**Panel Title**: "The Formation of Publics Through Social Media"

**Program Description**:

This panel presents a variety of perspectives on the role of social media and other forms of representation in the shaping of social and political relationships. Its four papers examine the extent to which social media technology can alter the relationship individuals and collectives have with the public sphere. Composed of a diverse group of scholars, the panel will address the relationship between mediated, discursive spaces and the public sphere at large, through the lenses of history, journalism, art and games.

**Panel Rationale**:

One of the most promising and important things that social media provide is a space through which the traditional public sphere—criticized for its exclusionary structure, narrow conception of public discourse, and historical reductionism—can be fruitfully re-imagined. Social media provide new ways of accessing and interacting with others, and thus suggest a potential for radical reformation in social relations. In theory, the space created by social media offers a flexible platform for individual and collective identity formation, as well as a new means of participation in public discourse. At the same time, like the public sphere theorized by Habermas, social media remain embedded in preexisting economic, social and ideological relationships.

Our panel will critically analyze the formation of publics using social media with four case studies: the "social turn" towards participatory art projects; transparency and objectivity in trans-Atlantic journalism; the game-like nature of many apps and programs; and journalistic uses of social media in India. In each of these cases, one central question is whether social media generate and disrupt or simply follow existing social relationships. We aim to highlight how social media provide an interplay of particular types of identities and social potentials that are distinct from their historical predecessors. However, we also emphasize that the interaction fostered by social media are embedded in pre-existing discourses and established media models. Just as social media encourage connectivity and transparency, and thus foster wider communities, they can also intensify old conflicts and reinforce existing divisions.

The panel seeks to amend more Utopian views of social media's affect on the larger public sphere. This discussion will provide pathways to a more complex and dynamic view of social media's role in the public sphere and its relationship with public spaces.

**Participants and Affiliations** (in order):

Chair: C. W. Anderson
The College of Staten Island


Presenter: Rebecca Lossin

Columbia University

Presenter: Colin Agur
Columbia University and Yale University

Presenter: Lluis de Nadal Alsina
Columbia University

Presenter: Maxwell Foxman
Columbia University

**Titles and Abstracts for Presentations** (150 words each):

Rebecca Lossin
"Social Media, Social Art, Social Change?"

From the mid 1990s into the 2000s socially engaged art occupied a particularly prominent place in curatorial practice and art critical discourse. Labelled by curator Nicolas Bourriaud as relational aesthetics and referred to alternately as participatory, interactive, community based or simply social art, this set of artistic practices attempted to displace the singular artist/creator, circumvent the hierarchies of traditional art institutions, and shift the role of the public from that of passive spectator to active participant. Not only does the social turn in art historically coincide with the increasing public availability of the Internet, its rhetoric intersects with that of social media in important ways. Indeed, participatory art could be read as a cultural symptom of an increasingly networked world. Considered as a parallel practice, a critical analysis of the social and political implications of participatory art provides a useful framework for thinking about the limits and potentials of social media. The discursive limits of art make these projects and performances more amenable to analysis and critique than something as diffuse and variously integrated as social media. Within this limited context—also "virtual" in that it occurs as art rather than 'real' politics—one can more easily pose questions about basic structural issues affecting social networking's political potency, such as the relationship of the real to the virtual. It also offers a space to think about the political implications of categories such as participation in a critical way because they are thematically central and already offered as critical categories rather than appearing as technological effects or mechanical necessities.

Colin Agur
"Social Media, Public Spaces and Identity in Indian Journalism"

This paper draws on interviews with Indian and foreign correspondents on their uses of social media during the 2012 Delhi gang rape case. It discusses the new communicative spaces and identity that are emerging in Indian storytelling and explores the new interactions that are a part of Indian journalism. These interactions involve a mix of old and new journalistic elements: On the one hand, the coverage of the Delhi gang rape highlights an emerging, participatory nature of storytelling by journalists. The growth of social media suggests new openness and inclusivity in news production and dissemination. On the other hand, the 'inclusivity' of social media is enjoyed mostly by the country's urban, educated, connected middle and upper classes. While these are early days for social media in Indian journalism, this case study provides insight into social media interactions in different economic and social circumstances than exist in the West.

Lluis de Nadal

"Threats and Promises of Transparency for Public Discourse"

The rapid expansion of social media has been accompanied by a move towards transparency in journalism. More and more reporters are blogging about how they do their jobs, and developing a closer relationship with their readers. The catchphrase "transparency is the new objectivity" enjoys great popularity in online journalism. The benefits of this move for the quality of public discourse seem hard to dispute. However, is transparency enough? Can it successfully challenge objectivity? To explore this questions, I turn to the iconic exchange between former *New York Times* executive editor, Bill Keller, and former *Guardian* columnist, Glenn Greenwald, published in the *Times* last October. While Keller defends the value of impartiality, Greenwald advocates a journalism more open about biases and point of view. In this paper, I consider the strengths and weaknesses of their viewpoints for a substantial and meaningful public discourse. In essence, I argue that objectivity in journalism remains unsuccessfully challenged, and that, properly understood, it is still a necessary ideal.

Maxwell Foxman
"Gaming the System: Gamification, Playbor and Toying with the Public"

If the public sphere created a safe space for the development of critical and rational discourse, its anthropological predecessor might be the magic circle. According to historian Johan Huizinga, this safe space for play preceded modern society and was manifested in everything from law to war. Part of the magic of play within this circle was the ability to know and be aware of the rules of play. With the rise of "gamification" in the beginning of this decade, play and the public arena are colliding. Gamification has been highly criticized for employing games and play to cultivate particular user activity, causing one scholar to redefine it as "playbor." Yet, it persists within academic and business communities because of its powerful effects on individuals and the public alike. Participants, for the sake of play, perform all sorts of unexpected acts, from losing weight to publicly disclosing their whereabouts. This paper will serve two primary functions.  First, it will explain the power of gamified applications on individuals through a kind of "punctuated play" where the magic circle imbues everyday activities. Secondly, it will then consider, through the case study of the social media application Foursquare, the effect of public disclosure through gamification, arguing that the community created through the application is both public, broadcasting information over the Internet, and insular, playing a game among a distinct group of individuals. This dichotomy raises important questions about the nature of the public and private, global and local, in the digital age.

**Bio**
Rebecca Lossin is a librarian, writer and PhD candidate in Communications at Columbia University. Her interests include the intersection of technology and contemporary art, the destruction of information, Luddites, and the reconfiguration of work and leisure in a networked society. Her work has appeared in *The Nation* and *The Huffingtion Post.* She is a regular contributor to *The Brooklyn Rail.*

Colin Agur is a PhD Candidate in Communications at Columbia University and a Visiting Fellow at Yale Law School's Information Society Project. His dissertation examines mobile phone policy and network formation in India. He has published articles about Indian media in Harvard's Nieman Lab, *Journalism: Theory, Practice, Criticism* and the *Journal of Asian and African Studies*.

Lluis de Nadal is a PhD student in Communications at Columbia University. His research interests include epistemology, journalism, psychoanalysis and philosophy of technology. After receiving a B.A. in Communication Sciences from the Autonomous University of Barcelona, he went on to work for the Public Catalan Television, specializing in the convergence between television and digital media. He also founded the popular Catalan band Quart Primera, where he played the drums and the clarinet. Recently, he graduated from the Arts Journalism M.A. program at Columbia University. In his Master's thesis, he explored algorithmic theater.

Maxwell Foxman explores the nature of digital media in everyday life as a PhD candidate in Communications at Columbia University. Maxwell received his Master's from NYU's Department of Media, Culture and Communication, where he studied social and digital media in the contexts of gamification and location-based technology. While completing his Master's, Maxwell taught at a secondary school, where he founded an independent study program and taught, among other things, journalism, the history of comics and Non-Western Civilizations.