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

Session & speaker details

From the syndromic to the systemic: Democracy, peace and social media in a post-pandemic world (Fireside chat)

16 March 2021, 10.00am — 10.45am (GMT +12)

Session outline

Contemporary challenges in socio-technological landscapes defy easy capture through existing political, oversight or academic vocabularies. Hostage to outmoded paradigms, we bear witness to information, social and political disorders, but cannot coherently explain why. Unable to grasp the full import of contemporary problems, we struggle to imagine meaningful responses. Simultaneously, sophisticated political actors are increasingly challenging democratic institutions and peace. We need new ways of looking at inter-connected issues spread over diverse disciplines and domains.

What possibilities the prospects for democracy and peace in a post-pandemic world where online perceptions lead to offline behaviour?

Speakers

- Sanjana Hattotuwa, NCPACS & ICT4Peace Foundation
- Vijaya Gadde, Head of Legal, Policy, and Trust, Twitter
- Kathleen Reen, Policy and Government, Twitter

The network virus and the networked virus: Hate on social media studied as an epidemic

16 March 2021, 10.45am — 11.30am (GMT +12)

Session outline

2020 was marked and marred by two viruses. A biological strain shut down entire countries. In parallel and as virulently, online content instrumentalised public anxiety, anger and fear. From conspiracy theories to content inciting hate and violence, the pandemic had a parallel life on social media. Leading platforms struggled to curtail the spread of incendiary content, often leading to offline violence. What are governance, regulatory and media literacy equivalents of vaccinations? How, and to what degree, can society be inoculated against infodemics, growing at pace? Are solutions technical, political, social, offline or online? If a combination of these, how can we determine the right mix?

Speakers

- Zeynep Tufekci, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
- M. R. X. Dentith, Beijing Normal University

Māori and Pasifika (re)presentations on social media

16 March 2021, 11.45am — 12.30pm (GMT +12)

Session outline

How does social media reflect and refract Māori and indigenous perspectives? The framing of activism, advocacy and political engagement is heavily influenced by language, context and community. In so many markets around the world, social media companies repeatedly demonstrate an inability or unwillingness to respect or respond to indigenous issues. Artificial intelligence and machine learning do not work at all or very poorly with indigenous expressions. Māori relationships and values - both online and offline - are subject to violent dismissal and marginalisation. How can social media be leveraged to empower indigenous voices, identity & presentation by, with and for the community?

Speakers

- Te Rina Krystal Warren, Massey University
- Lana Lopesi, Author, Art Critic, and Editor

Harried, harangued and hating: Modulating the volume of violence on social media

16 March 2021, 12.30pm — 1.15pm (GMT +12)

Session outline

Calls to regulate social media have grown over the past couple of years. Driven by infodemics - the online equivalent of the offline Coronavirus pandemic - the West now grapples with the same socio-political harms induced by disinformation many in Global South have experienced for a decade or longer. Regulatory responses to this toxicity bring the fear of overreach especially in countries with a democratic deficit. Complicating matters, social media companies now both invite and resist oversight. Often glossed over in debates around reform is how workplace cultures contributing to algorithmic harms and platform toxicity. How to interrogate encoded misogyny? What does regulation in 2021 and beyond look like?

Speakers

- David Shanks, Chief Censor, Office of Film and Literature Classification
- Kate Hannah, University of Auckland

Political technologies & authoritarian innovation: Inflaming fears and fighting the fires

16 March 2021, 2.00pm — 3.00pm (GMT +12)

Session outline

What constitutes hate speech? With the (ab)use of social media platforms by political entrepreneurs growing at pace, is it possible to address platform toxicity through definitions and mechanisms that never embraced hate innovation at the scale we witness today? A decade after Arab uprisings, platforms which held the potential to liberate now hold us hostage to sophisticated, sustained propaganda. Clearly, all the leading platforms are struggling. In the ensuing confusion, authoritarians increasingly instrumentalise social media and censor inconvenient truths. How and when is intervention needed? What is that intervention and by whom should it be done? Is hate speech itself an outmoded paradigm?

Speakers

- Susan Benesch, Director, Dangerous Speech Project and Berkman Klein Centre, Harvard University
- Sarah Oh, Non-Resident Fellow, Atlantic Council
- Allie Funk, Senior Research Analyst for Technology and Democracy, Freedom House

The violent valley: Social media's tryst with democracy

16 March 2021, 3.15pm — 4.15pm (GMT +12)

Session outline

Decisions that impact billions of people are taken in Silicon Valley every day. By choosing to prioritise, address, cast aside or ignore, platforms influence how users perceive and engage with each other. From mood swings to markets, electoral outcomes to viral trends, a few in Silicon Valley determine how the rest of the world communicates. Media, also hostage to algorithms, report on social media using a language that reduces complex, fluid interactions to soundbites or episodic encounters. Warnings from the Global South around platform harms went unheeded for years, but now, the focus is completely on platform harms. What is the space that billions inhabit in between these two extremes?

Speakers

- David Kirkpatrick, Founder of Techonomy and author of 'The Facebook Effect: The Inside Story of the Company that is Connecting the World.
- Victoire Rio, Myanmar Tech Accountability Network
- Meenakshi Ganguly, South Asia Director, Human Rights Watch

Insights through critical oversight: Information disorders and journalism

16 March 2021, 4.15pm — 5.00pm, (GMT +12)

Session outline

Hand-wringing about the state of journalism in the 2020s invariably turns to social media's negative impact on media and information landscapes. Across many countries and different contexts, information disorders are growing at pace, posing enduring challenges to democracy, electoral integrity and trust in institutions. At the same time, social media helps bear witness when authoritarian governments control media production. Complicating this, autocrats now create alternative facts geared to sow confusion. Is social media a bane or boon for journalism? Does any meaningful answer require the interrogation of context? In an age where consuming media has overtaken journalism, how can we refocus on what should matters, beyond what's going viral?

Speakers

- Maria Ressa, Rappler
- Stephen Davis, Reporter and writer

The Christchurch massacre and social media: Lessons learnt and unlearnt

17 March 2021, 9.30am — 10.15am (GMT +12)

Session outline

The events of 15 March 2019 changed New Zealand's approach to and study of violent extremism. Just over a month after, suicide attacks across Sri Lanka claimed over 5 times as many victims. Leading up to, during and in the aftermath of both incidents, social media played a significant role. The similarities end there. New Zealand's *cri de coeur*, the Christchurch Call, aims to reduce platform harms, including the spread of hate and violence. Social media was instrumentalised in Sri Lanka after the attacks to stoke Islamophobia. In both countries, however, episodic, preconceived media coverage glosses over more interesting developments. Where is the Call today? What is the platform's future? And in Urdu, Hindi, Turkish and Hausa, why did victims in Christchurch galvanise empathy in ways Sri Lankan victims did not? What lessons for platform governance can both countries offer?

Speakers

- Sanjana Hattotuwa, NCPACS and ICT4Peace Foundation
- Paul Ash, Christchurch Call

Strengthening information literacy: Countering extremism and strengthening social cohesion

17 March 2021 10.15am — 11.00am (GMT +12)

Session outline

Advances in media and information literacy have not kept pace with social media adoption and platform affordances. For well over a decade, social media content has contributed to offline violence and harm. Globally, and also increasingly in New Zealand, an unprecedented epistemic crisis is evident, as more media is unthinkingly produced and engaged with. Encoded into this surfeit of content are calls for violence, increasingly hard to spot and harder to counter. If social media algorithms are, by default today, amplifying toxicity, how best to combat harm and hate at scale? If a healthy public sphere is influenced by content on social media, is countering violent extremism a platform governance, regulatory, civil society, government, private sector or academic issue? What's the state-of-the-art thinking in this domain, post-Trump, post-Brexit, post-6th January in the US?

Speakers

- Helena Puig Larrauri, Build Up
- Clark Hogan-Taylor, Moonshot CVE

The pulse of a nation: Measuring and managing socio-political mood swings

17 March 2021 11.15am — 12.00pm (GMT +12)

Session outline

When Hillary Clinton over a decade ago said that social media offered the pulse of a nation, she was ahead of her time. Today, all leading social media platforms provide near real-time insights into user behaviours, including unrest, anxieties, anger, political and personal preferences. What can be measured can, however, also be manipulated. How can we trust what the platforms feature & amplify, often for profit? On the other hand, studying social media engagement also puts at risks civil liberties, including privacy. New forms of discrimination are possible by cross-relating choices or interactions

across platforms, generating citizen scores which can determine access to basic services. Furthermore, social media algorithms discriminate in often unexpected places and ways. How can we best respond to what we can now collect at vast scale, and may drive governments towards illiberal practices?

Speakers

- David Hood, University of Otago
- Thomas Beagle, NZ Council for Civil Liberties

Architects of or hostages to social media: Youth on youth

17 March 2021 1.00pm — 2.00pm (GMT +12)

Session outline

How do youth see and use social media? Studies from New Zealand and worldwide show a complicated relationship with country and even city, community or gender specific trends. What can youth tell adults, including regulators, to reduce platform harms? What are youth telling their peers around circumvention, appropriation and countering bullying or abuse? Do youth think their self-perceptions or formative political ideologies are influenced by social media and if so, to what degree and how? With media focussing on the potential for increased radicalisation, depression and anxiety, social media appears to have negative impact on youth. Studies show far more complicated, on-going, contextual negotiation, with varying degrees of media literacy. Recognising this variance, what can youth in New Zealand do to strengthen healthy discourse and peer relationships? How do they see agency in algorithmic environments?

Speakers

- School Strike for Climate Change - Dunedin
- Representative from OFLC Youth Advisory Panel

From frontier to front door issues: Inoculating against information pandemics

17 March 2021 3.00pm — 3.45pm (GMT +12)

Session outline

New Zealand will not be immune to future infodemics. Disinformation, like a biological virus, doesn't recognise national borders, class, identity, gender or other socio-political markers. If information disorders are inevitable and persistent, how can we best protect democratic institutions, electoral integrity and social well-being? How can domestic legislation serve as a good ancestor for future socio-technological challenges, and a democratic template for the world? *Medice, cura te ipsum* - if social media companies are responsible for where we find ourselves today, can they strengthen our democratic potential? How, and to what degree, can government work with Silicon Valley, civil society and academia in zero or low trust contexts? What can the world learn from New Zealand? Are there global lessons that can guide New Zealand?

Speakers

- Kara Hinesley, Director of Public Policy, Twitter
- Kim Connolly-Stone, Internet NZ
- Nicole Matejic, Principal Advisor Digital Safety, Department of Internal Affairs

Curators of the conference

Sanjana Hattotuwa is a PhD candidate at the University of Otago, New Zealand, studying the role and relevance of social media in the generation of hate as well as the fuller realisation of Sri Lanka's democratic potential. He has worked for twenty years in South Asia, South East Asia, North Africa, Europe and the Balkans on social media communications strategies, web-based activism, online advocacy and social media research. As Special Advisor at the ICT4Peace Foundation, Switzerland, he works on information management during crises and a range of initiatives focussed on online platforms and peacebuilding. For nearly a decade, he led the Foundation's work around these areas with the United Nations in New York. He founded in 2006 and till June 2020 curated the award-winning *Groundviews*, Sri Lanka's first civic media website. From 2002-2020 he was a Senior Researcher at the Centre for Policy Alternatives, Sri Lanka.

Jeremy Simons is completing doctoral studies focused on indigenous leadership and transformative justice at the National Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, University of Otago, New Zealand. He has nearly twenty years of experience as a community development organiser, peace advocate, and learning facilitator in New Zealand, Southeast Asia, and the United States. He is an appreciative inquiry and conflict transformation expert and has facilitated education, health, and justice reform initiatives. He has published on transitional and restorative justice in a variety of outlets and currently supports peace processes in the southern Philippines.