25 years of New Media Studies

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METHOD

To inductively "vibe map" 25 years (2000–2024) of New Media Studies, we used BERTopic for doing topic modeling using vector embeddings. Data was collected using VibeCollector on 35 scholarly journals using their ISSNs (sources: CrossRef, SemanticScholar, and OpenAlex). The selected journals were collectively identified as being directly related to the field. We cleaned the data by removing XML tags ("<jats:p>") and filtering out editorials and book reviews. Titles and abstracts were combined and embedded using the small model Snowflake/snowflake-arctic-embed-s to capture the semantic meaning of each publication. BERTopic uses UMAP for dimensionality reduction and HDBSCAN for clustering. We tested different hyperparameters across four benchmark years (2005, 2010, 2018, 2024) to evaluate stability and conceptual shifts. The outcome was semantic grouping of similar articles in clusters together with representative keywords, refined through stopword removal using c-TF-IDF. Outliers were connected to their most probable topic so all articles had a topic. BERTopic then subdivides documents in each topic through each year, allowing to see the evolution of the keywords used. After inductively mapping the field across the years, we created stories that build upon initial research we conducted on the baseline of the field through edited field-defining handbooks. Some topics were removed for clarity (e.g. "Editorials").

MAIN RESEARCH QUESTION

How can we use small AI techniques to inductively map the conceptual structure of New Media Studies—and what does this reveal about the field?

RESEARCH SUB-QUESTIONS

1. What can this process teach us about the capacities and limitations of LLMs as tools for exploratory research?
2. How might this dual inquiry, into both the field and the model, inform the design of alternative research infrastructures grounded in scholarly rather than commercial values?

Relevance 0 — 5+
Frequency (Number of Articles) 1.0 / 651

Artificial Intelligence

Artificial Intelligence emerged in early discourse as a speculative and philosophical concern, tied to questions of agency, ethics, and the "conditions of possibility" for artificial life. Interest remained modest until a marked resurgence around 2020. From 2021 onward, article volume surged—peaking dramatically in 2024—reflecting AI's mainstreaming and intensified critical scrutiny. The focus shifted from foundational questions to urgent debates around power, regulation, accountability, and machine autonomy. This arc marks AI's journey from fringe theory to infrastructural reality, prompting renewed ethical, political, and design-oriented inquiry across the media and communication field.

Open-source and digital commons

Between 2010 and 2015, research on open-source software and digital libraries imagined the Internet as a cultural and technological commons. Scholars emphasized free software, collaborative development, public access, and the preservation of archival memory. By the late 2010s, these topics declined. Did openness, decentralization, and participation, once central to the digital future, become a background infrastructure or residual imagery in a platform-dominated present? This shift in scholarly attention may reflect a deeper reorientation in digital culture itself.

Platforms and social media

As openness declined, platforms emerged as engines of visibility, optimization, and control. Early research on social media, e.g. related to Facebook (11) and Twitter (29), focused on personal networks and public discourse. By the mid-2010s, scholars turned to platforms as governance systems (Topic 27). TikTok's rise (Topic 38) marked a shift toward short-form video, performance-based visibility, and affective labor. Across these trajectories, we see a temporal and conceptual shift: from relational connection to platforms and from networks of people to streams of content. Being online increasingly means being seen, curated, and calculated.

Surveillance and privacy

In the early aughts, a lot of the debate on Surveillance & Privacy focused on CCTV. In 2014 and 2015, the discussion began to focus on big data, Snowden's revelations, and other issues around digital data. In more recent years, Biometrics & Facial Recognition discussion emerged, signalling the rise of new forms of control through technological systems. The journal Surveillance & Society plays a key part in the debates of this topic. This also explains the blip in the year 2002: at first, we thought this could be due to the post 9/11 debates on surveillance; however upon a closer look, it seems the metadata wrongly dates articles published before 2004 as if they were all on Sep 1, 2002.

Conspiracy, misinformation, and COVID-19

Beginning in mid-2015, there was a notable rise in articles discussing bot activity and fake news on social media, especially Facebook and Twitter. This marked a shift from viewing the internet as a space of truth to recognizing its limitations and the importance of digital literacy. Between 2016–2020, articles increasingly addressed misinformation, often tied to health and vaccine concerns. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this trend, with a surge in discussions around conspiracy theories and disinformation spread by bots or rhetorical actors. Terms like "infodemic," "conspiracy theory," and "fake news" became central in New Media Studies through to 2024.

Non-Western New Media

Over the past 25 years, New Media Studies has increasingly turned its attention to Non-Western contexts, with a growing body of scholarship examining developments in China, Korea, the Arab world, and other regions. A recurring theme throughout this work is the ongoing negotiation between public participation and state control. In China, media studies has evolved alongside the nation's emergence as a global power, shifting from an early focus on BBS forums and censorship to more recent explorations of digital nationalism. In the Arab world, research has centered on satellite networks and the formation of contested publics. Korean media scholarship has charted the rise of soft power through fandom and the global spread of K-pop.

Data Tracking

The trends of self-tracking and dating apps reveal how intimacy has increasingly become a core part of digital platforms, as they merge personal data with social connection. Even before 2020, location tracking and algorithmic recommendations became central to how apps operate, shaping how people connect and navigate online spaces. Self-tracking technologies, from health apps to geolocation, quietly reshaped daily life and social interactions. The spike around 2020 reflects how the pandemic accelerated these dynamics: governments normalized large-scale data tracking and lockdowns confined social interaction to digital platforms. Together, these trends show how personal data and online connection have become inseparable in everyday life.

We constructed a baseline corpus for New Media Studies through a multi-step process combining expert curation and LLM-assisted taxonomy generation. The result was a field-specific conceptual taxonomy designed to support our vibe-oriented exploratory semantic mapping.