New Ec(h)o systems: Democracy in the age of social media

Conference overview

"Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it."

Arundhati Roy: 'The pandemic is a portal', *Financial Times*

Stark evidence around the weaponisation of Facebook in South Asia was evident towards the end of 2013. In Sri Lanka, religious extremists were using the platform to seed and spread Islamophobia. Around the same time, religious extremists with precisely the same motivations produced and promoted content inciting genocidal violence in Myanmar. The (ab)use of social media by political entrepreneurs for ideological persuasion and propaganda production shows rapid iteration and innovation in the past decade. However, it was not until 2016's Presidential Election in the US and the Brexit referendum in the UK that Western media focused on social media's harmful impact on democracy and social relations. For years before, social media markets in the Global South were Petrie dishes for what in Western societies, and more mature democracies, came to pass. Silicon Valley's libertarian evangelism to connect everyone rarely considered inadvertent consequences of enabling masspersonal content production at a scale never attempted before.

In the Global South, this 'growth hacking' – a term used to describe the aggressive attempts to increase market share – overlapped with the availability of cheaper and more capable smartphones along with more affordable and widespread broadband access. The results were unsurprising. In divided societies, while these developments provided new vectors for civil society advocacy and activism to strengthen democracy, it also resulted in the faster, more pervasive spread of violence. Social media companies are quick to take credit for connecting people. To date, they rarely acknowledge how platforms, products and algorithms not designed to deal with divided societies contribute to and often amplify hate and violence. Big Tech only parenthetically and partially addresses this toxicity. Profit continues to trump ethics, and human rights concerns struggle to compete with commercial interests.

In many markets, the logics governing the (ab)use of social media are complex and fluid. Competing motivations by a diverse spectrum of users result in social media's instrumentalisation in prosocial and harmful ways, complicating meaningful responses to platform abuse. Users shape social media as much as social media content shapes usage, and through engagement, public perceptions. The same platforms that bear witness to human rights abuses are used to spread violence at a speed that often outpaces efforts to quell riots.

The same products that enable small businesses to reach new customers are powerful megaphones for populists, defying existing media regulations. The same algorithms that help trusted news sources reach more consumers enable disinformation to hold billions hostage to conspiracy theories that increasingly result in violence. Facebook is not Twitter, and YouTube is WhatsApp. Platform affordances also play a role in shaping perceptions of authenticity and popularity. From the design of social media apps and platforms to the generative potential of algorithms to amplify bias, many factors influence social media's impact on society and democracy.

Regulation, including in New Zealand, is increasingly proposed to meet these growing challenges. Though regulatory oversight of social media companies is long overdue, many governments – especially in authoritarian states – welcome more or stronger legislation addressing hate speech with a deeply self-serving, censorious lens. What can be popularly pitched as architectures to control pornography and paedophilia today can tomorrow quickly identify and contain dissent. If responsibility (who can and should act), responsiveness (how quickly harmful content can be addressed), proportionality (doing the minimum necessary for the broadest possible impact) and transparency (making explicit what was done and why) are vital underpinnings for effective regulation, it is unclear how governments with a democratic deficit headed by populist leaders can be trusted with oversight.

These are not just academic, technical or legal problems. After the 2020 global pandemic, platforms that are indispensable in connecting us are also those that political entrepreneurs and their proxies appropriate to divide us. Current challenges often outpace existing political, oversight and academic vocabularies. We often see what is going wrong but cannot coherently explain why. Unable to grasp the nature of the problems, we struggle to imagine meaningful responses. An urgent revision in critical approaches is required. Risks to democracy and peace arising from sophisticated political actors are growing and across borders. At the same time, social media is complicated and context dependent. Inextricably entwined in governance and government, social media often provides the potential to strengthen democratic institutions. To more fully grasp this potential requires meaningful and enduring exchanges between government, academia, civil society, social media companies, along with robust, international frameworks of cooperation.

The pandemic is an invitation to revise political, policy and profit models no longer fit for purpose. Coronavirus has accelerated the pace of social media's weaponisation. Simultaneously, opportunities arising from new norms around remote working and virtual connections provide fertile landscapes to seed and strengthen prosocial content and conversations. In framing a daily contest between democratic potential and divisive propaganda, this conference will strengthen the critical appreciation of contemporary social media challenges. A range of critical perspectives, including from Aotearoa, will highlight issues festering for years that increasingly impact Western societies and more mature democracies.

Curated by [Sanjana Hattotuwa](#) and [Jeremy Simons](#) at the [National Centre for Peace and Conflict Studie](#)s, University of Otago.