Cogitatio

Digital Geographies of Hope: Situated Futures in a Data-Driven World

Cornelia Brantner [1] , **Kaarina Nikunen** [2] , **and Georgia Aitaki** [1]

[1] Department of Geography, Media and Communication, Karlstad University, Sweden
[2] Faculty of Information Technology and Communication Sciences, Tampere University, Finland

Correspondence: Cornelia Brantner (cornelia.brantner@kau.se)

Abstract

This thematic issue advances digital geographies of hope as a lens for examining how possibilities for action, connection, and alternative futures take shape in a deeply datafied and platformized world. While critical scholarship has documented extraction, surveillance, bordering, and algorithmic injustice, the contributions foreground hope as situated, relational, and contested, emerging within crisis rather than outside of it. Drawing on utopian and feminist thought, queer and decolonial critique, and research on affect, care, and solidarity, the thematic issue conceptualizes hope as both affective and infrastructural: enacted through everyday practices, collective struggles, and sociotechnical imaginaries that expand "room to act." Cases range from feminist and anti-war organizing to rural and regional media ecologies, post-digital work cultures, and AI governance debates. Read across these contexts, hope appears as ambivalent yet generative, enabling refusal, repair, solidarity, and world-making across scales.

Keywords

critical geomedia studies; digital activism; digital geographies; futures; hope; platformization; spatial justice

1. Introduction

As this thematic issue contends with the role of hope in a datafied and platformized world, we open with two reflections that illuminate the fragile conditions under which hope becomes possible. In her book *Hope in the Dark*, Rebecca Solnit (2015) writes that uncertainty itself creates spaces for hope: "Hope locates itself in the premises that we don't know what will happen and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty there is room to act" (foreword to the third edition, para. 10). In *The Spirit of Hope*, philosopher Byung-Chul Han (2024) warns that hope cannot survive in atmospheres governed by fear: "In a climate of fear, there is no hope. Fear represses

hope. What is needed is therefore a politics of hope that creates an atmosphere of hope against the regime of fear" (Han, 2024, prelude, para. 35).

In recent years, critical scholarship on digital media, datafication, and platformization has been dominated by diagnoses of harm: extraction, surveillance, bordering, and algorithmic injustice. For example, critical work has mapped how digital infrastructures extend state and corporate power into everyday space, and how digital systems reproduce racialized, gendered, and classed inequalities at multiple scales, from intimate life to planetary logistics. Yet, people continue to assemble, imagine, and build forms of connection, care, and resistance. It is in these tensions that this thematic issue on digital geographies of hope is situated. This issue has its origins in the 5th international geomedia conference *Digital Geographies of Hope*, held at Tampere University, Finland, in September 2023, and co-organised with the Centre for Geomedia Studies at Karlstad University, Sweden, where scholars from across human geography, media and communication, and cognate fields explored how hope is articulated and contested in a deeply datafied world. It also connects to earlier work that has brought questions of futures and sociotechnical imaginaries into geomedia studies by conceptualising geomedia as both a sociotechnical regime and an imaginary, and by interrogating hegemonic geomedia futures (Fast et al., 2024). While that thematic issue foregrounded "geomedia futures" more broadly, here we turn explicitly to digital geographies of hope as a way of engaging with possible futures under conditions of datafication and platformization. While several of the contributions were developed from work presented at the conference, the thematic issue includes additional articles submitted in response to our call for papers, further widening the empirical and conceptual range of digital geographies of hope.

What do we mean by hope—and how to conceptualize it? Hope is an elusive and fragile concept, marked by considerable ambiguity and often applied rather loosely across diverse contexts within the social sciences and humanities.

In *Principles of Hope*, Ernst Bloch (1959/1986) formulates utopian thinking as anticipatory consciousness in a world that is incomplete and constantly becoming. Thus, hope presents itself in the energy of imagining better futures, in the desire to transcend the status quo. In a similar way, feminist scholarship connects hope with the affective energy of becoming: Mary Zournazi (2003) frames hope as a vital force—a drive or energy that embeds us in the world and sustains our engagement with the ecology of life, ethics, and politics. She identifies a need to re-envisage and imagine hope as "a convergence of new agendas, conversations and possibilities in everyday life and political activity" (Zournazi, 2003, p. 17).

While the utopian energy and drive to imagine are identified as central to hope, the question of the abstract nature of utopian thinking and the extent to which aspirations can be realized preoccupies reflections on hope. Many thinkers argue that hope for the future should be anchored in reality while remaining radical through a transformative imagination that envisions alternatives to the present. Some are especially cautious about how hope is mobilized within ideological agendas that determine which futures are imagined and by whom. For example, in *Hope Without Optimism*, Terry Eagleton (2015) adopts a history-of-ideas approach to argue that hope is never ideologically neutral; rather, it is embedded within—and shaped by—relations of power. In queer studies, Jack Halberstam (2022) has consistently argued for the need to problematize hope and to instead recognize the critical value of failure, collapse, and unworlding.

Such contextual forms of hope can be traced across a range of theories engaging with utopian imagination, yet they diverge in how deeply hope is embedded in the everyday routines of life or whether it assumes a central role during moments of crisis.

Gayatri Spivak (as cited in Zournazi, 2003) conceives of crisis not simply as a moment of breakdown but as a hopeful opportunity: an interruption of the everyday that opens possibilities for resistance. Such ruptures can unsettle dominant epistemologies and create spaces for rethinking agency, particularly in relation to the subaltern and the ethics of responsibility. Here, crisis is a condition that demands a reconfiguration of ethical and political responsibility—an acknowledgment of shared precariousness that can ground new forms of solidarity. For some scholars, such as Achille Mbembe (2019), crisis is not a singular rupture but a lived condition that gradually becomes normalized, shaping the temporal and affective structures of everyday existence where uncertainty and vulnerability become constitutive of life rather than exceptional states. While Mbembe is far from hopeful, his work has been used in exploring how everyday hope emerges as a relational and situated practice of resilience—woven into the fabric of ordinary life as a stubborn determination to persist. Such hope is not innocent; it may be cruel, demanding endurance in the face of structural violence and deferred futures (Visser, 2025). Payal Arora (2024) even argues that in precarious contexts, hope manifests as a necessity that provides a horizon towards the future, whereas pessimism is a privilege reserved for those who can afford it.

While politics of hope may sometimes be connected to a coercive sense of "we-ness," there are approaches of hope that reimagine collectivity not as a prescriptive identity but as an open horizon: as a convivial ethos of sharing (Ashcroft, 2017) or a performative practice that transgresses entrenched normativities (Muñoz, 2019).

Such polyvocal imagination has been an objective of research that explores practices of digital witnessing and care, technologies of experience and encounter, and digital constellations of solidarity (Nikunen, 2019). As many of the contributions in this special issue show, the affective drive to imagine through and with digital media requires contextual grounding to lived experience. Furthermore, it often requires radical rethinking and reformation of the digital conditions, questioning the algorithmic platform power that shapes digital participation as well as the mobilization of alternative digital spaces. From this perspective, then, hope is not treated as naïve optimism or a simple counterweight to critique. Rather, following recent calls to engage geographies of hope as an analytical lens for spatialized struggle and possibility, we approach hope as an affective, relational, contextual, and (infra-)structural orientation that emerges precisely within contexts of crisis, precarity, and oppression. Across the contributions, hope appears as a contested, processual, sometimes fragile disposition that is enacted through intersectional feminist coalitions, diasporic and anti-war organizing, rural media ecosystems, post-digital workspaces, AI governance debates, and user imaginaries of immersive technologies.

2. Mapping the Contributions of the Thematic Issue

Several articles in this issue explicitly seek to move critical digital geographies beyond what Sarah Elwood (2026) describes as "theoretical cycles of negation" by turning to analytical frameworks that can apprehend minor, situated practices as openings onto other, alternative futures. José Esteban Muñoz's (2019) methodology of hope, queer of colour critique, decolonial feminist approaches to AI, and the concept of affective bridges all proposed ways of reading digital practices and digital platforms as spaces where

alternative modes of being and relating are tentatively brought into view. Hope, in this sense, is a way of looking and listening that refuses to reduce minor practices to mere epiphenomena of structural power.

At the same time, the contributions point out that hopeful digital geographies are often entangled with violence and constraint. Intersectional feminist coalitions in Turkey mobilize against femicide and anti-gender backlash in a context of networked authoritarianism; Russian anti-war activists negotiate visibility and invisibility across dispersed locales and heavily surveilled platforms; Nigerian youth craft "virtual exile" and digitally mediated futures from within conditions of systemic failure and uneven state provision. In rural Sweden, participatory action research on "socially smart villages" uses place-based digital design to contest urban-centric smart imaginaries and to co-create modest, locally grounded digital solutions that strengthen social bonds and future orientations in marginalised communities. In Castilla-La Mancha, Spain, a mixed-methods analysis of rural mediatization shows how differentiated local media ecosystems and media ensembles interplay with higher levels of territorial hope, belonging, and outward projection in depopulated municipalities, highlighting media presence as a symbolic condition for feeling recognised and future-bearing in so-called "left-behind" regions. Post-digital workers in coworking spaces and domestic VR users seek relief, belonging, and alternative spaces in and against platformized environments, experimenting with practices of presence, immersion, and withdrawal that re-situate the spaces of the social.

Overall, the articles in this issue show that digital geographies of hope are produced through situated practices of infrastructuring, imagination, and refusal. Hope appears in the crafting of "affective bridges" across feminist and trans movements, in the logistical uses of Telegram that sustain proximity between dispersed anti-war actors, in community-driven smart village projects and rural media ecologies, in critical re-framings of gender AI safety in the Global South, and in mundane negotiations of presence, escape, and immersion in post-digital workspaces and immersive media. The collection also foregrounds the importance of scale: from bodily autonomy and intimate images to homes and workplaces, villages and regions, cities and diasporas, and transnational policy fields.

We have organized the issue into four overlapping themes. The first develops conceptual and methodological frameworks of hope in digital geographies, drawing on queer, feminist, and decolonial approaches. The second examines contentious spaces, activism, and transnational solidarities under authoritarian and crisis conditions. The third focuses on rural and regional media as drivers of territorial hope. The final theme turns to post-digital everyday life, work, and technological imaginaries, exploring how people negotiate connection and utopian/dystopian futures in deeply mediatized environments. Across these themes, hope coexists with fear, exhaustion, and marginalization, yet it also serves as a resource for imagining and enacting other digital futures.

2.1. Conceptualising Hope: Critical Frameworks and Situated Methodologies

The first theme gathers contributions that develop conceptual and methodological frameworks of hope in digital geographies, from queer urban activism to intersectional feminist coalitions and decolonial approaches to AI. The issue opens with Sarah Elwood's (2026) article, which proposes "queer methodologies of hope" as a way to move critical digital geographies beyond what she calls "theoretical cycles of negation." Centring on the Stop the Sweeps campaign in Seattle, and drawing on Muñoz's (2019) methodology of hope and queer of colour critique, the article treats minor, everyday praxes as anticipatory glimpses of more just

urban futures rather than as politically insignificant. Dilara Asardag (2026) then introduces the concept of "affective bridges" to theorise how intersectional feminist and trans coalitions in Turkey sustain solidarity, care, and political imagination under conditions of increased femicides, anti-gender backlash, and networked authoritarianism. Through a manifesto-style argument grounded in empirical cases, the article shows how digitally mediated feminist activism builds fragile but powerful infrastructures of hope that connect bodies, experiences, and struggles. Weijie Huang, Payal Arora, and Marta Zarzycka (2026) extend this conceptual agenda into the field of AI governance by rethinking deepfake harms and "gender AI safety" from the standpoint of the Global South. Their article develops a gen(der) AI safety framework that foregrounds pleasure-positive, survivor-centred, and decolonial approaches to non-consensual synthetic intimate images, and proposes geographies of hope as a way to imagine more just and situated AI futures that do not reproduce data universalism.

2.2. Hope in Struggle: Activism, Solidarity, and Contentious Digital Spaces

The second theme turns to contentious spaces, activism, and transnational solidarities under authoritarian and crisis conditions. Svetlana Chuikina's (2026) article examines Russian anti-war activism after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, focusing on how activists navigate platform visibility and street (in)visibility within a dense regime of surveillance and repression. Tracing practices such as amplification, evasion, hijacking, and the logistical uses of Telegram, the article shows how protest spaces are reconfigured across "streets and streams" and how hope is maintained through the careful distribution of risk, visibility, and proximity between dispersed localities. Jaana Serres' (2026) contribution shifts the focus to Nigeria's digital entertainment industries and the notion of "virtual exile." It explores how young Nigerians invest in the promise of "making it from Africa" through platformized creative labour, while confronting systemic failure, infrastructural breakdown, and uneven state provision. By analysing how Lagos is discursively and infrastructurally refigured as a global tastemaker city, the article reveals digital geographies of hope that are deeply entangled with precarity and inequality, yet also mobilize powerful imaginaries of African futures in global cultural circuits. As such, these articles show how hope is enacted in contentious, high-risk environments where digital infrastructures both constrain and enable collective action and future-making.

2.3. Territorial Hope: Rural Futures and Regional Media Ecologies

The third theme focuses on rural and regional media as drivers of territorial hope in contexts marked by depopulation and marginalisation. Lotta Braunerhielm, Pernille K. Andersson, and Laila Gibson (2026) analyse "socially smart villages" in rural Sweden through participatory action research. Critiquing dominant, urban-centric smart-village models that privilege technological efficiency and economic growth, they show how place-based digital design and locally anchored storytelling projects can support social cohesion, visibility, and a sense of future in small communities. Rather than reproducing narrow techno-solutionist imaginaries, their work highlights modest, situated digital solutions that emerge from the everyday needs and aspirations of rural residents. Vanesa Saiz-Echezarreta, Belén Galletero-Campos, and Joan Ramon Rodriguez-Amat (2026) turn to Castilla-La Mancha in Spain, combining a survey with an analysis of local media ecosystems to operationalise geographies of hope as territorial attachment, belonging, and outward projection. They demonstrate how differentiated local media ensembles correlate with higher levels of territorial hope in depopulated municipalities, and argue that local media presence functions as a symbolic condition for being recognised as future-bearing rather than "left-behind." Read alongside one another,

these two articles foreground how rural (geo-)media participate in shaping who and what is imagined as having a future.

2.4. Everyday Futures: Post-Digital Everyday Life, Work, and Technological Imaginaries

The final theme addresses post-digital everyday life, work, and technological imaginaries, asking how people negotiate connection and utopian/dystopian futures in deeply mediatized environments. André Jansson, Karin Fast, and Magnus Andersson (2026) explore coworking spaces in Oslo as "romantic workplaces" that anchor post-digital knowledge workers who are otherwise exposed to precarious, placeless forms of labour. Through the lens of post-digital consumption, they show how coworking spaces promise authenticity, community, creativity, and hope for more meaningful and sustainable futures, even as they remain entangled with neoliberal work regimes and urban redevelopment. Linnea Saltin (2026) examines "VR heterotopias" in Swedish homes, analysing how users imagine virtual reality headsets as technologies for reaching utopian elsewhere spaces. VR emerges as a heterotopic counterspace in relation to smartphones and social media, where users negotiate desires for escape, intensity, and alternative worlds.

3. Conclusion

To return to Solnit's (2015) reminder that hope lives in "the spaciousness of uncertainty" and to Han's (2024) call for a politics that can counter regimes of fear, this issue insists that the data-driven world is not only a terrain of extraction, surveillance, and algorithmic injustice, but also a space where alternative futures are continuously rehearsed; sometimes in minor gestures, at other times in organized struggle, often in forms that are fragile, ambivalent, and unevenly distributed. Across the contributions gathered here, hope is neither a celebratory antidote to critique nor a mood that emerges from an "outside" crisis; it is a situated orientation that takes shape through the infrastructures people inherit and the ones they improvise—through coalition-building, rural mediations of belonging, tactics of (in)visibility, and everyday experiments in presence, withdrawal, and connection. The articles hosted in this thematic issue invite us to treat digital geographies of hope as an analytical entry point for noticing where possibilities are being made, contested, and sustained under pressure; and, crucially, for asking what kinds of digital conditions would expand that room to act.

Acknowledgments
We thank all contributing authors and reviewers whose work and feedback made this thematic issue possible. We are also grateful to the editorial team at *Media and Communication* for their guidance throughout the process and for supporting our proposal for this thematic issue.

Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

LLMs Disclosure
Grammarly was used for proofreading and language editing. No text was generated, and no substantive content or conclusions were produced by an LLM.

References

Arora, P. (2024). *From pessimism to promise: Lessons from the Global South on designing inclusive tech*. MIT Press.

Asardag, D. (2026). Manifesto for our times: Theorizing and demonstrating "affective bridges" for intersectional feminist coalitions. *Media and Communication*, *14*, Article 11053. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.11053

Ashcroft, B. (2017). *Utopianism in postcolonial literatures*. Routledge.

Bloch, E. (1986). *The principle of hope*. MIT Press. (Original work published 1959)

Braunerhielm, L., Andersson, P. K., & Gibson, L. (2026). Bridging digital geographies and socially smart villages: Participatory action research in rural place design. *Media and Communication*, *14*, Article 10952. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.10952

Chuikina, S. (2026). Fostering proximity through Telegram's logistics: Russian anti-war activism between streets and streams. *Media and Communication*, *14*, Article 11349. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.11349

Eagleton, T. (2015). *Hope without optimism*. University of Virginia Press.

Elwood, S. (2026). Digital geographies and the city: Queer methodologies of hope. *Media and Communication*, *14*, Article 11048. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.11048

Fast, K., Brantner, C., & Abend, P. (2024). Bringing the future to geomedia studies: Geomedia as sociotechnical regime and imaginary. *Media and Communication*, *12*, Article 9112. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.9112

Halberstam, J. (2022, October 26-28). *On destitution, dereliction, depreciation and dispossession* [Keynote address]. g22—Shaping Hopeful Futures in Times of Uncertainty: The Challenges and Possibilities of Gender Studies, Karlstad, Sweden.

Han, B.-C. (2024). *The spirit of hope*. Polity Press.

Huang, W., Arora, P., & Zarzycka, M. (2026). Geographies of hope: Rethinking deepfake harms and gender AI safety in the Global South. *Media and Communication*, *14*, Article 10969. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.10969

Jansson, A., Fast, K., & Andersson, M. (2026). The romantic workplace: How coworking spaces drive post-digital consumption. *Media and Communication*, *14*, Article 11281. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.11281

Mbembe, A. (2019). *Necropolitics*. Duke University Press.

Muñoz, J. E. (2019). *Cruising utopia: The then and there of queer futurity* (10th anniversary ed.). New York University Press.

Nikunen, K. (2019). *Media solidarities: Emotions, power and justice in the digital era*. Sage.

Saiz-Echezarreta, V., Galletero-Campos, B., & Rodriguez-Amat, J. R. (2026). Local media, rural depopulation, and territorial attachment: Geographies of hope in Castilla-La Mancha. *Media and Communication*, *14*, Article 11030. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.11030

Saltin, L. (2026). VR heterotopia: User imaginings of virtual reality headsets as technology for reaching utopic spaces. *Media and Communication*, *14*, Article 11191. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.11191

Serres, J. (2026). From virtual exile to digital futures: The Nigerian entertainment industry's quest to re-enchant "Africa." *Media and Communication*, *14*, Article 11083. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.11083

Solnit, R. (2015). *Hope in the dark: Untold histories, wild possibilities* (3rd ed.). Haymarket Books.

Visser, J. (2025). Where the soil holds hope: Optimistic liveability through collaborative entanglements in Nkambeni, South Africa. In F. B. Nyamnjoh (Ed.), *Navigating hope: Cultivating inclusive optimism in a complex world* (pp. 361–386). Langaa RPCIG.

Zournazi, M. (2003). *Hope: New philosophies for change*. Routledge.

About the Authors

Cornelia Brantner is a professor of media and communication studies and coordinator of the Centre for Geomedia Studies, Karlstad University, Sweden. Her research focuses on geomedia, visual communication, digitalized publics, and data and knowledge infrastructures and has been published in reputable journals such as *New Media & Society* and *Telecommunications Policy*. She leads the research project Digital Infrastructure Sovereignty: Towards a Public Value-Based Media Policy for the Datafied Swedish Welfare State, funded by the Swedish Research Council (VR), as well as the international consortium project (Re)Capturing AI: Governing Generative Search Engines in the Nordic Countries (funded by NordForsk via VR) and serves as the Swedish principal investigator for the international research project From Pixels to Peace: The Role of Visual Communication in Conflict Transformation, funded by the Swiss National Science Fund.

Kaarina Nikunen is professor of media and communication research at Tampere University. Her research focuses on digital culture and datafication, emotions, affectivity, migration, and solidarity. Her book *Media Solidarities: Emotions, Power and Justice in the Digital Age* (Sage, 2019) explores the ways in which emotions and affect drive solidarity and political participation in the context of digital and data-driven culture. Her current project, funded by the Research Council of Finland, develops ways to respond to hate speech (TACKLEHATE).

Georgia Aitaki (PhD) is a senior lecturer in media and communication studies and a member of the Centre for Geomedia Studies at Karlstad University, Sweden. Her current research focuses on representations of crisis, peace, and ethics in contemporary popular culture and criticism (including drama, animation, reality TV, documentary, and cultural journalism). Her work has appeared in journals such as *International Journal of Communication*, *NECSUS*, *VIEW: Journal of European Television History & Culture*, *Media, Culture and Society*, *Social Semiotics*, *Screen*, and in a number of international anthologies.