

Information ecologies: Disinformation, artificial intelligence and the public sphere

Indo Pacific Research Centre Workshop

Boola Katijin 360.3.011

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1 Program

Time	Session
9:30- 9:45	Workshop opening
9:45-10:45	De-individualizing our responses to misinformation – Anne Schwenkenbecher, Nardine Alnemr, Tael Harper and Howard Lee (Murdoch University)
	The Psephology of Silicon – Tim Flannagan (Murdoch University)
10:45-11:00	Morning tea
11:00-12:30	Imagining the Future: AI and Australian News Media – Kai-Ti Kao (Curtin University)
	Between SLAPPs and legalised harassment – navigating truth and reputation in independent journalism – Howard Lee (Murdoch University)
	Crafting messages for our consumption in the public sphere: What are the views of strategic communication agency managers in the 2020s on AI? - Catherine Archer (Edith Cowan University)
12:30-1:20	Lunch break
	Suspicion online and the coherence theory of truth – Paul Sutherland (Curtin University)
	“The past was erased, the erasure was forgotten, the lie became truth.” - History writing and disinformation campaigns – Phil Chilton (Curtin University)
2:20-2:30	Short break
	Do it for the ‘Gram: “Terrorgram” mythmaking and the comfort of collapse – Todd Morley (Curtin University)
	Historical Objects or Symbols of Hate? Examining the Australian Nazi Memorabilia Ban and its Effects on Collectors - Kimberly Radivojevic (Murdoch University)
3:30-4:00	Workshop reflection and closing

2 Paper abstracts

Session 1: Conceptual approaches to AI and misinformation

Anne Schwenkenbecher, Nardine Alnemr, Tael Harper and Howard Lee -
De-individualizing our responses to misinformation

Common responses to misinformation and disinformation are overly focused on individual agents and their ability to detect misinformation. Responses also tend to be reactive in character. This paper proposes that we take a different and – as we will argue – potentially more effective approach to combating misinformation. Starting from an appreciation of the fundamentally social nature of knowledge and belief, we suggest that misinformation and the destructive power of disinformation are best understood when envisaging these phenomena to occur in particular epistemic environments rather than focusing – primarily – on how they are affecting individuals.

Acknowledging that individual agents' beliefs ultimately rest not merely on first-order evidence but to a large extent on second-order evidence (such as trust in the source of one's information and the level of credence we assign to others' testimony) allows us to view the spread of misinformation and the success of disinformation strategies in their social context. We argue that successfully combating misinformation and disinformation will require the fostering of healthy epistemic environments. Doing so is a forward-looking epistemic responsibility; it requires proactive investment at the societal level. In contrast, individualized responses to misinformation such as increasing individual agents' media-literacy or holding individual journalists and news organizations responsible for 'fact-checking' – while certainly useful and important – will not address the root cause of the problem – lack of public trust.

Tim Flannagan - *The Psephology of Silicone*

Developing further themes from his earlier book *The Question Concerning Technology in China* (2017), in the closing chapter of *Machine and Sovereignty: For a Planetary Thinking* (2024) Yuk Hui claims that “we need not a unification that effaces differences but rather a unification based on fragmentation” (241). Key to this, he explains, and in place of the more familiar electoral and geopolitical outlook that has traditionally dominated so much of our thinking, is the requirement of a certain ‘political ecology’ which is oriented not by concepts of nature (or nations) but, rather, those of machines. Accordingly, the following paper explores how Hui’s proposed notion of a certain ‘technodiversity’ draws upon but ultimately questions the understanding of biodiversity on which it is modelled, but ultimately does not resemble.

As a way of charting Hui’s proposal, the paper considers the recent example of Trump’s claims regarding the sovereignty of those living in Greenland, Panama, and Gaza. In so doing, the paper emphasises the importance and difficulty of thinking locale or milieu

in the context of homogenising systems of cybernetic governance that are ultimately designed around notions of space rather than those of place.

Session 2: Disruptions to public communication

Kai-Ti Kao - Imagining the Future: AI and Australian News Media

While the rapid evolution of AI technologies in recent years has encouraged both public and scholarly attention to focus on the immediate future, there is also much value in adopting a long-term perspective on society's relationship with technology. In this presentation, I employ a sociotechnical imaginaries lens to provide such a longitudinal perspective, focusing on the news media industry. I discuss how imaginaries of AI technologies intersect with normative ideals of news media and consequently impact news media content, delivery, and engagement.

Using the ABC's "digital first" strategy as a starting point, and drawing on existing debates about the public service obligations of news media and the challenges posed by digital platforms, I interrogate what the idea of AI as our inevitable future looks like. I consider these issues within the unique challenges of the Australian news media landscape, which include longstanding problems with media concentration, newsroom diversity, and regional representation. While the imaginaries we hold around AI do not necessarily correspond to the actual capabilities of these technologies, they nonetheless have significant sociotechnical impacts which include the future of the Australian news media industry, democratic participation, and informed citizenship.

Howard Lee - Between SLAPPs and legalised harassment – navigating truth and reputation in independent journalism

Defamation laws against media organisations are intended to protect the reputation of those defamed by journalists. However, research has documented the use of strategic litigation against public participation (SLAPP) as an abuse of defamation laws to curtail journalistic freedom. In the case of Singapore, SLAPPs have taken on diverse forms that extend beyond libel. Legal mechanisms targeting journalists – specifically, independent online journalists who are least resourced to defend themselves – range from 'fake news' legislation that leads to funding restrictions, to criminal defamation lawsuits used by political leaders and government bodies. Rather than help promote information ecologies of truth, SLAPPs that are predicated on 'shining a torchlight of truth' conversely cast a shadow of doubt over independent journalism, in turn causing reputational damage that, ironically, further alienates them from fact finding, appropriate resources and legal support. This paper highlights the contentious issue of how laws governing 'truth' might instead adversely affect independent journalism

and the public sphere. It offers suggestions for how an Australian model for a misinformation law, given its political context, might look like.

Catherine Archer - Crafting messages for our consumption in the public sphere: What are the views of strategic communication agency managers in the 2020s on AI?

While it is often recognised that journalists, politicians and social media citizens and influencers are part of the 'information ecology', the 'unseen hands' of public relations practitioners, marketers and advertising professionals should also be considered. Some scholars have argued that PR practitioners are "AI cheerleaders" and are 'gung-ho' in their take up of generative AI tools. Sometimes called 'spin doctors', the role of these agents, representing corporations, politicians and others in their work, and their impact on the public sphere should not be disregarded. Our research aimed to find out the views of Australian practitioners working in Communication, Advertising, Public Relations and Marketing (CPRAM) consultancies in relation to artificial intelligence (AI), with 15 interviews taking place. We asked the question: Are CPRAM practitioners champions of AI? In what ways are practitioners incorporating AI into their work for clients? The research uses Bourdieu's theories of social capital and 'fields' of practice and interrogates the work and views of those who work behind the scenes to craft key messages that resonate and may impact views in the public sphere. Our findings suggest that far from being myopic champions of AI, leading practitioners in our Australian cohort are taking a 'blinkers off' approach, that involves a healthy scepticism, mixed with an appreciation for some of the benefits that AI can bring to 'mundane tasks'. Leading practitioners are providing counsel to their clients, researching the risks and benefits, and aiming to educate and guide senior leadership, while taking a slow and considered approach to incorporating AI functions in their own practice.

Session 3: Truth and misinformation

Paul Sutherland - Suspicion Online and the Coherence Theory of Truth

Over the course of the 2010s and 2020s, western liberal democracies have undergone a shift in what constitutes acceptable political discourse. Phenomena such as QAnon, anti-vax beliefs, conspiratoriality, the manosphere, and white nationalism were at one point each regarded as belonging to the political fringes, and now each of them have demonstrably become normalised. The mainstreaming of fringe ideas also corresponds to what many academics and journalists are calling the 'post-truth' era, comprising wilful subscription to misinformation and the increasing precedence of information's affective power over its factual accuracy. This paper approaches the 'post-truth' condition from a philosophical standpoint, examining how a lifeworld constantly mediated by screen and network-based technology augments our understanding of reality and truth itself. The key factor lies in the ontological disconnect

between what we encounter on our screens and their external referents in the physical world. Ultimately, I argue that digital mediation is conducive towards apprehending our lifeworld with suspicion, and this 'online suspicion' is overcome by depending on coherence to pre-existing beliefs as an arbiter of validity. The effect this has is that extremist ideologies and their moderate counterparts have become equally accessible and the political stakes for adhering to them have lowered.

Phil Chilton - "The past was erased, the erasure was forgotten, the lie became truth." - History writing and disinformation campaigns.

History has long been contested ground. Historical narratives can omit, obscure, and justify the most horrendous of events. From the crude holocaust denial of David Irving to the more sophisticated imperial 'white-washing' of Nial Ferguson - an historian still on many university reading lists – historians have often provided the basis for broader disinformation campaigns. History can serve the needs of the status quo or its challengers, be they from the right or left of the political spectrum. Popular understandings of history once entrenched can become difficult to unseat. Many people still cleave to 'historical' understandings that provide a supporting narrative for their own viewpoint, however erroneous that historical understanding is. How are historical omissions and justifications to be challenged in the context of new media, technologies and networks that have vastly expanded the opportunities for historical 'fabrication'? As academic historians teaching to students in a university environment, amidst the cacophony of available 'information', what is to be done?

Session 4: Polarisation in the public sphere

Todd Morley - Do it for the 'Gram: "Terrorgram" mythmaking and the comfort of collapse

Over the last decade, counterterrorism experts and professionals have encountered a rise in lone actor political violence motivated by a loose collection of "accelerationist" ideas. The core of accelerationism is a pursuit and incitement of stochastic acts of violence to bring about societal collapse with a view to rebuilding a new order from the ashes.

The ideas of militant accelerationism have been taken up most notably by extreme right and white nationalist communities that organise online. One such online community, a loose collective known as "Terrorgram", distributes political manifestos and practical guides to committing acts of sensationalist violence across the online platform Telegram. Self-professed militant accelerationists, the denizens of Terrorgram see societal collapse as an opportunity for a fascist future. Terrorgram propaganda has inspired multiple acts of violence, most recently the Nashville school shooting in January 2025.

However, a close reading of Terrorgram's propaganda and the manifestos it has inspired reveals a fragmented picture. Rather than an ideologically or strategically coherent accelerationist movement, what's found instead is an online community offering a flag of convenience to imbue random acts of grievance-fueled violence with the meaning of a global struggle against the mundanity of modern life, and the anxiety of an uncertain future.

Kimberly Radivojevic - Historical Objects or Symbols of Hate? Examining the Australian Nazi Memorabilia Ban and its Effects on Collectors

Background:

In January 2024, the Counter-Terrorism Amendment Act 2023 (Cth) banned the trade in Nazi memorabilia inside Australia. Following this, Australian media covered the purported dangers of Nazi memorabilia, despite a lack of research existing on collectors of Nazi memorabilia or its Australian market. This research aimed to analyse the legislation's effects on Australian collectors of Nazi memorabilia, including the media's effect in demonising Nazi memorabilia collectors.

Method:

A content analysis of the limited Nazi memorabilia literature and its media coverage was conducted, forming the background for this research. One hundred and forty submissions to the parliamentary inquiry into the Counter-Terrorism Amendment Act 2023 (Cth) were then analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis, resulting in the development of eight themes representative of Nazi memorabilia collectors beliefs.

Results:

Collectors held overwhelmingly negative views towards this legislation prior to its enactment, hypothesising negative impacts for collectors and stating that the Australian media has created a 'moral panic', eroding their trust in public media.

Conclusion:

This analysis indicates the legislation and media's perceived negative effect on Nazi memorabilia collectors. Future studies should research the Australian black market for Nazi memorabilia and its media coverage as an effect of this legislation's enactment.