



Australian Political
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HYBRID WORKSHOP

Authoritarian Information Manipulation and Dissemination: National, Transnational, and International Perspectives

7-8 November 2024

Deakin Burwood Corporate Centre (BCC)



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HYBRID WORKSHOP

Authoritarian Information

Manipulation and Dissemination:

National, Transnational, and International Perspectives

Deakin Burwood Corporate Centre (BCC)
221 Burwood Highway, Burwood, Victoria 3125

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WELCOME

The emergence of repressive and authoritarian "hybrid regimes" poses one of the most significant threats to democracy today. These regimes and authoritarian actors wield information suppression and manipulation as essential tools to disseminate narratives that erode democratic institutions. This issue transcends national borders; digital technologies now enable authoritarian states to infiltrate robust democracies, allowing them to project their authoritarian narratives globally. The transnationalisation of authoritarian politics, facilitated by digital technologies, presents substantial challenges to the integrity of democratic processes and institutions.

In response to these challenges, our workshop aims to investigate how various actors—governments, non-state organisations, state-sponsored entities, and political parties—suppress and manipulate information to erode trust in democratic processes, both domestically and internationally. The workshop will also examine the darker dimensions of social media, focusing on the interactions between misinformation, negativity, and polarisation.

We will also discuss strategies to counter misinformation and disinformation, along with intervention techniques to mitigate their impacts. We will focus on countering disinformation through activism and explore everyday online experiences with misinformation, stressing the importance of evidence-based media literacy education initiatives. We will discuss necessary curricular reforms to combat disinformation, toxicity, and polarisation in educational contexts, as well as the responses of political elites to conspiracy theories.

We encourage all participants to actively engage in discussions and share insights throughout the workshop. Together, we aim to enhance our understanding of these critical issues and explore collaborative strategies to combat misinformation and disinformation in our increasingly complex digital environment. Thank you for joining us!

A special thank you to our funders: the Australian Political Studies Association (APSA), the Australian Research Council (ARC), and the Gerda Henkel Foundation for their generous support in making this event possible.



Prof. Dr. Ihsan Yilmaz
Research Chair
The Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation
Deakin University

on behalf of the organisers:

Prof. Dr. Ihsan Yilmaz
Dr. Ana-Maria Bliuc
Dr. John Betts
Dr. Susan de Groot Heupner
Dr. Nicholas Morieson
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FUNDING

Authoritarian Information Manipulation and Dissemination: National, Transnational, and International Perspectives

Deakin Burwood Corporate Centre (BCC)
221 Burwood Highway, Burwood, Victoria 3125



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PROGRAMME

DAY ONE - 7 November 2024

09:00 - 10:30
Roundtable 1

Keynote 1:

Foreign Interference Campaigns on Social Media:
Insights from Field Theory and Computational Social Science

Robert Ackland

Professor, The Australian National University

10:30 - 11:00

Morning Tea

11:00 - 12:30
Roundtable 2

Keynote 2:

Manipulating Truth: Authoritarian Strategies of 'Attention
Bombing' and 'Epistemic Modulation' in Hybrid Media Systems

Timothy Graham

Associate Professor, Queensland University of Technology

12:30 - 13:30

Lunch

13:30 - 15:00
Roundtable 3

Keynote 3:

The Dark Side of Social Media:
Misinformation, Negativity, and Polarisation

Jason Weismueller

Assistant Professor, University of Western Australia

15:00 - 15:30

Afternoon Tea

15:30 - 17:00
Roundtable 4

Keynote 4:

The Influence of Familiarity and Identity Relevance
on Truth Judgements

Li Qian Tay

Postdoctoral Fellow, The Australian National University

PROGRAMME

DAY TWO - 8 November 2024

09:00 - 10:30
Roundtable 5

Keynote 5:
**Countering State-Sanctioned Information Operations:
The #FreeYouth Movement in Thailand**
Aim Sinpeng
Associate Professor, The University of Sydney

10:30 - 11:00

Morning Tea

11:00 - 12:30
Roundtable 6

Keynote 6:
**Investigating Everyday Online Experiences with Misinformation
and Responding with Evidence-Informed Media Literacy
Education Initiatives**
Tanya Notley
Associate Professor, Western Sydney University

12:30 - 13:30

Lunch

13:30 - 15:00
Roundtable 7

Keynote 7:
**Reforming the Curriculum to Counter Disinformation,
Toxicity and Polarisation**
Mathieu O'Neil
Professor, The University of Canberra
Honorary Associate Professor, The Australian National University

15:00 - 15:30

Afternoon Tea

15:30 - 17:00
Roundtable 8

Keynote 8:
Ignore, Rebut or Embrace: Political Elite Responses to Conspiracy Theories
Zim Nwokora
Associate Professor, Deakin University

Keynote 9:
Disinformation in the City Response Playbook
Jessica (Ika) Trijsburg
Research Fellow in City Diplomacy at the Melbourne University





ABSTRACTS AND BIOS

DAY ONE
7 November 2024



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DAY ONE - 7 November 2024

09:00 - 10:30
Roundtable 1

Keynote 1: **Foreign Interference Campaigns on Social Media:** **Insights from Field Theory and Computational Social Science**

Robert Ackland

As part of election integrity processes, social media companies such as Twitter/X have released “takedown” datasets containing posts and media that have been associated with state-operated influence campaigns, including those run by the Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA) during the 2016 US presidential election. These datasets allow researchers to gain insight into the operation of foreign interference campaigns on social media: what countries and issues are targeted, and the strategies used to gain impact. This presentation extends research from a submission to the Senate Select Committee on Foreign Interference through Social Media, where we used the first Twitter takedown dataset to identify IRA accounts and tweets focused on Australian political and social issues. In that work, we identified evidence of “issue payload injection”: IRA troll accounts attempting to influence the direction of discourse around the issue of refugees and asylum seekers by inferring that refugees being housed on Manus Island were security threats to Australia. In the present research we explore how field theory (e.g. Fligstein & McAdam 2012), an analytical framework for researching competition among individuals and groups in various settings such as academic disciplines and cultural markets, can be used in research into foreign interference on social media. Drawing on earlier work (O’Neil & Ackland 2019), where we employed field theory to understand competitive behaviour of environmental activist organisations in response to an emergent environmental risk issue, this presentation outlines progress in using field theory in the context of foreign interference on social media. The presentation will focus on computational (network and text analysis) approaches for demarcating the field and identifying the actors and their competitive strategies.



Robert Ackland holds a PhD in economics and is a professor in the School of Sociology at the Australian National University, specialising in social network analysis, computational social science and the social science of the Internet. In the first phase of his career, Robert worked in applied economics as a senior research officer in the Bureau of Immigration Research (Commonwealth Department of Immigration) and a consultant economist in the World Bank. In 2002, Robert began researching online political networks, and this led to the establishment of the Virtual Observatory for the Study of Online Networks (VOSON) Lab (<http://vosonlab.net>) in 2005, under an Australian Research Council Special Research Initiative (e-Research) grant. Robert's recent research areas include network approaches to studying online political communication and deliberation, and associated problems such as echo chambers, misinformation and social bots. He has been chief investigator on five ARC grants (including as sole investigator on a Discovery Grant) and he is currently a chief investigator on a Volkswagen Foundation funded project (in the AI and the Society of the Future stream) focused on social bots and online political communication. Robert's book *Web Social Science* was published by Sage in 2013, and he teaches courses on online research methods and the digital economy and society. Robert is a long-term instructor for the Australian Consortium for Social and Political Research Inc. (ACSPRI), and is currently the Chair of ACSPRI.

11:00 - 12:30
Roundtable 2

Keynote 2:

Manipulating Truth: Authoritarian Strategies of 'Attention Bombing' and 'Epistemic Modulation' in Hybrid Media Systems

Timothy Graham

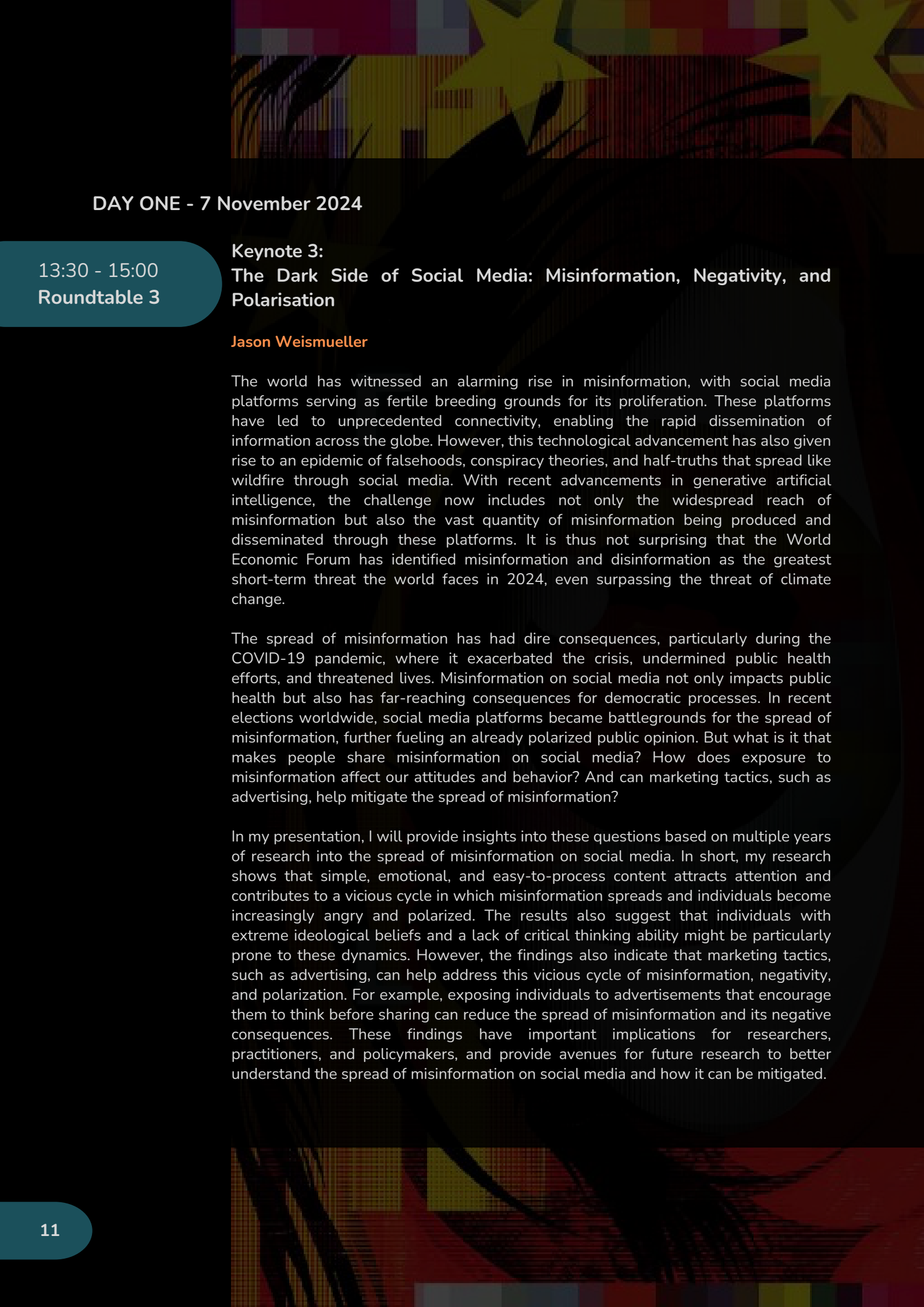
Authoritarian leaders such as Vladimir Putin are often credited for playing '4D chess' with liberal democratic nations through their efforts to manipulate public opinion and sow distrust. This metaphor of a hyper-dimensional game refers to the complex, multi-layered strategies that authoritarian regimes employ to achieve their goals of expanding geopolitical influence, undermining democratic institutions, increasing 'discourse power' in contested digital spaces, and exerting 'sharp power'. Moreover, the term '4D chess' evokes the perception of a higher-order strategy at play: that foreign state actors and leaders are thinking ten steps ahead of their adversaries and are using strategies with uncanny foresight that provides indirect control of narratives and events. In this paper, I offer a deeper exploration of this through a case study of Russian state-aligned coordinated inauthentic behaviour (CIB) on Twitter during the early stages of the Ukraine war, focusing on its impact on online discourse, news media coverage, and elite political communication. This CIB included the use of inauthentic burner accounts, bots, online PR firms, and state-operated accounts to bolster supportive narratives about the invasion. I contend that it is not only what these CIB actors do that matters, but 'what what they do does', as philosopher Michel Foucault wrote. Specifically, I focus on a higher-order process that I call 'attention bombing', which is an acute form of attention management (Graham, 2024; Harsin, 2015) where considerable resources are expended to carry out a short burst of high-volume messaging intended to get a topic, narrative, or hashtag trending, and thereby trigger widespread – often unintentional – amplification by the public and mainstream media (Phillips, 2018).

Beyond the strategy of attention bombing, the manipulation of discourse by state actors operates on a deeper epistemic level. To examine this, I draw on the concept of alethic functionalism from the field of epistemology to understand how sophisticated propaganda strategies co-opt and manipulate different notions of truth in contested digital space – a process I call 'epistemic modulation'. Alethic functionalism contends that truth functions differently across domains, and that properties that manifest in one domain may not apply in the other, even though both produce what we take as valid truths. For example, in domains like biology, truth functions through correspondence to observed reality; in mathematics, truth hinges on coherence with logical systems; and in ethics, truth manifests through a combination of moral coherence and pragmatic considerations about what produces socially desirable outcomes. While correspondence to reality is often perceived as the 'gold standard' of truth, many propositions, especially in political discourse or relating to distant events, are either difficult to verify or by nature are unverifiable (e.g., an ethical proposition about Ukrainian sovereignty). This framework helps us to understand how knowledge about the Ukraine war and other strategic topics is shaped through multiple modalities of truth-seeking, and how existing epistemic processes like belief-formation, fact-checking, and journalistic practices can be subtly modulated by authoritarian regimes using digital technologies to reshape the boundaries of acceptable discourse and who has authority to speak the truth.

DAY ONE - 7 November 2024



Timothy Graham is Associate Professor in Digital Media at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT). He is a computational social scientist who studies online networks and platforms, with a particular interest in propaganda and online influence, digital publics, and algorithmic curation. Tim is an Australian Research Council DECRA Fellow, for his project, “Combatting Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour on Social Media” (2022-2025). He is also Chief Investigator of the QUT Digital Media Research Centre and Associate Investigator of the ARC Centre of Excellence in Automated Decision-Making and Society (ADM+S). He is Chief Investigator of a newly commenced ARC Discovery Project, “Understanding and Combatting ‘Dark Political Communication’” (2024-2027). He has authored over forty peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters, featured in thousands of news articles in leading outlets including The New York Times, The Washington Post, and BBC World News, and actively develops and maintains open-source software for the collection and analysis of data from the web and social media.



DAY ONE - 7 November 2024

13:30 - 15:00
Roundtable 3

Keynote 3:

The Dark Side of Social Media: Misinformation, Negativity, and Polarisation

Jason Weismueller

The world has witnessed an alarming rise in misinformation, with social media platforms serving as fertile breeding grounds for its proliferation. These platforms have led to unprecedented connectivity, enabling the rapid dissemination of information across the globe. However, this technological advancement has also given rise to an epidemic of falsehoods, conspiracy theories, and half-truths that spread like wildfire through social media. With recent advancements in generative artificial intelligence, the challenge now includes not only the widespread reach of misinformation but also the vast quantity of misinformation being produced and disseminated through these platforms. It is thus not surprising that the World Economic Forum has identified misinformation and disinformation as the greatest short-term threat the world faces in 2024, even surpassing the threat of climate change.

The spread of misinformation has had dire consequences, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, where it exacerbated the crisis, undermined public health efforts, and threatened lives. Misinformation on social media not only impacts public health but also has far-reaching consequences for democratic processes. In recent elections worldwide, social media platforms became battlegrounds for the spread of misinformation, further fueling an already polarized public opinion. But what is it that makes people share misinformation on social media? How does exposure to misinformation affect our attitudes and behavior? And can marketing tactics, such as advertising, help mitigate the spread of misinformation?

In my presentation, I will provide insights into these questions based on multiple years of research into the spread of misinformation on social media. In short, my research shows that simple, emotional, and easy-to-process content attracts attention and contributes to a vicious cycle in which misinformation spreads and individuals become increasingly angry and polarized. The results also suggest that individuals with extreme ideological beliefs and a lack of critical thinking ability might be particularly prone to these dynamics. However, the findings also indicate that marketing tactics, such as advertising, can help address this vicious cycle of misinformation, negativity, and polarization. For example, exposing individuals to advertisements that encourage them to think before sharing can reduce the spread of misinformation and its negative consequences. These findings have important implications for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers, and provide avenues for future research to better understand the spread of misinformation on social media and how it can be mitigated.

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Jason Weismueller is an Assistant Professor in Marketing at UWA Business School in Perth, Australia. Jason's research centres on critical issues in the digital age, particularly the darker dimensions of social media. He explores the spread of misinformation and the increasingly polarised political discourse that permeates online platforms. Leveraging advanced big data analytics, he has conducted studies into how the textual and visual features of social media posts shape public sentiment, contribute to negativity, and stimulate engagement. More recently, his work has taken a forward-thinking approach by investigating not only the drivers behind the proliferation of misinformation but also proactive strategies such as pre-bunking, which can mitigate its impact. In addition to his work on the negative aspects of social media, Jason's expertise extends into broader areas of digital marketing. His research includes studying the efficacy of influencer marketing campaigns, focusing on how brands can enhance engagement and visibility in the competitive social media landscape. Jason's scholarly contributions have appeared in prestigious international journals, including *Information Systems Journal*, *Computers in Human Behavior*, and *Australasian Marketing Journal*. His insights have also reached a wider audience through media outlets like *The Conversation*. Jason has been invited to present his research at leading academic institutions across Australia and internationally. He frequently shares his expertise at public forums, such as city libraries, where he engages communities in meaningful discussions about the risks and realities of misinformation. His work has earned him invitations to speak at high-profile conferences globally, with notable presentations across the USA, Europe, New Zealand, and Australia.

DAY ONE - 7 November 2024

15:30 - 17:00
Roundtable 4

Keynote 4:

The Influence of Familiarity and Identity Relevance on Truth Judgements

Li Qian Tay

Misinformation—broadly defined as all types of false or misleading information, including disinformation—has become a salient issue in both public and academic discourse. A key question of practical relevance is the extent to which individuals can effectively distinguish between truth and falsehood. Some researchers argue that individuals generally demonstrate strong misinformation discernment abilities, and that there is little reason to be concerned about misinformation. I contend, however, that while some findings related to misinformation discernment are encouraging, they may be contingent on the specific type of misinformation used in those studies. Moreover, there remain significant gaps in our understanding of the psychological mechanisms underlying judgements of truth. In this workshop, I will challenge the arguably overly optimistic conclusions by presenting a series of studies that examine how two simple manipulations—enhancing a claim’s familiarity and its social identity relevance—can influence belief. For instance, in one of the studies, we presented participants with a single set of country-referencing claims (e.g., “Country A has the highest number of PhD holders per capita”), randomised to be repeated or novel, and identity-relevant or irrelevant. For U.S. participants, an identity-relevant claim might be “The United States has the highest number of PhD holders per capita,” whereas an identity-irrelevant version might reference another, randomised G7 country, such as “France has the highest number of PhD holders per capita.” Results showed that both repetition and identity relevance caused claims to be judged as more true, despite all of the presented claims being false.

With recent technological advances and the democratisation of the information ecosystem, the potential for malicious actors to exploit the effects of factors such as familiarity and identity relevance is significant. In this light, interventions to address misinformation should go beyond simply examining and enhancing discernment based on communications, such as teaching individuals to recognize potential markers of falsehood in the claims that they may encounter. While helpful, these interventions are inherently limited, as they depend on the content and specificity of the communication and can be easily adapted by those spreading misinformation. Indeed, to truly combat misinformation, I argue we must consider the role of the psychological processes involved as well as the broader social contexts that shape how individuals come to accept information as true in the first place.

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Li Qian Tay is currently Postdoctoral Fellow at the School of Medicine and Psychology at the Australian National University, after recently completing his PhD in Psychology at the University of Western Australia. His research lies at the intersection of cognitive psychology, social psychology, and causal inference, with a particular focus on the effects of misinformation and the development of ethical and effective interventions to mitigate its impact. For instance, his work has examined the role of cognitive biases and social identity in shaping belief in and sharing of misinformation. He has also applied computational modelling (e.g., drift diffusion models) to examine the mechanisms underlying truth judgments. In addition, he has written on how to draw causal inferences in misinformation and conspiracy research via methodological triangulation, as well as proposed a framework for the evaluation of misinformation interventions that takes into account primary effectiveness, ancillary impacts, and implementation challenges. Commensurate with career stage and experience, he has a track record of publications in internationally recognized journals. He has authored and co-authored publications in journals such as *Nature*, the *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review*, *American Psychologist*, and the *British Journal of Psychology*.

In addition, Li Qian Tay is also a member of the coordinating team for SciBeh (www.scibeh.org), a global interdisciplinary network of researchers focused on building the infrastructure required to facilitate knowledge management. SciBeh aims to connect researchers, policymakers, and public communicators, particularly in times of global crises such as pandemics or environmental emergencies, ensuring that scientific insights can be quickly mobilised for practical decision-making. As part of his role at SciBeh, he has an established record of building and maintaining relationships with a diverse network of volunteers and researchers across disciplines, including psychology, data science, political science, and public health.





ABSTRACTS AND BIOS

DAY TWO
8 November 2024



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09:00 - 10:30
Roundtable 5

Keynote 5:

**Countering State-Sanctioned Information Operations:
The #FreeYouth Movement in Thailand**

Aim Sinpeng

The use and misuse of digital media has upended the relationship between citizen and state, abetted oppressive governments and posed immediate and long-term threats to democracy. More than 70% of the world's population lives in countries whose governments already employ at least one form of cyber repression. Existing analyses on cyber repression have been state-centric, leaving us with a limited understanding of how civil society responds to, and circumvents, digital crackdowns (Weidmann and Rod 2019). Thus far, they have also been largely focused on the Global North (Woolley and Howard 2017). This project aims to determine why Thai online opposition movements have proved to be so successful in the face of sustained cyberattacks. It does this through an investigation of the 'Free Youth Movement' (FYM), one of the largest anti-regime youth protest movements in Thailand's contemporary history. FYM is a networked counterpublic that has succeeded in infiltrating mainstream public discourse and in leveraging its online infrastructure to mobilise large-scale, street-based, anti-regime protests. How, then, do cyber repressive tactics target the network structures of opposition movements, and how do opposition movements resist such attacks?

Adopting a network structure framework, I hypothesise that the flat network structure of FYM and its crowd-sourced leadership help explain its resilience in Thailand's digitally repressive environment. At the heart of any online counterpublic is its networked structure – how groups and individuals are connected – because this shapes pathways for information diffusion, framing and collective mobilisation. Decentralised network structures have comparative advantages over hierarchical ones when faced with cyber repression because their flat and diffused network structures allow multiple information brokers to emerge at different points in time. Based on both social network and content analysis of X data as well as in-depth interviews, I argue that horizontally connected counterpublics, like FYM, produce a multiplicity of brokers who can bridge otherwise unconnected groups. These brokers can also continue to mobilise counter discourse even when leaders of particular sub-communities within the networks cannot participate. These network properties make FYM particularly resilient to cyber repression, because the presence of large numbers of brokers – none of whom have a public profile – means that the government cannot identify regime critics in the same way that it could do in a traditional oppositional social movement.

Robbed of its tried and true tactics of oppression, governments resort to cyber repression, for example, bombarding online social movement with bot attacks and disinformation attacks. In Thailand's case, these attacks have been both heavy and sustained. However, FYM's resilience indicates that these have been poorly targeted, possibly suggesting that the government has yet to fully grasp the differences between online and offline movements. My second hypothesis is that the quality of cyberattacks matters: to be effective, governments need to understand online dissident culture. For example, hashtags are a key tool in the case of X, but hashtags are embedded in pop culture, such as K-pop, and therefore often inaccessible to bureaucrats and state officials, who are assigned to thwart anti-regime narratives online. Implications of the Thai case contribute to the growing literature on digital activism in authoritarian state as well as bringing in the network structure approach to understanding today's contentious politics.

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Aim Sinpeng is Associate Professor in the Discipline of Government and International Relations and Thailand Country Coordinator for the Sydney Southeast Asian Centre at the University of Sydney. She's currently a DECRA fellow for a project on cyber repression and protest politics in Thailand. She is the author of an award-winning book, *Opposing Democracy in the Digital Age: the Yellow Shirts in Thailand* (University of Michigan Press, 2021). Her research interests include digital politics in authoritarian states, ethics in AI and Southeast Asian politics. She is currently a principal investigator for a Google-funded project on AI and gender bias in translation in Asian languages and a Meta-funded project on misinformation in low press freedom environment. She has published widely on Thai politics and digital politics in Southeast Asia in journals such as *Pacific Affairs*, *Electoral Studies*, *Critical Asian Studies* and *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*. Aim is Senior Advisor – Southeast Asia for the Freedom House and serves as a consultant on politics and eSafety to governments and organisations such as Meta, the UNDP, the Westminster Foundation for Democracy and EngageMedia. In her free time she likes to play tennis and enjoy bubble tea with her children.

DAY TWO - 8 November 2024

11:00 - 12:30
Roundtable 6

Keynote 6:

Investigating Everyday Online Experiences with Misinformation and Responding with Evidence-Informed Media Literacy Education Initiatives

Tanya Notley

Misinformation can harm democratic processes, social cohesion and public health outcomes. However, there has been limited research into how adult Australians respond to potentially harmful misinformation they encounter online, or how media literacy interventions can be designed to assist them. Our research project addresses this research gap. Media literacy is the ability to apply critical thinking to digital and non-digital media through analysis, evaluation, and reflection. Media literacy has been shown to support people's ability to identify, avoid and respond to misinformation by increasing their critical thinking, digital skills and media knowledge (Edwards 2021). Our project partners with four national public cultural institutions who are responding to our research findings by developing targeted media literacy initiatives. In this presentation I share our research findings and explain how these findings are being used by our project partners to develop evidence-informed media literacy initiatives.

We used a mixed methods approach to examine adult media literacy and online encounters with misinformation. First, we conducted a nationally representative survey of 4442 adult Australians, which was administered by an online panel provider. Our 2024 Australian Adult Media Literacy survey finds that almost half of adult Australians (47%) reported that they encountered false or misleading information online in the week prior to the survey. However, only two in five (39%) are confident they can check if information they found online is true.

Second, we conducted an activity based survey with 2,115 of the initial survey respondents to investigate their ability to identify misinformation and the methods they adopt to verify information. Respondents were given four tasks asking them to verify information on social media posts and articles on websites. The findings reveal that an average of 79% of the respondents could not take the basic steps required to identify false information. The respondent's ability was strongly related to their education level and their confidence in their media ability.

Third, we implemented a multi-day diary study with 60 of the survey participants to examine adult's everyday experiences with online misinformation. The data collected provides a glimpse into diverse everyday online information-seeking behaviours and encounters with misinformation. This was followed by in depth interviews with 20 of these participants. Taken together, this phase of the research contributes to a more grounded and concrete understanding of what misinformation looks like to different groups of Australians, who is spreading it, and how Australians respond.

Finally, we use an Evidence-Informed Approach (Neelen & Kirschner, 2020) combined with a Connected Learning Approach (Ito et al., 2013) to support and work with our project partners to develop learning initiatives that are informed by credible evidence, are aligned with people's interests, and are embedded in their everyday media activities.

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Tanya Notley is an Associate Professor at the School of Humanities and Communication Arts, Institute for Culture & Society, Western Sydney University. She is internationally recognised in the field of engaged, practice-based media research, as well as for her work in areas of digital inclusion, media literacy, and human rights media. She has worked extensively with a range of organisations to use media to address digital inequalities and has led 10 media literacy research projects since 2017, including two longitudinal national surveys and involving collaborations with more than 20 industry partners. Tanya is a co-founder of the Australian Media Literacy Alliance and served as the Co-Chair 2020-23. Prior to joining Western Sydney University, Tanya worked as a practice-based researcher for UN agencies, community media and human rights organisations. Tanya is currently leading a national project that examines everyday experiences of misinformation in Australia and works with public cultural institutions to design media literacy initiatives that can help people avoid and identify misinformation.

13:30 - 15:00
Roundtable 7

Keynote 7:

Reforming the Curriculum to Counter Disinformation, Toxicity, and Polarisation

Mathieu O'Neil

When people can no longer tell truth from fiction, we are in an epistemic crisis. For Haider and Sundin (2022), this primarily stems from algorithmic curation by online platforms: information is increasingly volatile (the origins or status of fast-changing newsfeed content is uncertain), fragmented (complex knowledge is re-arranged in continuously shifting shapes), and personalised (access is individualised). Aggravating factors are hostile influence campaigns seeking to worsen social divisions, and the rise of AI. The crisis increases distrust towards the institutions of liberal democracy such as the news media, science, and representative politics. Alternative sources are on the rise. Health influencers have huge audiences; toxic masculinists are idolised by boys and young men. In response, democratic education systems must innovate. I outline three strategic avenues.

I – Against disinformation: instilling effective information processing and curating skills: When information is overabundant fact-checking, or information processing skills, need to be cognitively effective. They should be fast (don't waste your attention), non-partisan (community acceptance is key), and transparent (the antidote to conspiratorial thinking). I will share insights from an information literacy program currently running in Canberra high schools. This program uses the 'lateral reading' method: do not engage deeply with a claim; look to the side, open another tab; search and verify. If the claim is unreliable, move on. The program uses Wikipedia for fact-checking, so students must be able to determine if a Wikipedia article is problematic. We also need to help people who curate information environments, such as Reddit moderators, deal with hate speech by developing clear guidelines for the best 'counterspeech' tactics.

II - Against toxicity: reclaiming martial arts: The rightful contestation of patriarchy throws the baby out with the bathwater. When it comes to dealing with toxic masculinity, educators have left the building. Influencer Andrew Tate's appeal derives from his status as a former kickboxer who proved his skill in action. Fighting is a human trait which should not be suppressed, but channelled. The core martial arts value is respect. When training or sparring, skills and a respectful attitude are what matters. Martial arts training ought to be included in the curriculum.

III - Against polarisation: fostering collaborative values: In the attention economy, the most attractive social media content is deemed to be conflict-based, so energy is wholly devoted to 'destroying' an opposing point of view. We must incorporate cooperative values into the curriculum by demonstrating how people work together to build resources that benefit all. Digital commons are a prime example. Open source software is now the industry standard. Students must learn core open source coding principles and values of openness and transparency. Haider and Sundin (2022) point out that though information literacy is often framed in terms of individual responsibility, 'a shared sense of truth [...] requires societal trust, especially institutional trust, at least as an anticipated ideal' (p. 30). Where could this ideal lie? How can trust in institutions be rebuilt? Wikipedia is an auditable platform where knowledge is collectively developed and where interactions are based on the authority of the better argument, on proof and evidence: Wikipedia editing skills ought to be taught in schools.

DAY TWO - 8 November 2024



Mathieu O'Neil is Professor of Communication in the University of Canberra's Faculty of Arts and Design and Honorary Associate Professor of Sociology at the Australian National University. Mathieu co-founded the ANU's Virtual Observatory for the Study of Online Networks, a world leader in big data analytics and computational social science. Most recently, he is developing heuristics to detect online echo chambers (Bots Building Bridges (3B): Theoretical, Empirical, and Technological Foundations for Systems that Monitor and Support Political Deliberation Online, Volkswagen Foundation, Artificial Intelligence and the Society of the Future, 2021-2024). In the University of Canberra's News and Media Research Centre, he has initiated multidisciplinary collaborations with UC researchers. With colleagues in the Faculty of Education, he is designing information literacy resources for schools (Co-developing a new approach to media literacy in the attention economy, ACT Education Directorate-UC Affiliated Schools Research Program, 2021-2022; Building information resilience: A collaborative project with ACT teacher-librarians, ACT Education Directorate-UC Affiliated Schools Research Program, 2024-2026).

Mathieu has played a key role in peer production research (the term 'peer production' describes free and open source software in the 1990s, Wikipedia in the 2000s, and Blockchain in the 2010s) by founding and editing the peer-reviewed Journal of Peer Production (2011-2021), by editing the Handbook of Peer Production (Wiley-Blackwell Handbooks in Communication and Media, 2021), and by founding an international think tank, the Digital Commons Policy Council, in 2021. He also leads an international team researching the economic and environmental sustainability of free and open source software (Mapping the co-production of digital infrastructure by peer projects and firms, Sloan and Ford Foundations, Critical Digital Infrastructure Fund, 2019-2021; DCPC: Pilot Research and Operational Costs, Ford Foundation, 2022-2025).

Mathieu's research has been published in peer-reviewed journals such as Social Networks, Information, Communication & Society, Réseaux, New Media and Society, the International Journal of Communication, and Organization Studies, amongst others. He previously held academic appointments at the Université Stendhal - Grenoble 3, the Australian National University and the Université Paris Sorbonne. He has also worked as a magazine editor and exhibition curator in Singapore, and as a researcher for the Australian Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy.

DAY TWO - 8 November 2024

15:30 - 17:00
Roundtable 8

Keynote 8:

Ignore, Rebut or Embrace: Political Elite Responses to Conspiracy Theories

Zim Nwokora

Concerns about conspiracy theories have increased in recent years, fuelled by a surge in conspiratorial discourse during the Donald Trump presidency in the United States. Responding to this development, the scholarship on how democracies should deal with conspiracy theories has focused on what new regulations and institutions ought to be introduced to tackle its threats to democracy. In this article, I consider this practical question from a different angle by exploring the discursive strategies that are available to political elites when they encounter a conspiracy theory. I flesh out three general strategies – ignore, rebut and embrace – and identify the circumstances that shape when each strategy should be used in order to maximize the effects of discourse as an anti-conspiracy mechanism. This perspective thereby aims to reveal the elements of skill and nuance that are required of a politician who seeks to engage a conspiracy theory in a way that advances democratic values.

Zim Nwokora is an Associate Professor in Politics and Policy at Deakin University, Melbourne. His expertise is in comparative political institutions, especially constitutions, political parties and political finance. His research on these topics has appeared in leading journals in political science and cognate fields, including the *British Journal of Political Science*, *International Journal of Constitutional Law*, *Governance*, *Party Politics*, *Political Research Quarterly* and *Political Studies*. He is co-author of *Money, Parties, and Democracy: Political Finance between Fat Cats and Big Government*, forthcoming with Oxford University Press, and co-editor of *Constitutional Conventions: Theories, Practices and Dynamics*, forthcoming with Routledge.



DAY TWO - 8 November 2024

15:30 - 17:00
Roundtable 8

Keynote 9: Disinformation in the City Response Playbook

Jessica (Ika) Trijsburg

This playbook has been developed at the request of cities. It aims to inform local responses to disinformation and, in doing so, enhance the wellbeing of communities and democracy. The playbook is based on several principles which underpin its content and provide the context for effective disinformation response in cities. The playbook development process involved 40 representatives from cities, media and tech sectors, civil society and academia. These applied different disciplinary lenses to the challenges and potential responses of cities in their contexts within Australasia, Europe and North America. The process involved completion of an in-depth cities survey to understand the current experiences and responses employed by participating cities and one peak body for cities (n=14)

Jessica (Ika) Trijsburg is Research Fellow in City Diplomacy at the Melbourne University. She delivers the DFAT-funded City Diplomacy Melbourne Masterclass which builds capacity for city diplomacy in the global governance of climate and sustainability. Ika researches the ways that cities connect and collaborate to address shared and complex challenges, including climate change and disinformation. She leads the Disinformation in the City project on behalf of a collaboration across The University of Melbourne, The Australian National University, Monash University, Deakin University and Victoria University in partnership with the German Marshall Fund of the United States.





FUNDING



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Australian Political Studies Association (APSA)

Research Workshop Funding

Workshop Title:

**“Authoritarian Information Manipulation and Dissemination:
National, Transnational, and International Perspectives”**

This 11K AUD funding was awarded by APSA for a 2-day hybrid workshop that will bring together approximately 25 experts to explore the global landscape of authoritarian information manipulation and dissemination, particularly focusing on disinformation tactics employed by authoritarian regimes. Designed to foster collaboration and advance cutting-edge research, the workshop aims to enhance our understanding of these tactics and develop strategies to counter their effects. The workshop's objectives include providing new conceptual, methodological, and empirical insights into how authoritarian actors erode trust in democratic systems. Participants will engage with various frameworks and methodologies to investigate the digital strategies that manipulate democratic narratives and public sentiment. By facilitating interdisciplinary discussions, the workshop will also address the complexities of misinformation and disinformation propagation and their impact on societies, politics, and cultures worldwide.



Australian Government
Australian Research Council

Australian Research Council (ARC) Funded project (DP220100829) (2022-2025) “Religious Populism, Emotions and Political Mobilisation”

This 3-year project is led by Ihsan Yilmaz and seeks to explore the defining characteristics of religious populism, particularly through the lens of emotional influence in political engagement. Focusing on three key countries—Turkey, Indonesia, and Pakistan it employs a range of analytical methods, including the examination of populist rhetoric, populist digital communication and interviews with voters to understand the reception of the populist messaging. The goal is to deepen both theoretical and empirical understandings of religious populism, especially how emotional appeals contribute to political mobilisation and societal polarisation. By developing benchmark data sets and conceptual frameworks, the research aims to offer insights that can be applied to other contexts where religious populism threatens democratic institutions. Ultimately, the project aspires to equip democratic governments with the knowledge needed to devise informed policies that mitigate the potential harms of religious populism, safeguarding the stability and integrity of democratic systems.



Australian Government
Australian Research Council

Australian Research Council (ARC)

Funded project (DP230100257) (2023-2026)

**“Civilisationist Mobilisation, Digital Technologies, and Social Cohesion
in Turkish and Indian Diasporas in Australia”**

This 3-year project is led by Ihsan Yilmaz and investigates intra-diaspora conflict among Indian, and Turkish migrants in Australia. Supporters of these nations' governments have increasingly targeted dissident expatriate groups, often utilizing digital technologies such as social media to mobilize their supporters. These platforms have become "hate factories," spreading divisive rhetoric that vilifies other diaspora groups as traitors to their countries of origin. Despite the significance of these trends, little research has been conducted on how civilisational populist narratives mobilize diasporas, influence inter-group relations, and interact with digital technologies. This project aims to fill these theoretical and empirical gaps by studying the role of civilisational populist narratives in the transnational political mobilization of Turkish and Indian diasporas in Australia.

The logo of the Gerda Henkel Stiftung is a vertical rectangle divided into three horizontal sections. The top section is light gray, the middle section is white and contains the text "GERDA HENKEL STIFTUNG" in dark gray, and the bottom section is yellow.

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Gerda Henkel Foundation (GHF)

Funded project (AZ 01/TG/21)

“Emerging Digital Technologies and the Future of Democracy
in the Muslim World (2022-2025)”

This 3-year project is co-led by Shahram Akbarzadeh and Ihsan Yilmaz. Smart digital technologies have had both positive and negative impacts on democracy worldwide. On the positive side, these technologies have weakened the dominance of traditional media, giving ordinary people a platform to share their voices, communicate politically, and organize protests more effectively. They have also made it easier for people to connect with their governments. However, these same technologies provide governments and large tech companies with vast amounts of personal data, raising concerns about privacy and surveillance, which can harm democratic processes. In the Muslim world, where digital technologies have grown rapidly in the last two decades, this mixed impact is evident. In some countries, these tools have enabled protests and revolutions, while in others, they have strengthened government control. This project explores how smart digital technologies have affected democracy in the Muslim world by examining four countries: Iran, Turkey, Pakistan, and Egypt.





HYBRID WORKSHOP

**Authoritarian Information
Manipulation and Dissemination:**
National, Transnational, and International Perspectives

7-8 November 2024



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