital services (European Commission, 2022). This environmental dimension may increasingly function as a regulatory pressure on the current model of limitless AI content scaling — and as a values-based driver for those seeking more sustainable forms of digital participation.

Political

The most significant regulatory development in recent years has been the implementation of the European Union's Digital Services Act (DSA), which entered its enforcement phase in 2025. For the first time, major platforms operating in the EU are now subject to legally binding requirements around algorithmic transparency, including the obligation to offer users non-algorithmically curated, chronological feeds as an alternative to the default personalized experience. The DSA also mandates researcher access to platform data, enabling independent scrutiny of algorithmic systems that previously operated as proprietary black boxes. Enforcement has been active: the European Commission imposed a €120 million fine on X (European Commission, 2025b) in late 2025, signalling that regulatory consequences for non-compliance are no longer theoretical. A parallel Digital Fairness Act, currently under development, is expected to address addictive design practices, dark patterns, and the commercial dimensions of influencer culture more directly (European Parliament, 2025).

In the United Kingdom, the Online Safety Act entered its full enforcement phase in 2026 (Ofcom, 2026), adding further regulatory weight to an emerging international framework around platform accountability. While regulatory efforts in the United States remain fragmented, individual states have begun legislating around children's social media access, and the broader legislative conversation around platform responsibility is more active than at any prior point. The direction of travel is clear: the era of largely

unregulated platform operation is ending, and governance frameworks — however imperfect — are beginning to catch up with the scale and influence of platform systems.

For the purposes of futures thinking, this regulatory shift is significant not only in its immediate effects, but in what it signals about legitimacy: the assumption that platforms should be free to design systems that maximize engagement without external accountability is increasingly contested at the level of law and public policy.

Values

A recurring premise in this research is the generational positioning of millennials as a "bridge generation" — old enough to have experienced social life before platforms, yet young enough to have been fully shaped by digital culture. This framing was affirmed by participants across interviews, with several identifying it as the source of a particular kind of awareness: a felt sense of what has changed, and with it, a sense of responsibility to help shape what comes next. Netnographic observation found this generational positioning echoed in wider public discourse: one widely circulated post on X in December 2025 characterized millennials as having "just enough experience to prompt well and sanity-check the output" — positioning them as uniquely equipped to navigate, and potentially redirect, the AI-saturated media environment.

Beyond this generational lens, a broader values shift is detectable: a growing cultural distinction between the instrumental logic of content culture — in which participation is a strategic activity oriented toward visibility and growth — and a more expressive, relational understanding of digital sharing. This distinction is not simply nostalgic. It reflects an emerging sensibility, articulated across participant accounts and visible in wider cultural conversations (Deloitte, 2025; Hootsuite, 2025), that the purpose of sharing online is not performance but presence — not reaching as many people as possible, but being genuinely present with the ones who matter.

Taken together, these six dimensions suggest that the current moment is characterized by genuine systemic instability. Social, technological, economic, environmental, political, and values-based pressures are converging simultaneously on a platform ecosystem whose core logic — visibility, scale, engagement, optimization — is facing challenge from multiple directions at once. This is precisely the environment in which futures diverge: not a stable system continuing on its current trajectory, but an open and contested one in which significantly different outcomes remain possible. The following section develops those possibilities.

7.3 Dator's Four Futures: Content Culture in 2045

Jim Dator's Four Futures framework posits that any complex system, when projected forward, tends toward one of four broad archetypal trajectories: continued growth along its current path; collapse of the existing order; discipline through external constraints that reshape system behaviour; or transformation into a fundamentally different configuration. These archetypes are not predictions but possibility spaces — structurally distinct futures that illuminate different implications of forces already at work in the present. Crucially, they are presented without hierarchy: each is treated as genuinely possible, and the task of evaluation — of identifying which future is preferable and why — is reserved for the section that follows.

Applied to content culture, each scenario is constructed from two sources: the internal dynamics of the system as mapped in Chapter 6 — its feedback loops, stakeholder incentives, deep myths, and leverage points — and the external conditions identified in the environmental scan, including regulatory developments, technological disruptions, and cultural and economic shifts. Together, these sources generate four distinct imaginings of what content culture might look like in 2045.

Scenario 1: Continued Growth — "The Glass Stage"

In this future, the dominant logics of content culture — visibility, optimization, and engagement — have persisted and intensified. AI tools now generate the majority of content circulating across platforms, and the distinction between human-authored and AI-generated posts has ceased to be legible to most users. Volume has increased exponentially while perceived meaning has declined proportionally. The feedback loops identified in Chapter 6 — performance pressure, algorithmic amplification, and monetization — have compounded over two decades.

Participation is no longer experienced as a choice. The professional obligation to maintain a visible online presence, already pervasive among participants in 2026, has extended across industries and life stages. Platform infrastructure has expanded further into the functions of everyday life — education, healthcare navigation, civic participation — making exit practically incoherent. The CLA insight that platforms function as a "world operating system" has, in this scenario, become literal rather than metaphorical.

The regulatory efforts that were gaining momentum in the mid-2020s — the EU's Digital Services Act, the UK's Online Safety Act — have proven insufficient to interrupt the system's core logic. Platforms have complied with transparency requirements at a surface level while preserving the underlying mechanisms of algorithmic amplification and engagement-driven design. The Digital Fairness Act was passed in 2027, but it only addressed individual dark patterns without touching the paradigm that generates them.

Culturally, “authenticity” has been fully absorbed into the optimization logic it once opposed. It is now a content category — a performance of genuineness. One participant’s concern, expressed in 2026, that AI proliferation would make everything “sound the same,” has been realized, but the response has not been the backlash they hoped for. Instead, sameness has been normalized. The myth identified in the CLA — that to be seen is to exist — has deepened and expanded, now operating as an unquestioned condition of social and professional life.

It is a future of comfort, efficiency, and continuous stimulation, in which the costs — the erosion of depth, the homogenization of expression, the exhaustion of performance — are distributed unevenly and experienced privately, rarely named as systemic.



Figure 13. “The Glass Stage” illustration. Generated with Gemini.

Vignette: A morning in 2045 — The Glass Stage

Meet Amara. She is 55 years old, works in communications for a mid-sized nonprofit, and has been navigating social media since her early twenties. She remembers dial-up. She remembers posting without thinking about it.

Amara’s content twin posted twice while she slept. The AI persona her employer provisioned three years ago operates continuously under her name and likeness, calibrated to her communications style and updated quarterly based on engagement data. Her morning task is to review what it said. She approves both posts without significant edits — one on sector trends, one a reaction to a news story she did not read. Her

performance review last quarter included a section on her "digital presence health score," a composite metric drawn from reach, sentiment response, and posting consistency across platforms. She scored 74 out of 100. Her manager suggested she let the twin post more frequently.

Outside, the café where she buys coffee has a content creation station near the window: good natural light, a ring light embedded in the table, a QR code linking to the café's collab programme. Three people are filming when she arrives. She orders without looking up from her phone. On the walk home she passes a mural that was installed by the city's cultural content initiative, designed by an AI trained on local artists' work. The artists were credited in the metadata. Most people who photographed it did not check. Her niece, who is twenty-two and has a verified AI persona with 340,000 followers, texts to ask if Amara wants to collab. Amara says she'll think about it. She has been thinking about it for eight months.

Scenario 2: Collapse — "The Empty Circus"

In this future, the content culture system has fractured. The "tragedy of the commons" archetype, identified in Chapter 6 as latent within the system, has played out at scale: the overproduction of content — accelerated by generative AI — has so thoroughly degraded the shared attention environment that the commons has ceased to function as a commons at all. Trust in platform-mediated information has collapsed. Engagement metrics have been exposed, repeatedly and publicly, as manipulated. Advertisers have retreated. Several major platforms have lost critical mass rapidly, triggering the network effect in reverse.

The collapse has not been total or uniform. Some platforms persist in fragmented, diminished forms, used by specific communities for specific purposes. Others have been abandoned. The netnographic signals that were visible as early as 2026 — "just endless misinformation and rage bait and AI slop," as one widely circulated post described — have cascaded into a broader loss of faith in platform-mediated sociality as such.

This scenario does not resolve neatly into either liberation or loss. For some, the collapse of the dominant platform ecosystem has created space — for slower, more intentional forms of connection, for the resurgence of local and embodied community life, for the quiet flourishing of the small, closed networks that participants in this study were already beginning to cultivate. One participant's migration of key relationships to encrypted messaging tools, and another's deliberate construction of an application for "deeper connections with fewer people," look, in retrospect, less like idiosyncratic personal choices and more like early moves toward what would become the post-platform norm.

For others — particularly those whose economic livelihoods had been built on platform infrastructure, or whose access to information, community, and professional opportunity depended on platform-mediated visibility — the collapse has been genuinely disruptive. The unevenness of this disruption reflects the unevenness of the original system: those who were most embedded in and dependent on content culture bear the greatest cost of its disintegration.

The environmental drivers most likely to precipitate this scenario are an accumulation: AI-generated content degrading platform utility, a series of high-profile trust failures, regulatory interventions that destabilize revenue models without providing structural alternatives, and a generational shift in which younger users, shaped by different experiences of digital sociality, simply do not reproduce the participation habits of their predecessors.

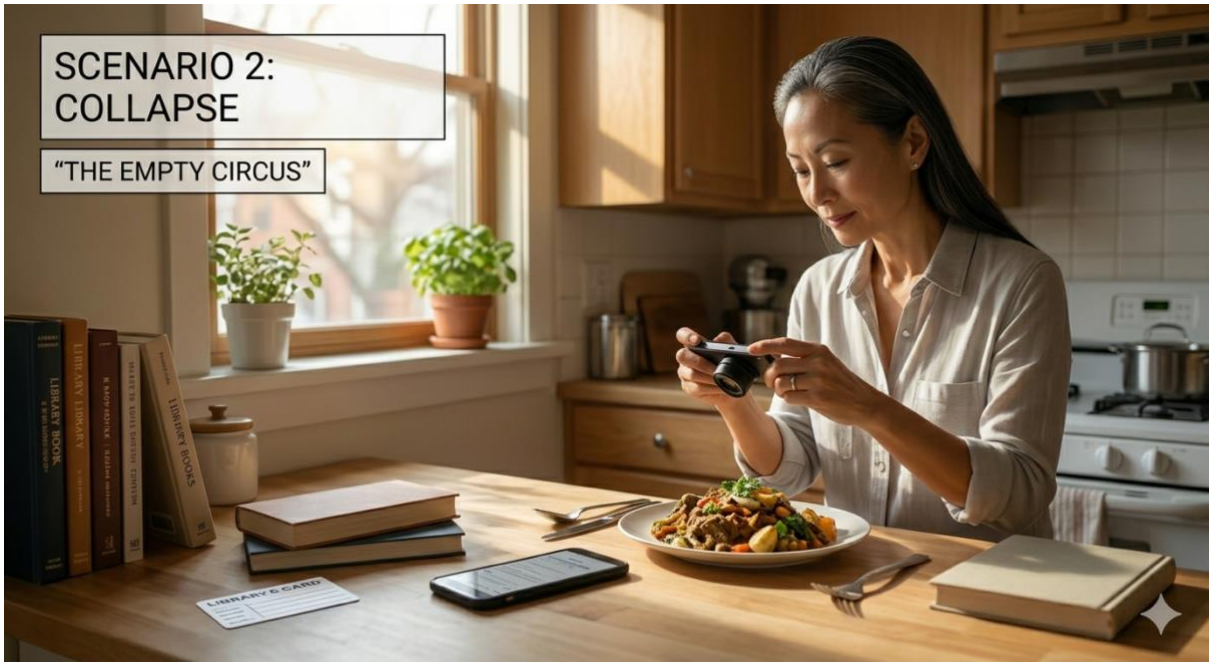


Figure 14. "The Empty Circus" illustration. Generated with Gemini.

Vignette: A Tuesday in 2045 — The Empty Circus

Amara has been cooking more. She is not sure exactly when it started but it was probably sometime after the Cascade, when three major platforms lost critical mass within the same year and the word feed stopped meaning what it used to. She makes things now and photographs them. Last week she made a dish her grandmother used to make and took a picture of it on the kitchen counter, light coming through the window at an angle she liked, and sent it to specific people. One of them, her friend, replied: this looks incredible, teach me. They made plans to actually meet. Her online life now runs through three group chats

and a diaspora forum that has existed in various forms since 2019. The forum recently voted to cap membership at 2,000 people. Some found this radical. Amara found it obvious. She found her current job through a professional registry after the platform she'd used for networking restructured and lost most of its users within six months. Her city's digital infrastructure report, released last month, noted that screen time among adults had dropped 34% since 2038, while library membership had increased for the seventh consecutive year. Amara renewed her membership. She is halfway through a book someone in the forum recommended. She has not thought about her follower count in four years, partly because the number no longer exists anywhere she can see it, and partly because she has simply forgotten to, which felt like its own kind of progress.

Scenario 3: Discipline — "The Visible Hand"

In this future, the regulatory momentum that was gaining force in the mid-2020s has succeeded — not in transforming the system, but in substantially reshaping its operating conditions. The EU's Digital Services Act and its successors, alongside equivalent frameworks in other continents, have established a global baseline of platform accountability. Algorithmic amplification is now regulated. Engagement-maximizing design patterns — infinite scroll, variable reward notifications, the removal of chronological feeds — have been restricted or prohibited in many jurisdictions. Age verification is mandatory. Platforms are required to demonstrate measurable commitments to user wellbeing alongside growth metrics.

The feedback loops identified in Chapter 6 have not been eliminated, but they have been interrupted. The performance pressure loop is weaker because algorithmic amplification is constrained. The monetization loop operates within limits — brands and advertisers face transparency requirements that have shifted incentives away from pure virality toward quality and credibility of engagement. The diffusion of responsibility that characterized the earlier system — in which no actor felt fully accountable — has been partially addressed through legal frameworks that establish clear obligations for platforms, advertisers, and institutional employers.

This is the future most closely resembling one participant's imagining of the "house party" — a space with known rules, where the owner bears responsibility for what happens within it, and where the implicit social contract of participation is legible rather than opaque. It is not a utopia of connection and meaning; it is a more governed, more accountable, and less manipulative version of the existing system. The underlying worldview — visibility as value — has not been replaced, but it has been modulated. Credibility, in this future, is increasingly earned through demonstrated expertise and sustained engagement rather than

algorithmic amplification, a shift anticipated in one netnographic observation that expressed the hope for "a society where credibility is earned with rigorous training in the associated field, not by a popularity contest."

The scenario's primary risk is capture: regulatory frameworks designed in collaboration with the industry they govern may serve platform interests as much as user interests, producing compliance without transformation. The deeper leverage points — goals and paradigms — remain largely unchanged. The system is better managed, not fundamentally reimagined.

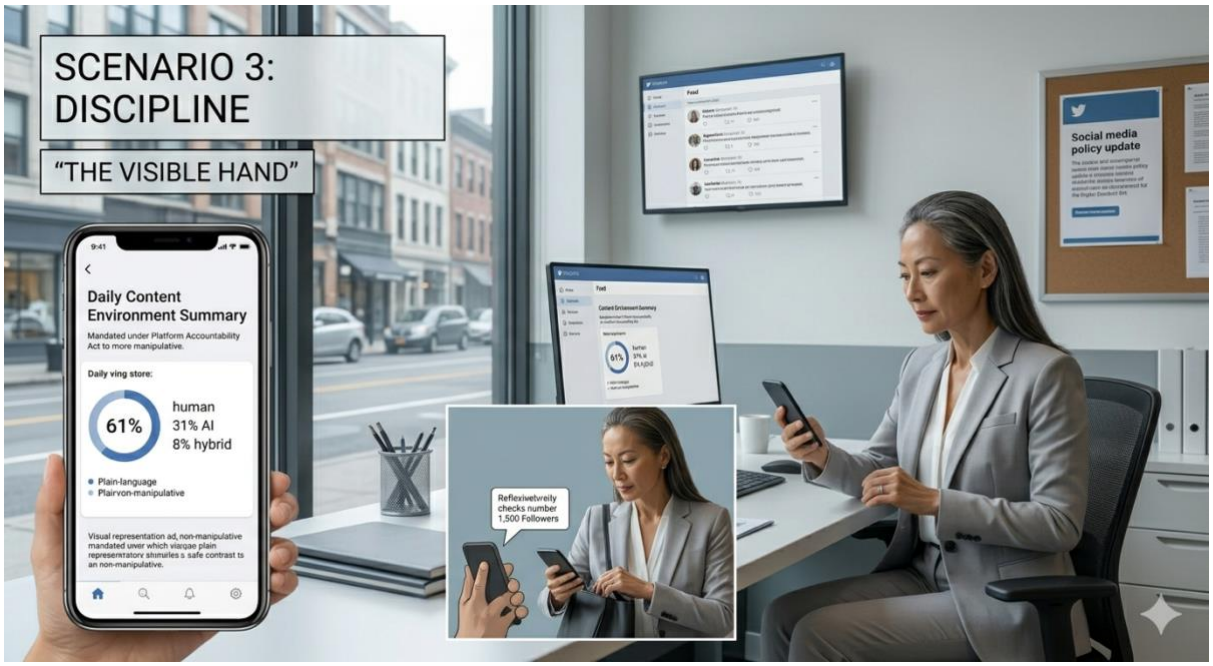


Figure 15. "The Visible Hand" illustration. Generated with Gemini.

Vignette: An evening in 2045 — The Visible Hand

Amara's phone opens to her daily Content Environment Summary — a transparency feature mandated under the Platform Accountability Act of 2038, which requires all platforms operating in her jurisdiction to show users a plain-language breakdown of what they saw, why they saw it, and what percentage was human-generated. Today's reads: 61% human, 31% AI, 8% hybrid. Algorithmic recommendation: moderate. She finds herself reading it the way she once read nutrition labels — not always acting on it, but aware.

Her feed is chronological now. She opted out of algorithmic curation the day the option became legitimately available, and the adjustment took longer than she expected. The feed is slower, occasionally boring in a way that used to feel like failure but now feels more like reading. She can see when her friends posted and what they were thinking at the time, rather than what an algorithm decided she should encounter weeks later.

Her employer's social media policy was updated after the Digital Conduct Act passed. The expectation to post professionally still exists, but frequency limits are in place, and performance reviews can no longer reference follower counts. She posts when she has something to say. Sometimes people respond. The compulsion she once felt — to check, to optimize, to stay visible — has quieted, though she cannot say whether that is regulation or just age. Probably both.

She finishes her second coffee and opens the platform's quarterly transparency report, skimming the section on algorithmic weighting with the mild interest of someone who finally understands the rules of a game they have been playing for twenty years.

Before she puts her phone down, she opens her profile and checks her follower count. The number is the same as yesterday. She notes it — a reflex built over fifteen years, so automatic she barely registers doing it — and puts the phone in her bag. The regulations have changed. The reflex has not.

Scenario 4: Transformation — "The Commons"

In this future, the paradigm that sustained content culture — visibility as value, scale as success, performance as participation — has given way to something organised around different principles. This shift has emerged from the convergence of the forces identified across Chapter 6 and the environmental scan: the exhaustion of the performance model, the proliferation of alternative platforms built on different logics, the revaluing of human-generated expression in an AI-saturated environment, and a generational transition in which the norms of the dominant system are no longer taken as given.

Platforms in this future are predominantly smaller, purpose-built, and organised around specific communities rather than universal audiences. The architecture of connection has shifted from broadcasting — reaching the most people — to belonging — finding the right people. The incumbent platforms of the 2020s did not simply disappear; they lost their centrality. As their advertising-attention model became economically and culturally unviable at scale, some restructured around community governance, others retreated to narrower, transactional functions, and others faded. The ecosystem became genuinely plural. One participant's vision of distinct "pods," each organised around genuine shared interest and "a little more intimate, a little smaller," has become a mainstream rather than a marginal model of digital sociality. The metrics of success have changed from follower counts and reach to relationship depth, community health, and the quality of sustained engagement.

Human-generated content, in an environment saturated with AI production, has become distinctively valuable. The "vinyl record" logic anticipated by one participant in 2026 has materialized: the knowledge

that a piece of content was made by a specific person, from a specific perspective, in a specific context, carries meaning that AI-generated content structurally cannot replicate. Platforms have responded to this by developing verification and attribution systems for human authorship, and audiences have developed corresponding literacies for identifying and valuing it.

The deep myths that sustained the previous system have shifted. The CLA identified "to be seen is to exist" as the foundational narrative of this culture in 2026. In this transformed future, the operative myth is closer to "to connect is to belong" — a reorientation from the individual's visibility before an audience to the quality of relationships within a community. This shift has not occurred uniformly or without contest. The transition has involved genuine disruption — to livelihoods built on the old model, to identities organised around visibility, to institutions that benefited from the attention economy's scale. But the direction of change is legible, and the system has reorganised itself around a different centre of gravity.

The millennial "bridge generation" — participants who remembered both before and after, who felt the difference "really intimately" — played a particular role in articulating and advocating for this alternative. So did the creators who, burned out by the demands of constant performance, shifted to subscription and community models that made sustainability, rather than virality, the measure of success. And so did the regulators, researchers, and platform designers who, drawing on the research infrastructure that the Digital Services Act had made possible, built the evidence base for what a different system could look like in practice.



Figure 16. "The Commons" illustration. Generated with Gemini.

Vignette: A Sunday in 2045 — The Commons

Amara wrote something this morning — an essay about a street she has walked her whole life and how it has changed. She posted it to her community, 340 people who found each other around a shared interest in how cities work, governed by their own rules, funded through a cooperative model that receives public support. The platform marked it as human-authored. Four people replied with essays of their own. A fifth said it made them cry. She does not know how many people read it. The platform does not tell her, because the community voted not to generate that number. She participated in that vote, and two others before it. What is tracked, collectively and transparently, is community health: response rates, whether new members find their footing, how often conflicts are resolved without moderator intervention. The essay has been archived to the community's shared library, where it will remain accessible and attributed whether or not Amara stays active. None of this involved a metric, a score, an algorithm, or a strategy. She made something. She shared it with people who chose to be in the same space. Some of them responded. When she tries to remember what it felt like to refresh a screen waiting for numbers to go up, she can recall it intellectually — the particular quality of that anxiety, the small collapse when nothing came — but she cannot quite recover the feeling itself. It is like trying to remember being cold on a warm day. The memory is there. The urgency is gone.

7.4 Selecting and Articulating the Preferred Future

The Preferred Future

The preferred future is Transformation. This selection is grounded in what the research consistently found beneath the surface of participants' experiences: beyond frustration with specific platforms or features, there was a deeper mismatch between what people wanted from digital social life and what the system was designed to provide. Participants did not describe wanting a more efficient or better-regulated version of the current system. They described wanting something built around different values — connection over reach, meaning over metrics, expression over performance. Transformation is the only scenario in which those values become the organising principle of the system rather than a deviation from it.

It is also the only scenario in which change occurs at the level where the problem is actually located. As the analysis in Chapter 6 established, the deepest driver of content culture is a widely shared belief: that to be seen is to exist — that visibility is the measure of value, relevance, and worth. Transformation is the only future in which that belief changes, and in which the system is reorganised around a different understanding

of what digital participation is for. That is why it is the preferred destination, even though the path toward it is neither simple nor guaranteed.

Articulating the Preferred Future

The preferred future is not a utopia. It is a content culture organised around a different centre of gravity — one that has shifted from visibility to belonging, from scale to depth, and from performance to expression. It does not remove all tension or difficulty from digital life, but it reorganizes what the system rewards, what users pursue, and what counts as success.

This is recognizably close to what participants described when asked to imagine the place differently. One envisioned distinct pods — "a little more intimate, a little smaller, a little bit more helping you find the people you're wanting to connect with that actually align and could be genuine connections for you." Another imagined a house party rather than a club — a space with a visible social contract, where norms are shared and the host bears responsibility for what happens within it. A third described simply wanting her "rational mind" to have more space — a platform designed to slow down rather than accelerate, to support deliberation rather than reaction.

What unifies these visions is not nostalgia for a simpler past, but a desire for conditions that were always possible and were lost to a specific set of design choices and business incentives. The preferred future does not return to what came before — it builds something that has not fully existed: a digital environment in which the terms of participation are clear, the costs of engagement are proportionate to its benefits, and participation does not require users to become performers in order to belong.

The underlying belief has shifted. Where the current system is sustained by the idea that to be seen is to exist, the preferred future operates closer to a different understanding: to connect is to belong. Credibility is earned through sustained engagement and demonstrated care rather than algorithmic reach. Success is measured in the quality of relationships and what is made and shared within them — not in follower counts or viral spread.

Perhaps most significantly, this is a future in which participation is genuinely optional in a way it has not been for some time. The professional pressure to maintain a visible online presence — described across virtually every participant account — has eased. Being absent from a platform carries no structural penalty. Opting in is a meaningful choice rather than a condition of social and professional life.

Trade-offs, Risks, and Design Responses

Intellectual honesty requires acknowledging what the preferred future costs. Several real trade-offs accompany Transformation, and they are not trivial.

The scale of current platforms, for all its harms, has generated genuine benefits that smaller, more intimate systems may struggle to replicate. Participants described using platforms to encounter ideas, communities, and perspectives they would not have found in more curated spaces — using TikTok as a search engine for lived experience, discovering viewpoints from across the world, expanding their awareness beyond their immediate environment. Scale has also functioned as a lifeline for communities who lack institutional visibility. The ability to reach large audiences has enabled forms of organising and solidarity that more enclosed spaces may not support as readily. Alongside this, the speed at which information currently travels — whatever its costs — has powered social movements and civic action in ways that smaller, slower platforms may find harder to match.

A more structural concern is the risk of a two-tier future: Transformation realized for some while Continued Growth intensifies for everyone else. The early signals of the preferred future — community-governed spaces, direct creator-to-audience relationships, platforms built around depth rather than scale — are currently concentrated among those with existing social, professional, and economic advantages. Substack subscribers, Discord communities, and Bluesky early adopters have all skewed demonstrably toward those with higher education, professional networks, and existing digital literacy. Without deliberate intervention, the preferred future risks becoming a premium option: a quieter, more meaningful digital life for those who can access it, while the dynamics of the current ecosystem persist and deepen for everyone else. This is not a hypothetical — it is already partially visible in the landscape. (Monahan, 2020; Wiener, 2021).

Finally, smaller and more intentional communities carry their own risk of insularity. People who choose their digital spaces may find themselves surrounded primarily by those who already share their perspectives — self-selected rather than algorithmically enforced, but similar in effect. This could foreclose the kinds of unexpected encounters with different people and ideas that the current system, at its best, has made possible.

These risks, however, are problems that can be addressed by design, not inevitable features of the scenario. The core of the design response is treating equity as a central condition of the transition, not an afterthought. In practice, this means building platforms that are publicly supported and freely accessible, not only available to those who can pay; creating what might be called bridges between communities, so

that smaller spaces do not become sealed off from the wider world. The email system offers a useful analogy: a person using Gmail can write to someone on a university server or a Hotmail account — different systems, owned by different entities, with no single company controlling everything, yet all able to communicate with each other. Applied to content culture, this means someone in a small, governed community could still encounter and engage with content from a civic channel, a cultural space, or another community entirely — when they choose to. The intimacy of the smaller space is preserved most of the time; the connection to something larger exists when it is needed. Alongside this, a managed and gradual transition, with real support for those whose livelihoods depend on the current model, is necessary to ensure that the costs of getting there do not fall heaviest on those least able to absorb them.

The preferred future is not the easiest future. It is the one most worth working toward.

This future is preferable because it operates at the depth of the problem. The tensions participants described — between wanting connection and feeling exhausted by performance, between valuing expression and experiencing it as labour, between choosing to use platforms and finding that use had become compulsory — are not resolvable within the existing paradigm. Better design, stronger regulation, and more ethical business models can modulate the current system, but they cannot resolve a tension that is structural: a system organised around visibility as value will continue generating the costs of that logic, regardless of how well it is managed. As the leverage point analysis in Chapter 6 established, the deepest available intervention is at the level of the system's foundational myth. Transformation is the only scenario in which that myth shifts — from to be seen is to exist toward to connect is to belong. It is the preferred future not because it is frictionless, but because it is the only one that resolves the problem where the problem actually lives: at the level of what the system is for.

7.5 Backcasting: What Would Need to Change?

Backcasting is a foresight method that begins from a preferred future and works backward toward the present. Rather than asking what will happen next, it asks what would need to have been true for this future to have become possible. This reversal of direction is deliberate: it shifts attention from prediction to intention, and from what is likely to what is necessary. Applied here, backcasting maps the conditions, decisions, and shifts that would need to occur — and in what rough sequence — for the Transformation scenario to be reachable from where content culture stands today.

The pathway is organised into three phases. Each phase builds on the last, and each corresponds broadly to a different depth of change: from adjustments to visible features and incentives in the early phase, to

structural and governance changes in the middle phase, to the deeper cultural and paradigm-level shifts that characterize the preferred future itself. This progression reflects Meadows' insight, developed in Chapter 6, that lasting change in complex systems requires working at multiple levels simultaneously — and that deeper change generally depends on shallower changes having created the conditions for it.

Phase 1: 2026–2033 — Creating the Conditions

The first phase is not yet Transformation. It is the period in which the ground is prepared, in which the regulatory, cultural, and technological conditions that make transformation possible begin to take shape. This phase corresponds broadly to the Discipline scenario: its function is not to change the paradigm but to loosen the grip of the existing one sufficiently for alternatives to develop.

Several things would need to happen during this period. Regulatory frameworks — building on momentum already visible in the EU's Digital Services Act and the UK's Online Safety Act — would need to gain real teeth across multiple jurisdictions. This means mandating algorithmic transparency, restricting engagement-maximizing design features, establishing provenance standards that distinguish human-generated from AI-generated material, and removing the conditions under which employers can require personal social media presence as a professional obligation. These changes do not transform content culture, but they interrupt the feedback loops — the performance pressure, algorithmic amplification, and monetization dynamics — that currently make the system self-reinforcing and difficult to exit.

Alongside regulation, the early alternative platform ecosystem would need to achieve sufficient scale to demonstrate viability. Community-governed spaces, direct creator-to-audience models, and publicly funded digital infrastructure would need to move from niche experiments to recognized options — not yet dominant, but credible enough to attract users, retain them, and prove that a different model can sustain itself. Early public investment in platform cooperatives and community infrastructure would be critical here, establishing that digital social spaces can be treated as civic infrastructure rather than exclusively commercial products.

Culturally, the shift in this phase is one of growing awareness and naming. The saturation of AI-generated content — already underway — would need to generate the backlash that some participants anticipated: a widespread recognition that human-made content carries distinctive value, and that the conditions sustaining the current system are neither inevitable nor desirable. Creator burnout, increasingly documented and publicly discussed, would need to become a recognized labour issue rather than a personal failing.

The actors who matter most in this phase are governments and regulators, early-adopting platform designers, civil society organizations, and the researchers whose access to platform data — enabled by transparency regulation — begin building the evidence base for what works. Users and creators who migrate toward alternatives during this period are not yet numerous enough to shift the centre of gravity, but they are the early movers whose experience shapes what comes next.

Phase 2: 2033–2040 — The Shift Takes Hold

The second phase is where the balance begins to tip. The conditions created in Phase 1 — regulatory infrastructure, viable alternatives, growing awareness — have matured to the point where the alternative is no longer marginal. This is the most contested and uncertain phase of the pathway: the period in which the old system is weakening but the new one has not yet become dominant, and in which the risk of the two-tier future — Transformation for some, Continued Growth for everyone else — is at its highest.

For the preferred future to proceed rather than stall here, several structural shifts would need to occur. Community-governed platforms would need to reach the critical mass at which network effects begin working in their favour — enough people present that others have reason to join. This is the threshold that has historically determined whether alternative platforms remain niche or become mainstream, and crossing it would require both continued public investment and active portability of relationships across platforms, so that users are not locked into the existing system by the social connections they have already built there.

Labour protections for creators would need to be established — recognizing content creation as work, with the rights and protections that entails. This is a structural intervention that addresses one of the transition costs identified in Section 7.4: ensuring that the shift toward new models does not leave those most economically dependent on the current one without support. Importantly, these protections are transitional: they are not the destination but the floor — harm reduction that makes it possible for creators to survive long enough to participate in, and advocate for, the deeper structural change that follows in Phases 2 and 3. Alongside this, employer norms around professional social media presence would need to shift — supported by regulation, but also by a generation of workers and managers who no longer equate visibility with value.

Advertisers and brands, responding both to regulatory pressure and to changing audience behaviour, would need to shift their investment toward engagement models that reward depth and credibility over reach and virality. This matters because advertising revenue is the economic engine of the current system: changing where and how it flows changes what the system rewards, and therefore what it produces.

The actors who matter most in this phase are platform designers building the new infrastructure, policy makers extending labour and data protections, creator communities organising collectively, employers revising professional expectations, and the millennial generation — now in mid-career leadership positions — bringing to organizational culture a felt sense of what has been lost and what a different system might offer.

Phase 3: 2040–2045 — Transformation Realized

By the third phase, the structural conditions for Transformation are in place. What remains is the deeper cultural work: the shift in the underlying belief that has sustained content culture through every previous adjustment. The idea that to be seen is to exist does not disappear entirely — beliefs of that depth rarely do — but it loses its status as the unquestioned organising principle of digital social life. A different understanding has become broadly practiced and increasingly normal: that to connect is to belong, and that belonging does not require an audience.

One of the clearest signals that this shift has occurred is linguistic. The term "content" — and with it, "content creation" — has largely fallen away as the default category for everything shared online. This matters more than it might appear. The word content implies something produced for consumption: a unit of material engineered to perform, attract attention, and convert that attention into value. Its disappearance signals that the logic it carried has also dissolved. In the preferred future, people make things and share them — writing, images, music, ideas, observations — without those things being automatically framed as strategic outputs for an algorithmic audience. A photographer is a photographer who shares work online. A writer is a writer. The category of "content creator" — a person whose primary orientation is toward optimizing material for platform performance — has ceased to be the dominant model for how creative people relate to digital spaces.

This does not mean that creative work goes unsupported. The advertising-attention model — in which income depends on algorithmic reach, brand alignment, and audience scale — has dissolved, because the platforms that sustained it no longer operate on that logic. In its place, creative work is sustained through direct relationships: audiences and communities supporting work they value through subscription, membership, or direct contribution; commissioned work that is transparently labeled and genuinely serves the community it reaches; and public and cooperative models that fund platforms as civic infrastructure rather than commercial products. The economic relationship is between maker and audience, not between maker, algorithm, brand, and audience. The intermediaries whose interests were never aligned with either the person making or the person receiving have been largely removed from the transaction.

Community-governed platforms are by this phase the dominant model for meaningful digital connection. Mechanisms that allow people in smaller spaces to discover and engage with work and ideas from beyond their immediate community when they choose to, are built into platform design as standard, without requiring engagement-maximizing algorithms to facilitate the encounter. Human-generated work carries recognized and verifiable attribution. Professional participation in social media is a choice. And crucially, in the preferred version of this phase, these conditions are not confined to a privileged subset of users. The public infrastructure investments and equity-centered policies of the earlier phases have ensured that the preferred future is, in fact, a future for everyone; not a better system for some running alongside an unreformed one for the rest.

What This Pathway Requires

The three phases reveal something important about the nature of the change required. No single intervention produces the preferred future. Regulation alone produces Discipline, not Transformation. Cultural change without structural support produces the two-tier outcome in which Transformation becomes a lifestyle choice for the few. What the backcasting pathway makes visible is that the preferred future requires coordinated movement across multiple levels simultaneously, sustained over time.

It also requires honesty about sequence. Paradigm-level change — the shift in the deep myth — cannot be mandated or designed into existence directly. It emerges from the accumulation of structural changes, lived experiences, and cultural shifts that make a different way of participating feel not just possible but natural. The work of the earlier phases is precisely to create those conditions: not to force the preferred future into being, but to make it the path of least resistance.

This sequencing maps directly onto the leverage point hierarchy developed in Chapter 6. The changes of Phase 1 — regulatory requirements, transparency mandates, restrictions on engagement-maximizing design — operate at the level of rules and feedback loops: real interventions, but ones that modify how the system behaves without touching what it is fundamentally organised to do. The structural shifts of Phase 2 move deeper, toward the goals and incentives that drive system behaviour. Phase 3's cultural transformation — the shift from visibility to belonging as the organising myth of digital participation — corresponds to the deepest leverage point Meadows identified: paradigm change. Chapter 6 named this transition explicitly as the shift from visibility to meaning and connection as the governing value of the system. The backcasting pathway is the route by which that shift becomes achievable rather than merely imaginable.

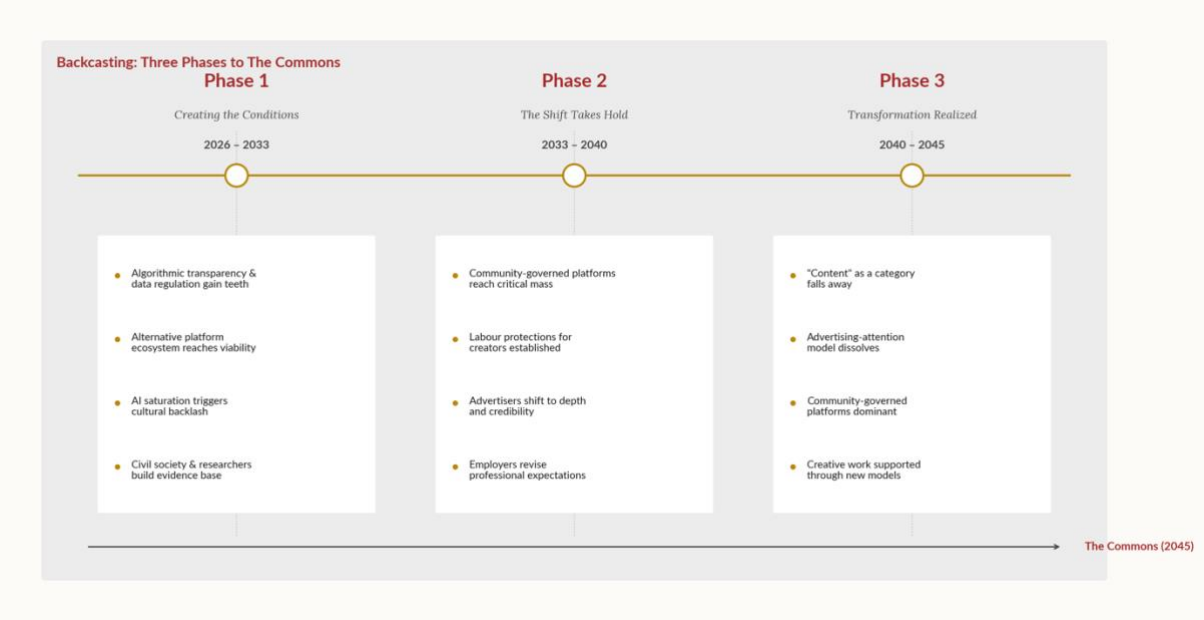


Figure 17. Backcasting timeline from the preferred future.

7.6 Chapter Summary: From Diagnosis to Direction

This chapter has moved the study from analysis to imagination. Beginning with the signals and pressures already accumulating within and around the current system, it applied Dator's Four Futures framework to open the full range of possible trajectories, and identified Transformation as the preferred future.

The preferred future is not utopian. It carries real tradeoffs and requires honest design responses to navigate them. But its costs are costs that can be worked on, in a way that the ceiling limitations of less ambitious scenarios cannot. The backcasting pathway makes visible that working on them requires sustained, coordinated action across regulatory, economic, cultural, and technological dimensions, over time, by actors operating at every level of the system.

What the chapter has mapped is a direction, not a destination handed down from above. The preferred future becomes reachable not through any single intervention, but through the accumulation of smaller ones, each making the next possible, each shifting the conditions of digital life. The following chapter identifies the specific actions and actors that make those shifts most likely, translating this futures work into practical recommendations for change.

PHASE 04

DELIVER

Charting a Path Forward

CHAPTER 08

From Futures to Action

8.1 Introduction: The Deliver Phase

The preceding chapters have moved through diagnosis, analysis, and imagination. This chapter makes the final turn. Drawing on Donella Meadows' leverage point hierarchy (Meadows, 1999) as its organising logic, it translates the futures work into specific, actor-oriented recommendations. These are not instructions for individuals on how to cope better with a difficult system. They are proposals for how different actors — policymakers, platform designers, creators, and communities — can intervene at multiple levels of the system simultaneously, in ways that compound over time toward the preferred future.

As established in Chapter 7, no single intervention produces the preferred future, The Commons. What the leverage point framework makes clear is that the depth of an intervention determines the durability of its effect. Shallow interventions — adjusting parameters, tightening rules — change what the system does without touching what it is organised to accomplish. Deeper interventions — at the level of goals, information flows, and ultimately the paradigm that gives the system its logic — change what the system is for. Both are necessary. The recommendations that follow are organised to reflect this: starting with the structural and regulatory foundations that make deeper change possible, and moving toward the cultural and paradigmatic shifts that constitute Transformation itself.

An honest framing: this chapter offers a direction, not a blueprint. The Commons is a destination that requires sustained, coordinated effort across actors who do not always share interests or timelines. What follows identifies where the leverage is, who holds it, and what moving it would require.

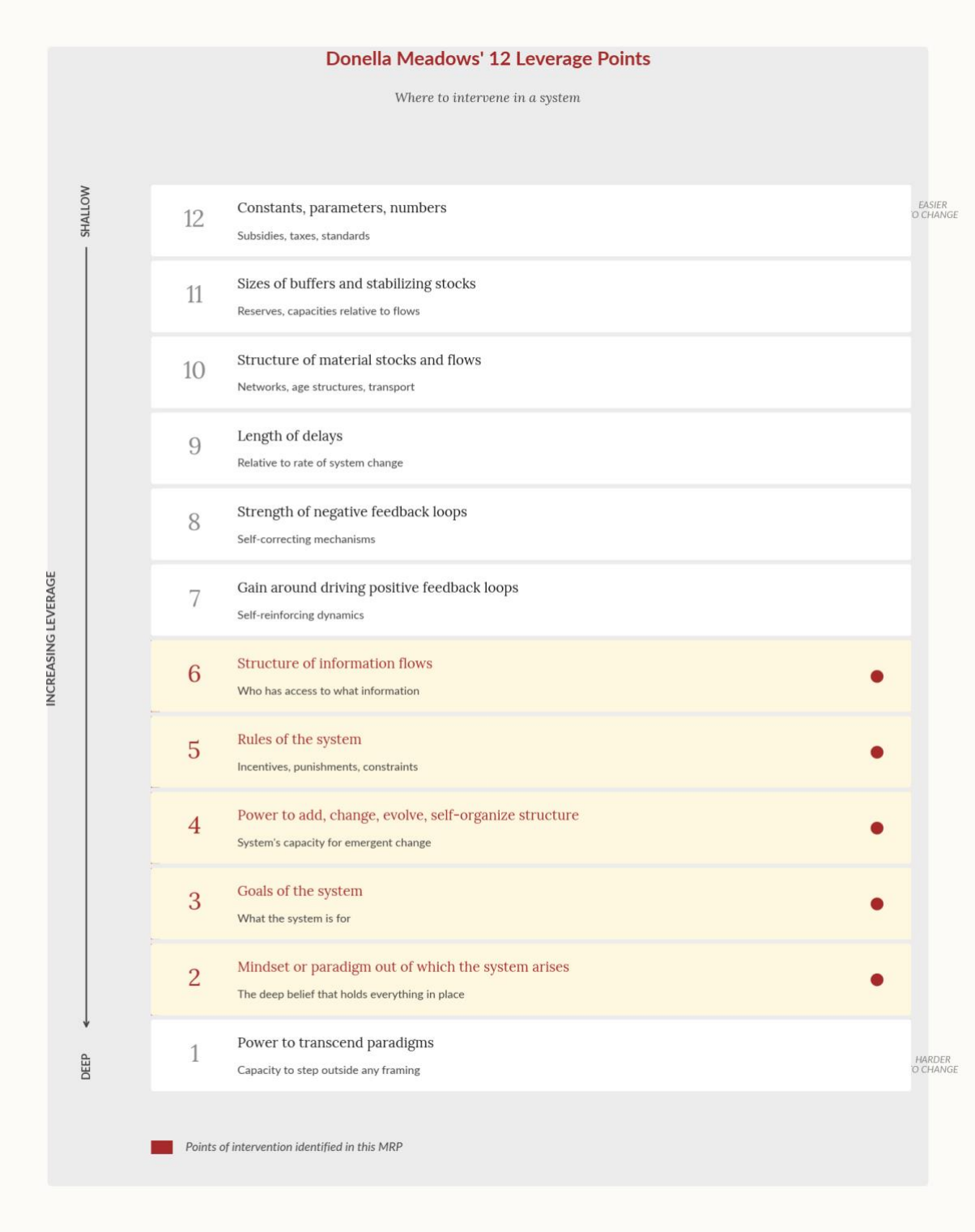


Figure 18. Donella Meadows' Places to Intervene in a System

8.2 Regulatory and Policy Interventions

Regulation operates at the level of rules — the shallowest of Meadows' leverage points, but a necessary foundation. The feedback loops driving content culture's current dynamics (performance pressure,

algorithmic amplification, monetization) will not dissolve through cultural goodwill alone. They require external constraints capable of interrupting the most extractive design practices and creating space for alternatives to develop.

The groundwork is already being laid. The EU's Digital Services Act, the UK's Online Safety Act, and the emerging Digital Fairness Act represent the most significant regulatory shift in the history of platform governance. The direction of travel is clear. What is needed now is acceleration, extension, and specificity.

Algorithmic transparency and user choice

The DSA's requirement that major platforms offer non-algorithmically curated, chronological feeds as a user option is a meaningful starting point — but it should become the default, not the exception. Regulation should require that opting into algorithmic curation is an affirmative user choice, not the invisible precondition of participation. Alongside this, mandatory content environment summaries — plain-language disclosures of what users are seeing, why they are seeing it, and what proportion is human-generated versus AI-produced — would give users the informational basis for meaningful choice. One participant in this study anticipated something close to this: imagining a future in which posts carry a "human generated" stamp as a marker of distinction. The regulatory infrastructure to make this real is within reach.

Restricting engagement-maximizing design

Infinite scroll, variable reward notification systems (the deliberate, unpredictable timing of alerts — modelled on slot-machine psychology — that keeps users checking compulsively), and the removal of natural stopping points are design choices, not technical necessities. They were adopted because they increase time-on-platform and, with it, advertising revenue. Regulation should treat them as what they are: features engineered to override users' deliberate intentions. The Digital Fairness Act's expected focus on addictive design patterns is a step toward this. Jurisdictions beyond the EU should not wait for enforcement to begin before developing equivalent frameworks.

Content provenance standards

As generative AI accelerates the volume of synthetic content circulating across platforms, the ability to distinguish human-made from AI-generated material becomes a structural concern, not merely an aesthetic one. Mandatory provenance labelling — technically feasible through cryptographic attestation (a security mechanism that uses digital signatures and measurements to prove the integrity, authenticity, and configuration of hardware and software) and metadata standards — would support both user trust and the

revaluing of human expression that the preferred future depends on. This is a regulatory intervention with direct consequences at the paradigm level: it changes what "authenticity" means in the information environment.

Platform accountability to creators

Content creation generates enormous value for platforms that bear no corresponding accountability toward those who produce it. The research infrastructure enabled by the DSA has begun documenting what participants in this study described firsthand: burnout rates that climb with career length, economic precarity masked by visibility, and revenue models that extract value from creator labour with insufficient disclosure and no meaningful recourse.

Creator work sits between employment and entrepreneurship — self-directed and risk-bearing, yet platform-dependent — and existing legal frameworks do not map cleanly onto this relationship. That ambiguity makes the case for new regulatory categories rather than an awkward extension of employment law. The more tractable intervention is platform accountability: mandatory operational transparency around revenue allocation — not just published percentage splits (YouTube, n.d.), but auditable, creator-accessible data on how earnings are calculated, why they fluctuate, and which algorithmic decisions affect them — and enforceable protections against arbitrary demonetization, which currently functions as a disciplinary mechanism with no meaningful appeals process. It is worth noting, however, that these are transitional measures, not an endpoint. The Commons (see Chapter 7) ultimately dissolves the creator-platform-dependency dynamic altogether; these protections serve as harm reduction for those most exposed to the current system while structural alternatives are built.

Public investment in alternative infrastructure

Platforms organised around community governance, cooperative ownership, and non-extractive economics exist, but they remain marginal in part because they are competing against incumbents who benefit from decades of network effect accumulation and venture capital subsidy. Public investment in platform infrastructure — treating digital social spaces as civic infrastructure rather than exclusively commercial products, in the way that libraries, parks, and public broadcasters are treated — would change the competitive landscape. This is the single intervention most directly enabling of The Commons as a destination.

Institutional accountability

A specific note on employers: while explicit written policies requiring personal social media posting are relatively uncommon, the research consistently surfaced what amounts to soft coercion — the implicit professional expectation that visibility equates to value, and that maintaining a public online presence is a condition of career advancement. In some industries and roles, this expectation does appear in job descriptions and performance criteria. Regulatory guidance clarifying that employment decisions should not formally rest on personal social media metrics, and that professional performance review frameworks referencing follower counts or reach are inappropriate, would begin to formalize what is currently left to individual negotiation. More broadly, it would signal that the equation of personal visibility with professional worth is not a neutral market outcome, but a cultural assumption that institutions have the capacity, and the responsibility, to contest.

8.3 Platform Design and Technical Architecture

If regulation sets the outer limits of what platforms can do, design determines how they do it — and design choices shape user experience far more directly than policy documents. The feedback loops identified in Chapter 6 are, at their core, design decisions: algorithmic amplification, variable reward schedules, and the removal of friction were built in, and they can be designed out. The leverage points here operate at the level of system structure and information flows, changing the conditions under which behaviour occurs, not just the rules governing it.

Design for deliberation

The current architecture of most major platforms is optimised for speed and volume: fast scroll, instant reaction, continuous feed. An alternative design logic prioritises conditions for reflection. Reading time indicators, prompted pauses before sharing, friction between consumption and response — these are not anti-technology positions but deliberate design choices that slow the system down in ways that change what it produces. One participant described wanting a platform where their "rational mind has more space" to operate, where behaviour is not driven by emotional reaction. That is a design brief.

Community governance as infrastructure

The Commons scenario depends on platforms that are governed by the communities that use them, not by the commercial imperatives of the companies that build them. This requires governance tooling to be built into platform architecture from the outset as a core design requirement. Moderation settings, membership

criteria, community voting, norm-setting mechanisms, and transparent conflict resolution processes are the infrastructure of self-governance. They exist in nascent form on platforms like Mastodon and in community spaces like the forums participants described migrating toward. They should be the standard, not the exception.

Interoperability

The network effect — the dynamic by which the value of a platform increases with the number of its users — is the primary mechanism by which incumbent platforms resist competition from alternatives. Users who have built social connections on a platform cannot easily move them elsewhere. Interoperability — the capacity for different platforms to communicate and exchange data with each other — standards, modelled on the protocols that allow different email services to communicate, would change this. A person in a small, community-governed space could still send and receive messages from contacts on different platforms; leaving a dominant platform would no longer mean abandoning the relationships built there. This is the technical precondition for a genuinely plural platform ecosystem.

Metrics reform

What gets measured shapes what gets pursued. As established in earlier chapters, follower counts, reach, impressions, and engagement rates are the quantified expression of the visibility-as-value paradigm. Platforms should offer community health metrics alongside, or in place of, reach metrics: response depth, relationship continuity, whether new members find their footing, how often conflicts are resolved without escalation. The Commons vignette in Chapter 7 depicted a community that had voted not to generate individual reach numbers at all. That is an available design choice.

Human authorship verification and data portability

Attribution systems for human-generated content — verifiable through emerging digital provenance standards (such as cryptographic signing) that confirm a piece of content was made by a specific human creator, and portable across platforms — would support the revaluing of human expression in an AI-saturated environment. Alongside this, robust data portability tools — allowing users to export not just their content but their connection graphs (the full network of relationships and followers a user has built up on a platform, which is currently locked in and cannot be moved elsewhere), enabling genuine exit — are a design prerequisite for a platform ecosystem in which power is genuinely distributed rather than concentrated.

Neither of these changes is likely to emerge voluntarily from platforms whose revenue models depend on the opposite — data lock-in makes exit costly and keeps alternatives unviable, while distinguishing human from AI content risks undermining the content volume that engagement-driven advertising depends on. This is why both measures require regulatory mandate, building on the framework established in 8.2, rather than design goodwill alone. The DSA's transparency provisions (European Union, 2022) and the forthcoming Digital Fairness Act's expected interoperability requirements (European Parliament, 2025) are the most direct regulatory levers.

8.4 Creators, Communities, and Cultural Workers

The deepest leverage points in Meadows' hierarchy — goals and paradigms — are not primarily activated by policy or design. They shift through culture: through the accumulated effect of different choices, different models, different ways of inhabiting the system that eventually make a new logic feel obvious. Creators and cultural workers are not passive recipients of the conditions set by platforms and regulators. They are actors whose collective choices shape what the system normalises, what it rewards, and ultimately what it is for.

Collective organising

Platform accountability will not be won through regulation alone. They require organised advocacy from those whose work is at stake. Creator unions, professional collectives, and industry associations organised around the interests of makers rather than platforms are in early formation in several creative industries. Strengthening these and extending them to the full range of people who produce content as part of their professional and personal lives, not only those who are visible at the scale of "influencer", is a precondition for the platform accountability measures discussed in 8.2.

Economic model diversification

The advertising-attention model is not the only way to fund creative work. Subscription platforms, cooperative structures, direct support models, and public funding have all demonstrated viability at meaningful scale. The shift from "influencer-for-hire" to creator as community steward is already underway among those who have found the burnout of the current model unsustainable. For this shift to become structurally available rather than individually heroic — a choice rather than a survival strategy — it needs to be modelled, discussed, and collectively advocated for. Creators who have made the transition are its most credible advocates.

The bridge generation's particular role

Several participants in this study identified with a generational positioning that carries specific responsibility: old enough to have experienced digital sociality before platforms, young enough to have been fully shaped by them, and now in mid-career positions with the social capital and institutional standing to influence norms. This is not nostalgia — it is the practical leverage of a generation that can articulate, from lived experience, what has been lost and what a different system might feel like. That articulation matters. The preferred future does not happen because the analysis recommends it. It happens because enough people, in enough contexts, begin to model and name a different relationship to digital participation.

Contesting the soft coercion of professional visibility norms

The implicit pressure to maintain a visible online presence as a condition of professional worth — what participants consistently described as an expectation rather than a choice — is not primarily a regulatory problem. It is a cultural one, operating through the accumulated signals of hiring practices, performance conversations, and organizational cultures that have internalized the visibility-as-value logic. Contesting it requires collective refusal, not just individual boundary-setting: professional communities, sectors, and organizations actively developing and modelling norms in which presence and worth are decoupled. The millennial professionals now moving into leadership positions are well placed to do this, precisely because they remember, as one participant put it, what it felt like before the shift.

Building the alternatives

The Commons is not only a policy destination or a design challenge. It is also a practice: something that can be inhabited now, at small scale, in the choices creators and communities make about how they engage, what they build, and where they invest their attention. Community-governed spaces, direct creator-to-audience relationships, and digital environments organised around depth rather than reach already exist. Growing them, funding them, and making their existence legible — demonstrating that another model is possible and sustainable — is itself a form of systems intervention. Early movers create the evidence base. They also create the felt experience of something different, which is what makes the paradigm shift eventually possible.

Your role as a participant

You, reader, also have a role in this — not as a policymaker or a platform designer, but as someone who has lived inside this system and, having encountered this research, now sees some of its architecture more clearly. Individual choices within a broken structure have real limits, and nothing here is suggesting that

posting less or curating differently is equivalent to regulatory reform. But the paradigm shift The Commons requires is not only structural. It is also cultural — and culture changes through the accumulated weight of people thinking differently about what participation means and what it is for. Decoupling your sense of worth, even partially, from visibility metrics; choosing depth over reach in the spaces where you have that choice; noticing when the performance reflex activates and asking whether it serves you — none of this moves the needle alone. But it is part of the substrate from which larger change becomes possible. The most durable thing this research can offer is not a set of instructions but a different frame: one in which your engagement with digital life is understood as a practice you can reflect on and, where it matters to you, reshape. That is not a small thing.

8.5 A Design Agenda for Transition

Strategic foresight and innovation is not only an analytical discipline. It is a design practice — one concerned not just with mapping possible futures but with creating the conditions under which preferred ones become reachable. This final section sketches what that practice looks like in the context of the transition toward The Commons.

Scenarios as design tools

The four futures developed in Chapter 7 are not predictions to be passively received. They are provocations — structured imaginings designed to make the choices embedded in the present more visible and the range of possible outcomes more legible. Used in participatory design processes, they can surface values conflicts, reveal assumptions, and open the space for different communities to articulate what they want from digital participation. A platform cooperative exploring its governance model, a regulatory body developing algorithmic accountability frameworks, a creator collective rethinking its relationship to metrics: each of these processes would benefit from the kind of structured future-thinking that scenarios enable. The illustrations developed for this research — The Glass Stage, The Empty Circus, The Visible Hand, The Commons — are designed to make the worlds feel inhabitable rather than abstract, and in that sense are themselves design artifacts.

Transition design as an orientation

The backcasting pathway in Chapter 7 makes visible something important about the nature of the change required: it cannot be designed at once, in a single intervention, by a single actor. It is a transition — a sustained, multi-phase process of changing conditions at successive levels of depth. Transition design, as a

practice, is precisely concerned with how to work across these timescales and levels: designing not just outcomes but pathways, not just artefacts but the conditions under which different artefacts become possible (Irwin, 2018). The recommendations in this chapter are not endpoints. They are starting conditions — interventions calibrated to make the next level of change more reachable.

8.6 Chapter Summary: A Direction Worth Holding

This chapter has translated futures thinking into action. Beginning from the leverage point hierarchy developed in Chapter 6 and the preferred future articulated in Chapter 7, it has mapped specific recommendations across four actor domains: regulatory and policy frameworks, platform design and technical architecture, creators and cultural communities, and the design practice of transition itself.

The recommendations are not equivalent in their urgency or their depth. Regulatory interventions are the most tractable in the near term and the most foundational for what follows. Design changes are the most directly felt by users and the most immediately enabling of alternative models. Cultural shifts — in how creators organize, how professionals relate to visibility, how communities inhabit digital spaces — are the slowest-moving and the most durable. All three are necessary. None is sufficient alone.

What holds them together is the leverage point logic: each intervention, at whatever level, is most valuable insofar as it creates conditions for the next level of change to become possible. A regulatory environment that mandates algorithmic transparency creates the conditions for design alternatives to be visible and legible. A design ecosystem that builds community governance tools creates the conditions for a new generation of creators to inhabit a different relationship to their work. A generation of creators who model that relationship creates the conditions for the paradigm shift — from visibility to belonging — that is The Commons.

That shift will not happen quickly, and it will not happen uniformly. But the signals are already present: in the participants who described moving key relationships to smaller, more intentional spaces; in the platforms built on different logics that are growing precisely because users are seeking what they offer; in the regulatory momentum that is, slowly but consequentially, catching up with the scale and influence of the systems it governs. The window is open. The question is whether the actors with the leverage to use it will act with sufficient coordination and sufficient ambition.

This study is one argument that they should.

CHAPTER 09

Conclusion

What the Research Found

This MRP set out to understand how the shift from connection to performance in digital content culture is sustained, and what conditions would need to exist for something different to emerge. The short answer, arrived at through nine interviews, embedded netnographic observation, systems analysis, and futures thinking, is this: the shift is not accidental, not inevitable, and not primarily a product of individual behaviour. It is structural.

Platform architecture, monetization logics, and algorithmic governance have produced a content environment in which performance is the default orientation, visibility is the organising metric, and participation feels increasingly compulsory. These dynamics are reinforced at every level of the system — from the design of individual affordances to the economic models of the largest companies in the world. They are also internalised. The causal layered analysis revealed a worldview in which performance has become synonymous with participation, and a governing myth — to be seen is to exist — that holds the system in place even when its costs are visible and named.

That this myth is widely named is itself significant. The netnographic observation and the interviews alike documented something that does not appear in earlier scholarship with the same clarity: widespread, articulate fatigue. Not passive disengagement, but active critique from within — people who understand the system, can describe its mechanisms, and are still navigating its pressures. That is a form of leverage. Systems change when the gap between how things are and how they are experienced as legitimate begins to close. That gap — between the costs of content culture and people's willingness to absorb them as inevitable — is closing.

The futures scenarios — The Glass Stage, The Empty Circus, The Visible Hand, The Commons — did not produce a single "correct" vision. They were designed to expand the range of what is considered possible, and to surface the value choices embedded in each trajectory. The preferred future, The Commons, is not a utopia, but a direction: toward content culture organised around belonging rather than visibility, depth rather than volume, genuine connection rather than optimised reach. Backcasting mapped the conditions

that would need to accumulate for that direction to become reachable. Many of them are already accumulating.

The Contribution

The contribution of this research is threefold. First, it provides an integrated systems account of content culture that connects the everyday experiences of non-professional users to the structural dynamics that shape those experiences — something the existing literature, which tends to focus either on platform mechanics or on professional creators, has addressed less directly. Second, it brings futures methodology to a domain that is more often analysed retrospectively than prospectively, treating the present moment not as a settled condition but as a branching point. Third, it produces a practitioner-oriented set of recommendations calibrated to different levels of systemic depth, grounded in Meadows' leverage point hierarchy, and addressed to actors who have different but complementary forms of leverage.

The research is also, inescapably, a piece of situated knowledge. It was produced by a millennial researcher who has inhabited the system under study for two decades, with the double awareness that comes from watching something change around you. That positionality is not a bias to be corrected. It is part of what makes the question worth asking and the preferred future imaginable from the ground up.

Limitations and Open Questions

A sample of nine participants across six countries is a foundation for theoretical development, not statistical generalization. The netnographic observation is bounded by the researcher's own platform presence. The recommendations in Chapter 8 are specific but not exhaustive — there are actors, institutions, and forms of leverage this research did not reach.

Several questions the research surfaces but does not resolve: How do the dynamics of content culture differ across global contexts, particularly in the Global South, where platform use is expanding rapidly and regulatory frameworks are at an earlier stage? What role do younger users — those who have no memory of a pre-algorithmic social media — play in sustaining or disrupting the current system? And what would it take for the fatigue that is already widespread to translate into coordinated collective action rather than individual withdrawal?

These are questions for future research, questions that the current moment is pressing toward answers.

A Final Note

The system described in this research is not fixed. It was built through a sequence of design decisions, business model choices, regulatory absences, and cultural adaptations that compounded over time into something that now feels like the natural order of things. It is not. The conditions for something different are not guaranteed, but they are real, and they are present in the platforms, the regulatory environment, the lived experiences of the people interviewed here, and the simple, persistent fact that most people who started out using these systems did not sign up to perform. They signed up to connect.

That desire has not gone away. This study is an argument that it should not have to.

Bibliography

Abidin, C. (2016). Visibility labour: Engaging with influencers' fashion brands and #OOTD advertorial campaigns on Instagram. Media International Australia, 161(1), 86–100. https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X16665177

Abidin, C. (2017). #familygoals: Family influencers, calibrated amateurism, and justifying young digital labour. Social Media + Society, 3(2), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305117707191

Awin Group. (2022). Influencer inhibitors: 80% of content creators are burnt out. Awin. https://www.agilitypr.com/pr-news/social-media-influencer-marketing/influencer-inhibitors-4-out-of-5-of-content-creators-are-burnt-out-struggle-with-mental-health/

Bishop, S. (2019). Managing visibility on YouTube: Algorithmic anxiety and the creators' pursuit of authenticity. New Media & Society, 21(11–12), 2589–2606. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819854731

boyd, d. (2014). It's complicated: The social lives of networked teens. Yale University Press. https://www.danah.org/books/ItsComplicated.pdf

Bruns, A. (2015). Making sense of society through social media. Social Media + Society, 1(1), 1–5. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115578679

Brüns, A., & Meißner, M. (2024). Generative AI and aesthetic convergence in digital content culture. New Media & Society .

Brüns, J. D., & Meißner, M. (2024). Do you create your content yourself? Using generative artificial intelligence for social media content creation diminishes perceived brand authenticity. Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services, 79, 103790. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2024.103790

Bucher, T. (2012). Want to be on the top? Algorithmic power and the threat of invisibility on Facebook. New Media & Society, 14(7), 1164–1180. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444812440159

Bucher, T. (2016). The algorithmic imaginary: Exploring the ordinary affects of Facebook algorithms. Information, Communication & Society, 20(1), 30–44. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2016.1154086

Bucher, T., & Helmond, A. (2018). The affordances of social media platforms. In J. Burgess, T. Poell, & A. Marwick (Eds.), The SAGE handbook of social media (pp. 233–253). SAGE Publications.

Butler, J. (1990). Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity. Routledge. https://selforganizedseminar.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/butler-gender_trouble.pdf

Chou, H.-T. G., & Edge, N. (2012). "They are happier and having better lives than I am": The impact of using Facebook on perceptions of others' lives. Cyberpsychology, Behaviour, and Social Networking, 15(2), 117–121. https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2011.0324

Cotter, K. (2019). Playing the visibility game: How digital influencers and algorithms negotiate influence on Instagram. New Media & Society, 21(4), 895–913. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818815684

Couldry, N., & Mejias, U. (2019). The costs of connection: How data is colonizing human life and appropriating it for capitalism. Stanford University Press.

Cover, R. (2012). Performing and undoing identity online: Social networking, identity theories and the incompatibility of online profiles and friendship regimes. Convergence, 18(2), 177–193. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856511433684

Dator, J. (2009). Alternative futures at the Manoa School. Journal of Futures Studies, 14(2), 1–18. https://jfsdigital.org/articles-and-essays/2009-2/vol-14-no-2-november/articles/futuristsalternative-futures-at-the-manoa-school/

Deloitte. (2025). 2025 digital media trends: Social platforms are becoming a dominant force in media and entertainment. https://www.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/industry/technology/digital-media-trends-consumption-habits-survey/2025.html

Design Council. (2019). The double diamond: A universally accepted depiction of the design process. https://www.designcouncil.org.uk/our-resources/the-double-diamond/

DeVito, M. A. (2021). Adaptive folk theorization as a path to algorithmic literacy on changing platforms. Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction, 5(CSCW2), 1–38. https://doi.org/10.1145/3476080

DeVito, M. A., Gerber, J., & Birnholtz, J. (2017). Platforms, people, and perception: Using affordances to understand self-presentation on social media. Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction, 1 (CSCW), 1–18.

DeVito, M. A., Gergle, D., & Birnholtz, J. (2017). "Algorithms ruin everything": #RIPTwitter, folk theories, and resistance to algorithmic change in social media. In Proceedings of the 2017 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (pp. 3163–3174). Association for Computing Machinery. https://doi.org/10.1145/3025453.3025659

Doshi, A. R., & Hauser, O. P. (2024). Generative AI enhances individual creativity but reduces the collective diversity of novel content. Science Advances, 10(28). https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.adn5290

Duffy, B. E. (2017). (Not) getting paid to do what you love: Gender, social media, and aspirational work. Yale University Press. https://doi.org/10.12987/yale/9780300218176.001.0001

Duffy, B. E., & Wissinger, E. (2017). Mythologies of creative work in the social media age: Fun, free, and "just being me." International Journal of Communication, 11, 4652–4671.

Eslami, M., Rickman, A., Vaccaro, K., Aleyasen, A., Vuong, A., Karahalios, K., Hamilton, K., & Sandvig, C. (2015). "I always assumed that I wasn't really that close to [her]": Reasoning about invisible algorithms in the Facebook News Feed. In Proceedings of the 33rd Annual ACM Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (pp. 153–162). https://doi.org/10.1145/2702123.2702556

European Commission. (2022). Directive 2022/2464 of the European Parliament and of the Council on corporate sustainability reporting (CSRD). Official Journal of the European Union, L 322, 15–80. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32022L2464

European Commission. (2025a, December 5). Commission fines X €120 million under the Digital Services Act [Press release]. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_25_2934

European Parliament. (2025). Regulating dark patterns in the EU: Towards digital fairness (PE 767.191). European Parliamentary Research Service. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2025/767191/EPRS_ATA(2025)767191_EN.pdf

European Union. (2022). Regulation (EU) 2022/2065 of the European Parliament and of the Council on a Single Market For Digital Services (Digital Services Act). Official Journal of the European Union, L 277, 1–102. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32022R2065

Foucault, M. (1977). Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison. Pantheon Books.

Gillespie, T. (2010). The politics of "platforms." New Media & Society, 12(3), 347–364. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444809342738

Goffman, E. (1959). The presentation of self in everyday life. Anchor Books.

Gorwa, R., Binns, R., & Katzenbach, C. (2020). Algorithmic content moderation: Technical and political challenges in the automation of platform governance. Big Data & Society, 7(1), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951719897945

Herman, L. (2023). For you page? TikTok creators' algorithmic dependencies. In Proceedings of the IASDR 2023 Conference. Design Research Society. https://dl.designresearchsociety.org/iasdr/iasdr2023/fullpapers/224/

Hines, A., & Bishop, P. (Eds.). (2006). Thinking about the future: Guidelines for strategic foresight. Social Technologies.

Hootsuite. (2025). Social media trends 2026. https://www.hootsuite.com/research/social-trends

Inayatullah, S. (1998). Causal layered analysis: Poststructuralism as method. Futures, 30(8), 815–829. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0016-3287(98)00086-X

International Energy Agency. (2024). Electricity 2024. IEA. https://www.iea.org/reports/electricity-2024

Kawakita, J. (1991). The original KJ method. Kawakita Research Institute.

Kozinets, R. V. (2020). Netnography: The essential guide to qualitative social media research (3rd ed.). SAGE.

Marwick, A. E. (2013). Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, and Branding in the Social Media Age. Yale University Press. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5vkzxr

Meadows, D. (1999). Leverage points: Places to intervene in a system. The Sustainability Institute. https://donellameadows.org/archives/leverage-points-places-to-intervene-in-a-system/

Meadows, D. H. (2008). Thinking in systems: A primer. Chelsea Green Publishing.

Monahan, S. (2020, November 17). Why are public thinkers flocking to Substack? The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/nov/17/substack-media-platform-publishing

Murthy, V. H. (2023). Social media and youth mental health: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/sg-youth-mental-health-social-media-advisory.pdf

NBC News. (2024, November 13). X sees largest user exodus since Musk takeover. NBC News. https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/x-sees-largest-user-exodus-musk-takeover-rcna179793

Nieborg, D., & Poell, T. (2018). The platformisation of cultural production. New Media & Society, 20(11), 4275–4292. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818769694

Ofcom. (2026, March). Online safety industry bulletin: March 2026. Ofcom. https://www.ofcom.org.uk/online-safety/illegal-and-harmful-content/online-safety-industry-bulletins/online-safety-industry-bulletin-march-2026

Pasquinelli, M., & Joler, V. (2020). The Nooscope manifesto: AI as instrument of knowledge extractivism. AI & Society, 36(4), 1269–1280. https://doi.org/10.1007/s00146-020-01097-6

Poell, T., & van Dijck, J. (2015). Social media and the transformation of public space. Social Media + Society, 1(2), 1–5. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115622482

Poell, T., Nieborg, D., & van Dijck, J. (2019). Concepts of the digital society: Platformisation. Internet Policy Review, 8(4). https://doi.org/10.14763/2019.4.1425

Raza, N. (2025). We're so entangled with our devices that online feels more real than real life [Video]. TED Conferences. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J-FzqolS5Q4

Sánchez-Torres, J. A., et al. (2025). The dawn of 'deinfluencing' as a vehicle for moral responsibility and anti-consumption. Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services, 84, Article 104157. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2025.104157

Senge, P. M. (1990). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization.* Doubleday/Currency.

TechCrunch. (2024, June 6). A social app for creatives, Cara, grew from 40K to 650K users in a week because artists are fed up with Meta's AI policies. TechCrunch. https://techcrunch.com/2024/06/06/a-social-app-for-creatives-cara-grew-from-40k-to-650k-users-in-a-week-because-artists-are-fed-up-with-metas-ai-policies/

UK Government. (2023). Online Safety Act 2023. https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2023/50/contents

Valkenburg, P. M., Meier, A., & Beyens, I. (2022). Social media use and its impact on adolescent mental health: An umbrella review of the evidence. Current Opinion in Psychology, 44, 58–68. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2021.08.017

van Dijck, J., & Poell, T. (2013). Understanding social media logic. Media and Communication, 1(1), 2–14. https://www.cogitatiopress.com/mediaandcommunication/article/view/70

Wiener, A. (2021, January 4). Is Substack the media future we want? The New Yorker. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/01/04/is-substack-the-media-future-we-want

YouTube. (n.d.). YouTube Partner Program overview & eligibility. https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/72851

Zuboff, S. (2015). Big other: Surveillance capitalism and the prospects of an information civilization. Journal of Information Technology, 30(1), 75–89. https://doi.org/10.1057/jit.2015.5

Zuboff, S. (2019). The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power . PublicAffairs.

Zulli, D., & Zulli, D. J. (2022). Extending the Internet meme: Conceptualizing technological mimesis and imitation publics on the TikTok platform. New Media & Society, 22(8), 1531–1550. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820983603