

# UNDERSTANDING THE SOCIAL IN A DIGITAL AGE

A ONE DAY CONFERENCE ON MEDIA,  
TECHNOLOGY & THE SOCIAL

*January 8th 2019, University of East Anglia*

## Conference programme

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**UEA** University of  
East Anglia

**ual:** london college  
of communication

# Welcome

Dear participant,

We are so pleased to welcome to you to 'Understanding the Social in a Digital Age', the first conference we have organized together and one we are very pleased to have you be a part of.

The idea for this conference may have come from discussions between the organizers, but it has also come from urgent questions about what it means to be 'social' in a digital age. These questions are being asked across multiple disciplines and more broadly afield in public discussions, moral panics, and critical debates. In an age where social and digital media have come to shape social interactions, intimacies, and popular collectivities, it is more important than ever to critically interrogate what it means to be social, how sociality is shaped, and why social change is happening the way it is. Increased political polarization, including the rise of nationalistic borders, xenophobic barriers and public misinformation threaten social cohesion, along with the simultaneous growth of global collectivities and participatory publics. The rise of digital empires focused on commodifying 'the social' provokes continued use of critical traditions in sociology, economics, politics, and media. Yet, we must also balance these traditions with a 21<sup>st</sup> Century orientation so that we can critically interrogate innovations, change, and anticipatory futures.

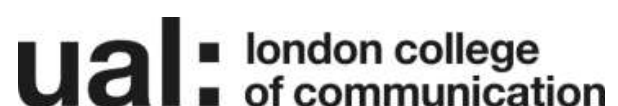
The purpose of this conference is to bring together a range of research and voices from across multiple disciplines to better understand 'the social' and sociality in a digital age. We are delighted to include your voice in this conference and hope that together we can share current thinking and challenges. It is our hope that we will contribute to identifying key questions about these issues, as well as to foster an active community actively working towards the important task of understanding and building a better 'social' in a digital age.

We have worked hard to organize this conference, the best part of which has been working with you, to deliver a thought-provoking day. We are grateful for the support of our departments and universities, The school of Education and Lifelong Learning at *The University of East Anglia* and the Communications and Media programme at *UAL: London College of Communication*, without whom this conference could not take place. We can't wait to share in your work and further thinking in this area. Welcome and thank-you for your participation.

With all best wishes,

Dr Zoetanya Sujon and Dr Harry T Dyer

Understanding the Social in a Digital Age



# UPDATED SCHEDULE

8:30-9:30	<b>registration – Julian Study Building, UEA</b>	
9:30-9:40	<b>Welcome and opening remarks – ROOM JSC 0.01</b>	
9:40-10:30	<b>Opening Keynote: Professor Nick Couldry Deep Mediatization: Towards A Datafied Social Order ROOM JSC 0.01</b>	
10:30-10:45	<b>Coffee break</b>	
	<b>Panel 1.1: Images - use and misuse CHAIR – Ysabel Gerrard ROOM JSC 1.02</b>	<b>Panel 1.2: Social Media, family, and young people CHAIR – Harry Dyer ROOM JSC 1.03</b>
<b>Session 1</b> 10:45-12:15	Politics and Porn: A Look at How News Media Characterizes the Problem with Deepfakes <b>Chandell Gosse and Jacquelyn Burkell (Western University)</b>	Affective coding: Platformed subtleties in new fathers self-disclosure strategies around mental health, <b>Ranjana Das and Paul Hodgkinson (University of Surrey)</b>
	Fannish Social Interactions Online: More than Producers? <b>Ruth Flaherty (University of East Anglia)</b>	The return of the social: On the socio-algorithmic construction of identity categories, <b>Dan M. Kotliar (The Hebrew University of Jerusalem)</b>
	Brands and productive publics in the event economy: the case of Milano Design week, <b>Alberto Cossu (University of Amsterdam)</b>	Family life and the smart home, <b>Murray Goulden (University of Nottingham)</b>
	The time of the social image, <b>Karen Cross (University of Roehampton)</b>	Socially ‘withdrawn’? Examining the sociality of young people ‘hidden’ in the bedroom in the digital age, <b>Mark Wong (University of Glasgow)</b>
12:15-13:00	<b>Lunch – JSC FOYER</b>	

	<b>Panel 2.1: Reframing the social</b> <b>CHAIR – Zoetanya Sujon</b> <b>ROOM JSC 1.02</b>	<b>Panel 2.2: Digital use, rights, governance, and power</b> <b>CHAIR – Harry Dyer</b> <b>ROOM JSC 1.03</b>
	Conducting the rhythms of the social and the antisocial, <i>Elinor Carmi (Liverpool University)</i>	Digital governance and our common digital future: a “digital sustainability” agenda, <i>Ioanna Noula (University of Leeds) and Jonny Shipp (LSE)</i>
<b>Session 2</b> 13:00-14:30	For Digital Space and Place: Socially constructed place in urban China’s digital space, <i>Carwyn Morris (LSE)</i>	Governed by algorithms: Theories of digitised power to shape subjects and societies, <i>Thorsten Bronholt (University of the West of Scotland)</i>
	Humiliation and the Affective Obligation of the Social: Putting the social back into social media, <i>Sarah Cefai, University of the Arts London</i>	Networked discussions about the network: Public(s) discussions around the right to be forgotten, <i>Rebekah Larsen (University of Cambridge)</i>
	Reality work: Digital labour as a reality construction, <i>Chris Till (Leeds Beckett University)</i>	
14:30-14:45	<b>Coffee break</b>	
	<b>Panel 3.1: Users, fans, followers, and friends</b> <b>CHAIR – Karen Cross</b> <b>ROOM JSC 1.02</b>	<b>Panel 3.2: Socio-cultural dynamics online</b> <b>CHAIR – Harry Dyer</b> <b>ROOM JSC 1.03</b>
	Trust in the age of dating apps, <i>Carolina Bandinelli and Alessandro Gandini (The University of Lincoln)</i>	Mapping (Anti)Colonial Issue Publics on Instagram, <i>Carrie Karsgaard, and Maggie MacDonald (University of Alberta)</i>
<b>Session 3</b> 14:45-16:15	How Chinese fans use social media to transnationally engage in the participatory culture of contemporary British TV drama, <i>Shiyu Zheng (The University of Warwick)</i>	‘We won’t allow politicians to speak for us anymore’: Sex workers, social media, and protest, <i>Nadine I. Kozak (University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee)</i>
	The Influence of PTT Bulletin Board System on Taiwanese Internet Culture, Mainstream Media and Civic Engagement, <i>Emi Pei-Ying Wang (Columbia University)</i>	The gendering of social media’s algorithmic recommendations, <i>Ysabel Gerrard, Helen Thornham (University of Sheffield)</i>
		Du Bois’s maps as devices: Changing digital social research with early social data experiments, <i>Laurie Waller (University of East Anglia)</i>
16:15-16:30	<b>Break</b>	
16:30-17:30	<b>Closing Keynote: Professor Gina Neff</b> <b>Towards Network Solidarity?</b> <b>Room JSC 0.01</b>	
17:45 +	<b>After conference reception – ROOM JSC 1.03</b>	

# Keynotes

## Deep Mediatization: Towards A Datafied Social Order

Professor Nick Couldry, (London School of Economics and Political Science)

ROOM JSC 0.01, 9.30-10:30

**Abstract:** This lecture will draw on Nick's forthcoming book with Ulises Mejias, SUNY Oswego, *The Costs of Connection: How Data Colonizes Human Life and Appropriates it for Capitalism* (Stanford University Press 2019), while also making links to Nick's preceding book with Andreas Hepp, *The Mediated Construction of Reality* (Polity 2016). It will argue that, in a process of deepening mediatization, the very elements of social life are being reconstituted. Social life and societies come to be governed ever more by force and not consent. The most, but not the only, disturbing feature of this shift is the process of data colonialism (Couldry and Mejias forthcoming 2019), the start of a new phase in human history that rivals in importance the emergence of historic colonialism: in short, the emergence of a new data colonialism, based on the appropriation of human life through data. The lecture will go on to discuss how a new social order is being created as the key means to stabilise and enforce this data colonialism and its extractive logics. This new order creates new dependencies on platforms through which data is extracted, and also produces new forms of social discrimination, based on a reinvention of social knowledge. The result is a hollowing out of the social world, which for corporate capitalism takes on the paradoxical form of an emerging new social domain available for endless exploitation and manipulation.



**Brief Bio:** Nick Couldry is a sociologist of media and culture. He is Professor of Media Communications and Social Theory at the London School of Economics and Political Science. He is the author or editor of twelve books including most recently *The Mediated Construction of Reality* (with Andreas Hepp, Polity, 2016), *Ethics of Media* (2013 Palgrave, coedited with Mirca Madianou and Amit Pinchevski), *Media, Society, World: Social Theory and Digital Media Practice* (Polity 2012) and *Why Voice Matters: Culture and Politics After Neoliberalism* (Sage 2010).

## Toward Network Solidarity?

Professor Gina Neff (Oxford Internet Institute)

ROOM JSC 0.01, 16:30 – 17:30

**Abstract:** In this talk I put forth the provocation that the concerns of propaganda, voice and democracy that characterised the rise of communication and media studies as disciplines were anchored in a set of twentieth-century liberal ideals that presumed that news played a key role in people's lives. I suggest that as scholars we need to revisit these founding assumptions from the communication field to update our theories about understanding the social in the digital age. Recent scandals about social media manipulation and misinformation show how in an age of unprecedented connectivity, people are now feeling both less trust in social institutions and more socially isolated. The dual elections of Donald Trump in the US and the 'Brexit' referendum in the UK are case studies how twentieth century ideals about news and information are no longer sufficient to anchor theories of democratic participation and political action. In this talk I suggest a corrective to both theory and praxis by revisiting Emile Durkheim's metaphors of organic and mechanical solidarity and calling for attention on new forms of solidarity that may emerge next. Developing the idea of network solidarity, I argue that the empathy and social cohesion that constitute it may be the last best hope for repairing the type of solidarity that must be in place to hold contemporary societies together.



**Brief Bio:** Professor Gina Neff is a Senior Research Fellow and Associate Professor at the Oxford Internet Institute and at the Department of Sociology, University of Oxford. She studies innovation, the digital transformation of industries, and how new technologies impact work. Professor Neff has published three books and over three dozen research articles on innovation and the impact of digital transformation. Her book *Venture Labor: Work and the Burden of Risk in Innovative Industries* (MIT Press, 2012) about the rise of internet industries in New York City, won the 2013 American Sociological Association Communication and Information Technologies Best Book Award. Her book, *Self-Tracking*, co-authored with Dawn Nafus (MIT Press, 2016) focuses on the practices and politics of using consumer technologies to track health and other everyday personal metrics.

# Abstracts

## Session 1: 10:45-12:15

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### Panel 1.1: Images - use and misuse

Chair: Ysabel Gerrard

Room JSC 1.02

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#### **Politics and Porn: A Look at How News Media Characterizes the Problem with Deepfakes** *Chandell Gosse and Jacquelyn Burkell (Western University)*

Over the last year issues of cybermisogyny and gendered online abuse have reached a 'tipping point,' and social media platforms have been caught flat-footed and even complicit, unable or unwilling to mount an effective response. For further support, governments, researchers, and organizations have stepped in to help understand the problems and to identify effective policy responses (Amnesty International, 2018; Duggan, 2014; Jane, 2014, 2017; Pasricha, 2016; Roberts, 2016; West Coast LEAF, 2014). Much of this work, however, focuses on issues with the technologies themselves, and thus seeks solutions by intervening at the technical or policy level. In this paper we argue that in order to understand and address inappropriate uses of new technologies, we must cast a wider net of analysis, looking at the influence of material conditions within which these new technologies are deployed, such as social and cultural contexts. We explore this thesis with respect to one specific issue: misogyny; and one specific technology: face-swapping algorithms.

In the last year, face-swapping technologies have garnered a lot of attention as the newest form of digital manipulation (Roose, 2018). While not problematic in and of itself, face-swapping technology exists in a social environment rife with cybermisogyny (Mantilla, 2013; 2015), toxic-technocultures (Massanari, 2017), and attitudes that devalue, objectify, and use women's bodies against them. The basic technology, which in fact embodies none of these characteristics or propensities, is deployed within this harmful environment to produce or facilitate problematic outcomes, such as the creation of non-consensual pornography known as deepfakes (Cole, 2018; Roettgers, 2018; Roose, 2018). The problem of 'deepfakes', therefore, cannot be located in the technology itself. We argue that it is important to put an emphasis on the social aspects of problems that occur across socio-digital environments, and thus to adopt a more material-based approach to understanding issues such as deep-fakes and non-consensual pornography.

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#### **Fannish Social Interactions Online: More than Prodisage?**

*Ruth Flaherty (University of East Anglia)*

Even before the birth of the digital era, fans of film, television and literary works have been socially active, sharing resources offline and publishing creative media via 'zines'. As early adopters of many types of social media – such as forums, blogs and online archives –

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Panel 1.2: Images - use and misuse

the fandom group provides a fascinating case study of the effect of social media on the consumption of media products. Most existing literature has been ethnographic in nature and focuses on the literary and media (Jenkins, 2013 and 2006; Jamison, 2013) or legal (Tushnet, 1997) implications of fan activities. This paper adopts a distinctive approach, applying quantitative methods to test the economic biases within copyright law as they apply to this social group. Using a dataset of user postings from the world's largest online fanfiction archive (Fanfiction.Net) and sales data (Nielsen), this study suggests that fans should be considered a special type of "producer" (Bird, 2011; Bratich, 2011, Bruns, 2008) who have a focus on utility maximisation rather than profit (Scott-Morton and Podolny, 1998). Indeed, while copyright law and economics presumes fans to maximise their utility by adapting original works – thus interfering with the 'normal exploitation' of that work – this research indicates that more important social incentives are at play, such as the desire to improve writing skills and assist others with the same. Copyright law makes no allowances for this type of social interaction online, which presents notable challenges that are evident from the furore surrounding the passage of the proposed EU Directive on Copyright in the Digital Single Market. This research is important as it uses data to draw together and test previous research into media production/consumption, thereby enabling conclusions to be drawn on how copyright and technology should be used to regulate social interactions among fans online.

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**Brands and productive publics in the event economy: the case of Milano Design week**  
*Alberto Cossu (University of Amsterdam)*

The economy of the event designates a production method (Bologna and Banfi, 2011), based on short-term events open to the public (festivals, universal exhibitions, fairs, etc.) and characterised by structural instability. In this context, successful events are pivotal in the global competition for a city to be perceived as a true creative city (Florida). Success is measured by the attendance of the public (e.g. numbers of visitors) and, increasingly, by the social media activity that an event is capable to trigger.

In this context, my contribution focuses on the role of publics as producers (Arvidsson, 2013) in the "Milano Design Week". The analysis is conducted on a dataset of 10,000 Instagram photos on which a digital methods analysis (Rogers, 2013) has been conducted, along with a critical visual analysis (Rose, 2016). Through these research methods I identify the communication patterns between the publics and the event main communication outlets and, thanks to visual analysis, I assess the extent to which publics are reproducing or resisting the dominant aesthetics proposed by the Design Week brand.

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**The time of the social image**  
*Karen Cross (University of Roehampton)*

It appears today that time has become a lost feature of visual social media communication and that we are far more enthralled to the drives of immediate (self-)gratification that are sustained by the image feed. At the same time, digital media and its (re)mediations of social life are highly concerned with time and the delay of time that is a core component of photographic forms of (re)production. Be it staging a departure from the past (as in the early descriptions of 'new' media) or through the nostalgic longings of the retro frames

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and filters that were common during the emergence of iPhonography, it appears that our engagements in and through social media involve a range of investments in the past, especially the past of photography, which theory relating to the digital can no longer avoid. This paper seeks to unravel this aspect of remediation in and through contemporary examples relating to the new time-features of social media platforms (e.g. ‘time hop’ and #tbt) that rely upon the circulation of images as memories. However, it also grounds this in a discussion of a longer history of an aesthetic ‘turn to the social’ that was heavily dependent upon photography as a media form, and which brought into relief the political transformative and affective nature of the medium. The paper describes why this remains important to consider today within the current context that is overridingly invested in ‘the social’ as a visual strategy, and will reflect upon the need to build once again a critical analytic frame of analysis and practice relating to photography and the use of photographic images within society.

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## **Panel 1.2: Social Media, family, and young people**

**Chair: Harry Dyer**

**ROOM JSC 1.03**

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### **Affective coding: Platformed subtleties in new fathers self-disclosure strategies around mental health**

*Ranjana Das and Paul Hodkinson (University of Surrey)*

Drawing on qualitative interviews with 15 new fathers struggling with postnatal mental health difficulties, we focus in this paper on the role of digital platforms in their approaches to disclosing these issues. We introduce the idea of “affective coding” - a deliberate, yet subtle way of working with, within and against platform architecture to encode narratives of disclosure and seek camaraderie and support. These range from using like and retweet buttons (on the disclosure of others, or general posts about mental health, for example) to signal for help, to posting wildly positive status updates about today that are subtly coded with references to darker yesterdays.

Such strategies, we suggest, make use of social media algorithms to achieve visibility on the newsfeeds of friends without explicit disclosure. And such affective practices involve imaginings of the ideal listener, anxious anticipations of response or support and, sometimes, intense disappointment when they are not forthcoming; coded affect may not be decoded as such. We build upon theorisations of networked affect (c.f. Papacharissi, 2010), to cast our attention to seemingly small but affectively weighted and expensive acts of subtle disclosure online which reveal agentic attempts by men to bypass hegemonic masculinities and structures of silencing around male mental health difficulties. We note that the subtle nature of affective coding means it does not leave easy digital traces and does not therefore lend itself “big data” word-sifting approach, or necessarily lead to desired affective outcomes for these men. And yet, affective coding - through its very nature of working with/in platformed architecture and algorithms - occupies the liminal space, we argue, between non-disclosure and disclosure, and between silence and articulation. This finding on affective coding as affectively weighted

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subtle acts of digital engagement, we suggest, is critical for self-disclosure research, for this might form an integral part of people's coping strategies in platform societies.

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### **The return of the social: On the socio-algorithmic construction of identity categories**

**Dan M. Kotliar, (The Hebrew University of Jerusalem)**

In this paper I argue that algorithmically-formed social categories stem from epistemic amalgams - complex blends of algorithmic outputs, human expertise, messy data flows, and "traditional" labels. Relying on an ethnographic study of the Israeli data analytics scene, this paper offers a closer look at algorithmic profiling, and specifically, at the role of expert knowledge, language, and social theory in the algorithmic construction of social categories. I will argue that while human language, theory, and social expertise are often described (by programmers and critical thinkers alike) as superfluous to algorithmic categorization, they still play a role in how companies categorize users, and accordingly, in the (re)construction of identity categories. Moreover, seeing algorithms as socio-technical assemblages (Morris 2015; Kitchin 2017; Seaver 2017; Neyland and Möllers 2017), I will argue that the malleability of algorithmic identities (Cheney-Lippold 2017) and the flexibility of algorithmically-formed social categories not only stem from the epistemic nature of algorithms or their data, but from diverse socio-cultural determinants. The names, meanings, and even existence of such categories are deeply affected by often-very-local inter-organizational relationships, meaning systems, and practices.

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### **Panel 1.2: Social Media, family, and young people**

#### **Family life and the smart home**

*Murray Goulden (University of Nottingham)*

The home has long been recognised as a protected space for family (Mallet 2004). Nevertheless, as a site of care, socialisation, and consumption, it has drawn the attentions of external institutions, attentions often met with resistance. The legacy of these border skirmishes can be seen today in the delicate relationship between the liberal state and the home. The EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), a most contemporary legislative regime, which sets out the legal relationships between institutions and individuals around digital data, purposefully retains a 'household exemption' clause which leaves domestic data practices beyond its reach.

My work is exploring the intervention of platform capitalism in this space, leveraging Internet of Things technologies to create the 'smart home', in which networked objects collect and process data on occupants and their practices. Most recently I have studied the family accounts offered by Amazon and Google, in order to ask how what these 'platform families' tell us about the broader effort to incorporate the home into the digital economy, and what the implications of this might be for both the doing of everyday domestic life, and how we understand home and family.

My proposed talk will present early findings from my next study – an ethnography of families encountering the smart home for the first time. The work will focus on how domestic practices are reconfigured in this space, particularly those managing the domestic space and coordinating family activity. I will ask what these changes mean for the distribution of agency amongst family roles, and the mediating role of the platform

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operator. Underlying this is a question of how the social here – as domestic practices, roles and hierarchies, becomes ‘torqued’ (Bowker & Star 2000) by the process of translating it into machine codable forms for the purpose of valourisation

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### **Socially ‘withdrawn’? Examining the sociality of young people ‘hidden’ in the bedroom in the digital age**

*Mark Wong (University of Glasgow)*

There have been enduring debates of the concept of “the social”, in which the nature and meanings of interpersonal connections have been contested. Classic social theories emphasise physical, face-to-face contacts are quintessential to human connectedness. The digital age, however, has had important implications to the understanding and experiences of the social. This paper reflects on how human interactions are diversified by “deep mediatisation” and technology becomes an increasingly crucial dimension of sociality.

Considering this contentious debate with an instrumental case, this paper presents a qualitative study on young people who physically shut themselves in the bedroom for months and years on end. This emerging phenomenon is commonly referred to as “hidden youth” in East Asia. Hidden youth are typically assumed as “withdrawing” from the social by self-seclusion and living in isolation. This paper challenges this reclusive depiction and critically examines hidden youth’s sociality and sense of connectedness based on their lived experiences.

This paper presents insights from the first study of this phenomenon in the UK/Scottish context, while studying this comparatively across two sites. 32 interviews were conducted with Hong Kong and Scottish youth “hidden” in the bedroom from 3 to 48 months. This study draws on theoretical debates across disciplines (Digital Sociology, Media Studies, and Science and Technology Studies) to shed light on emerging constructions of sociality in the digital age. Hidden youth’s sociality was found to be more nuanced and interconnected than previously assumed. A range of digital platforms allow youth to experience social connectedness in diverse ways, especially through large, loosely-knitted communities online. This paper argues that young people may become attached to digital networks to seek solace and solidarity inside the space of their bedrooms augmented by technologies. The significance and experiences of online interactions, especially for socially marginalised youth, are critically discussed in this paper.

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## Session 2: 13:00-14:30

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### Panel 2.1: Reframing the social

Chair: Zoetanya Sujon

ROOM JSC 1.02

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#### Conducting the Rhythms of the Social and the Antisocial

*Elinor Carmi (Liverpool University)*

The term 'social media' is often used by media companies, journalists and academics. While this term has been criticised by scholars such as José van Dijck and Taina Bucher, the focus still remains on the politics of creating the social and its (in)visibilities. This paper challenges these notions by using sound studies, and particularly the concept rhythm, as a more suitable approach for (re)organisation in multi-layered networks.

This paper proposes a new theoretical approach, which I call Rhythmedia, to examine the productive power of repetitive (re)organisation of time and space in software mediated networks. Rhythmedia is composed from three approaches – Raymond Williams' concept of 'planned flow', feminist technoscience (Karen Barad and Rosie Braidotti) notion of 'process' and Henri Lefebvre's 'rhythmanalysis'. This approach examines the way media companies (re)order people, objects and their relation for economic or political purposes, promoting the desired rhythms while excluding and filtering the harmful ones. In other words, it is the way the social and antisocial are ordered and configured.

To illustrate the way Rhythmedia is deployed, I will focus on two main algorithms that Facebook operates: Its newsfeed algorithm and its Facebook Immune System (FIS) algorithm. In the first example, I show how Facebook (re)produces particular temporalities to draw an artificial line between 'organic' and 'paid' ordering of its newsfeed to make a profit from the service it offers for free to 'normal' users. In the second example, I show how Facebook categorises behaviours that might harm its platform as spammy and filters them out in various ways. What these examples show is that by statistically analysing time (frequencies, speed and pace) and spaces of people's behaviours media companies can shape, manage, filter and remove rhythms. By doing so, they decide and enact what is human, nonhuman and deviant.

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#### For Digital Space and Place: Socially constructed place in urban China's digital space

*Carwyn Morris (The London School of Economics and Political Science)*

The link between the 'social', and 'space' and 'place' has received years of interrogation in the field of Geography. Some of the more established geographic thought on space and place - i.e. David Harvey and Doreen Massey - has made its way out of the discipline, particular as a 'spatial turn' has taken place across the social sciences. If space and place are socially constructed, as Massey argues, then any conversation on the social in the digital age should also consider the spatiality of the digital age. This article, building on long-term fieldwork in Beijing on the social media and instant messaging practices of urban youth, urban migrants and gig economy workers, examines this spatiality and argues for a spatial understanding of social media, instant messaging and other digital

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social spaces that goes beyond spatial metaphor. This would lead to a ‘social’ and ‘digital’ understood through the multiplicity of place and as spatio temporal event. It moves the researcher away from a ‘platform’ centred view of the digital and sociality towards a spatial understanding of the digital and the social practices centred around it, one with important theoretical and methodological considerations. The spatial lens makes it easier to understand digital sociality through existing social science theories while helping us to better identify and understand new spaces of sociality.

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### **Humiliation and the Affective Obligation of the Social: Putting the social back into social media**

*Sarah Cefai, University of the Arts London*

This paper examines the nature of the bond, contract, or trust that animates ‘the social’ in social media. Drawing on my research into the affective and discursive structure of humiliation, this examination is based on the premise that this bond is at stake in the reanimation of the social by social media: it is this bond that humiliation breaks. But humiliation too makes the social anew, in its threat and its consequences. The patterning of humiliation as an affective cluster not only results from but underpins many of the social media contexts we encounter. This means that a deeper understanding of the social in social media must realise both the affective nature of social bonds as well as the structures of identity from which these bonds stem. The paper therefore revises our conceptualisation of this bond in social and cultural theory given the specific ways in which social media mediate affect, as well as anticipates the technological determinism we risk in the disciplinary trend towards the study of data and the algorithm. By ‘putting the social back into social media,’ we must grapple with the role of the social articulation of algorithmic cultures in changes to the cultural politics of identity.

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### **Reality work: Digital labour as a reality construction**

*Chris Till (Leeds Beckett University)*

This paper will suggest that we should see some forms of digital labour (Terranova, 2013; Fuchs, 2014) as "reality work". The mobilisation and accusation of “fake news” has become central to political discourse and although propaganda is not new social media has provided opportunities to recruit witting and unwitting participants in the construction of new realities. The seemingly organic spreading of conspiracy theories and spurious claims is built on both “astro-turfing” (Zhang et al, 2013) and the genuine engagement and curiosity of users but both rely on the “digital labour” of sharing. While sometimes centrally coordinated this is often voluntarily organised to capture the disillusioned and disaffected through radicalisation, “red-pilling” and hashtag highjacking to strategically manipulate networks and the political economy of the media (Marwick and Lewis, 2017). Such activities are analogous to those of “fan labourers” volunteering time and skills to service “fandoms” and thus construct the affective meaning of “brands” (De Kosnik, 2013).

Disinformation and destabilisation of reality have been used by state actors directly employing “troll farms” (Giles, 2016) and activating unknowing users through “psyops” tactics of “reflexive control” (Thomas, 2004). The construction, and deconstruction, of

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these realities is central to the political economy of social media which is built on the “social logic of the derivative” (Martin, 2013) through constructing arbitrary “virtual” realities out of the concrete desires and affective relations of everyday life (Arvidsson, 2016). Strategies for the management and exploitation of complex social worlds and financial markets have merged in the move from disciplinary to control societies (Deleuze, 1992) with users mining their own lives for the raw materials for psychographic profiles and the construction of brand identities. The affective and cooperative work of online “social reproduction” (Jarrett, 2016) is thus central both to the fabrication and manipulation of political realities and their resistance.

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## **Panel 2.2: Digital use, rights, governance, and power**

**Chair: Harry Dyer**

**ROOM JSC 1.03**

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### **Digital governance and our common digital future: a “digital sustainability” agenda**

*Ioanna Noula (University of Leeds) and Jonny Shipp (LSE)*

The extensive use and deployment of AI in all aspects of everyday life has established the seamlessness of online and offline life. The digital ecosystem has become integral to and constitutive of human environments and now vital for humans as informational organisms (“inforgs”) (Floridi, 1999). The culturally disruptive character of ICTs as an industrial revolution and a revolution for human self-understanding has heralded new civilisational dilemmas (Floridi, 2014). These stem primarily from the speedy development of AI and the unpredictability of its effects which appear to be threatening the uniqueness of humans as autonomous beings. The external environment of human civilisation is nowadays as much digital and virtual as it is physical and natural.

In this context, reasserting the uniqueness of human life and safeguarding the achievements of human civilisation depends on the way digital environments will be re-organised and the way priorities for digital governance will be established. This presentation will focus on the significance of digital governance for sustainable digital living and the welfare of human societies. Drawing on the outcome of multistakeholder seminars on digital life and the expert arguments put forward, in this presentation we will discuss the crucial role of a better understanding of the technical, management and governance processes that shape the digital ecosystem. Transparency reporting, it is argued, can help shape healthier digital environments that operate in the interests of the public and the common good. Our presentation is framed by the concept of sustainability as proposed in the Brundtland Commission’s report (“[h]umanity has the ability to make development sustainable to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs) and, thus, we argue that if unchecked, the new human challenges that arise from digitalisation could undermine the potential benefits for future generations.

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**Governed by algorithms: Theories of digitised power to shape subjects and societies**  
*Thorsten Bronholt (University of the West of Scotland)*

When social media sites such as Facebook are viewed as virtual polities (MacKinnon, 2012), the codes that form the options, set the limitations, and steer the experience of the user, can be viewed as laws (Lessig, 2006). It follows that the company managers who define these user policies and their parameters can be viewed as ‘governments’ – sovereigns of the aforementioned polities. In recent years, it has become increasingly clear just how much the precepts and codes – what I term ‘cyber policies’ – of these virtual polities spill over and affect the offline political and social world. This has fuelled criticism of some practices and their effects, not to mention increased political, public, and academic awareness, which in turn has led to various public and policy responses by especially Facebook. In my current research I investigate these cyber policies to unearth the governmentality (Foucault, 1984, p. 338) of said virtual polities.

Power, and the concept of the state are essentially contested concepts (Gallie, 1955; Anderson, 2006; Lukes, 2005, p. 30)<sup>1</sup>; the nation state in particular (Willoughby, 1896, p. 8ff.). In this paper, I will first outline some of the most commonly used conceptions of state and power. I will then apply them to the digital realm, and explore which conceptions support an analysis of digital power to shape individuals and societies. I will argue that a Foucauldian notion of power is well suited for understanding the complex power relations implicit in the automated governance of digitised subjects. Finally, I will propose a framework for a Foucauldian analysis of the power exercised by digital entities such as Facebook.

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**Networked discussions about the network: Public(s) discussions around the right to be forgotten**

*Rebekah Larsen (University of Cambridge)*

One of the most pervasive paradigms today in the social sciences, when it comes to conceptualizing the social, is that of the network. The Internet, the brain, the ‘ego-centric’ friend group...everything is seen via networks. This paradigm, as with any, has certain politics. For example, the discourse around networks is often one that smacks of neoliberal techno-utopianism: networks are democratizing; networks can collapse space and time to allow us more connection (free flows); networks are inherently ‘social’, both structured and structuring; ‘networking’ is requisite for that next grant or job, etc. Though there has been an uptick in critical sociological work that disrupts such discourse, there is still an urgent need for empirical research into the plural realities of a networked society—particularly from those viewpoints that are historically and structurally underrepresented.

In this paper I will pull from my current PhD research to empirically ground an exploration of representation centered on that Network of Networks: the Internet. More specifically, I will focus on the ‘right to be forgotten’ (RTBF), a controversial data protection concept that was codified in Europe in 2014. Discussion around the RTBF concerns notions of personhood and personal data, the public/private divide in a ‘networked society’, the responsibilities of various institutions when it comes to data privacy...all mixed in with human rights discourse and geopolitics. It is a topic ripe for exploring which voices are

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visible—who is represented in this debate—given the many interested parties. Using mixed methods (interviews, text analysis, and hyperlink network analysis), I examine in particular the impacts of gender and region on conceptualizing, framing and visibility in the RTBF discussion between 2014 and 2016. I also focus on the concept of visibility (e.g., network centrality) as a key aspect of representation and participation in the networked society.

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## Session 3: 14:45-16:15

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### Panel 3.1: Users, fans, followers, and friends

Chair: Karen Cross

ROOM JSC 1.02

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#### Trust in the age of dating apps

*Carolina Bandinelli and Alessandro Gandini (The University of Lincoln)*

Dating apps are allegedly changing the ways in which individuals experience and build forms of mediated intimacy, providing new tools for selecting potential partners. This paper is concerned with the social dynamics bound to the use of dating apps, with a distinctive focus on the mechanisms of trust building among users. Drawing on a broad qualitative research comprising of 2 focus groups and 5 of in-depth interviews involving participants from both heterosexual and non-heterosexual cultures in the UK and Italy, we offer an explorative analysis of the process through which users negotiate with each other and with the apps' affordances to identify, invent and test new codes and practices for constructing romance. We concentrate on how individuals come to trust 'strangers', providing details on the tactics they employ before, during and after a meeting with an unknown potential partner. In so doing, we want to question how these emerging practices fit in relation to existing sociological definitions of trust, and provoke a reflection on the broader transformation of love cultures in the digital age.

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#### How Chinese fans use social media to transnationally engage in the participatory culture of contemporary British TV drama

*Shiyu Zheng (The University of Warwick)*

Douban, Youku and Bilibili (DYB), three of the most popular Chinese social media technologies, have attracted a great number of Chinese audiences to engage in the participatory culture and promoted not only Chinese media industries but also foreign cultural products such as TV drama to a large extent. These online platforms and social media become accessible and available for fans to adapt scenario, discuss content, share comments, create virtual community, etc. My paper would focus on how Chinese fans use social media to transnationally engage in the participatory culture of contemporary British TV drama. The roles Chinese social media play during the engagement and the transfer of British local products to overseas markets is the key questions to be answered.

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Therefore, the paper tries to understand Chinese audiences' engagement and participation into a British TV product via DYB, which not only benefits the circulation of British culture and media products, but also promotes the transnational and cross-cultural communication between the UK and China. British TV dramas go global and international alongside with cultural communication and media exchange from early 1990s, while the academic analysis is not abundant in this area. Today, due to the prevalence of social media in China, more transnational cultural products could be widely spread and welcomed. My paper will take the most famous British TV drama from BBC: Sherlock as an example and try to find out Chinese fans' engagement on Sherlock via Chinese social media from a Chinese scholar's perspective. Different engagement forms from Chinese audiences will be further observed and elaborated. Hopefully, the research achievements would not only benefit the British media/ TV industries, but also promotes Chinese creative cultural industry to facilitate transnational communication and social media understanding/ usage.

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### **The Influence of PTT Bulletin Board System on Taiwanese Internet Culture, Mainstream Media and Civic Engagement**

*Ema Pei-Ying Wang (Columbia University)*

While mainstream social media platforms like Facebook or Twitter have been dominating the global online sphere, there is an influential online community in Taiwan that has prevailed for more than 20 years – the terminal-based PTT Bulletin Board System (BBS). Similar to Reddit, PTT is a theme-based online forum that allows participants to interact with one another synchronously. More than 20,000 new posts are generated each day, as participants seek the most updated information regarding their topics of interest or indulge themselves in the entertaining PTT culture. Although the technology behind PTT is outdated – it is not a website – one has to install the specific BBS software to make posts, PTT is able to survive, coexisting with mainstream social media in Taiwan, such as Facebook and Line, and maintaining its influence both online and offline. To understand how PTT has thrived, I examine PTT's culture, its relationship with the mainstream media, and its influence on Taiwanese civic engagement.

The analysis shows how, due to the strong social bonds and shared identity among the participants (oftentimes built around humor and sarcasm), much like 4chan or Reddit in the U.S., PTT has become the birthplace of new language and online slang that often goes viral on the Taiwanese Internet. Furthermore, unlike mainstream media in Taiwan, which is often biased due to political or commercial interests, the independence of PTT welcomes a wide diversity of voices reflecting participants' authentic thoughts and, often, counterhegemonic positions. Last but not least, the strong cohesion among PTT participants helps facilitate civic engagement around social justice issues, such as the Sunflower Student Movement, born in response to the government's move to pass the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement without a transparent process. This research shows how grassroots digital media has affected the non-Western contexts both online and offline.

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## Panel 3.2: Socio-cultural dynamics online

Chair: Harry Dyer

ROOM JSC 1.03

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### Mapping (Anti)Colonial Issue Publics on Instagram

*Carrie Karsgaard and Maggie MacDonald (University of Alberta)*

As a settler colonial state (Tuck, McKenzie, & McCoy, 2014), settler centrality and superiority is naturalized in Canada through policy, law, and ideology, at the expense of Indigenous peoples who continue to be displaced from the land, which is conceptualized as a “resource.” Despite the seemingly static nature of settler-colonial structures, however, these are tested through the participatory social space of Instagram, which enables the formation of counterpublics and resistant discourses around specific controversies, such as Canada’s currently contentious Trans Mountain pipeline. Using large-scale digital social data available on Instagram, this project maps social life of this colonial and environmental controversy, its issues and its publics, as it develops according to medium-specific affordances.

Grounded in an understanding of society as performative rather than pre-given (see Latour, 2005), issue mapping (Marres & Moats, 2015; Marres & Weltevrede, 2013) draws on controversy mapping (Venturini 2010a & 2010b) to focus on issues and the publics that form around them, being “concerned with the social and unstable life of the matters on which we do not agree and with how the actors involved are connected to each other” (Rogers, Sánchez-Querubín, & Kil, 2015, p. 9). This study operationalizes issue mapping through digital methods (Rogers, 2013), engaging with the multiple grammars of Instagram, including hashtagging, text, and imagery, to explore how platform dynamics allow (or disallow) various means of expressing issue alignment by various publics according to colonial lines. The medium specificity of Instagram creates an arena for what Fraser (1990) names interpublic relations, wherein competing counterpublics are networked around the controversy rather than being obscured by the gatekeepers and agenda setters that dominate traditional modes of public discourse (Elmer, Langlois & McKelvey, 2012). This project will visualize this social issue using multiple network counter-maps in order to explore how publics “[unsettle] the very categories that constitute the intelligibility of modern power relations” (Crampton, 2010, p. 125) in Canada’s colonial context, remapping the social themselves through their online expressions.

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### ‘We won’t allow politicians to speak for us anymore’: Sex workers, social media, and protest

*Nadine I. Kozak (University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee)*

In the 1990s, discourse abound concerning the dangers lurking on the internet, a discourse resurrected by supporters of the Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (FOSTA), which became law on 11 April 2018 in the United States. The law intends to curb illegal prostitution and sex trafficking by holding websites that “knowingly” facilitate either activity both criminally and civilly responsible. Seeking to protect themselves from liability, websites closed adult services listings in response. The Department of Justice and groups supporting sex trafficking victims find it more difficult to

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stop sex trafficking absent digital traces. Furthermore, the closure of websites that enabled sex workers to vet potential clients makes their work lives less safe.

This study analyses how sex workers and sex trafficking victims are using social media to protest FOSTA, organise offline actions, and share their experiences, thus challenging the dominant discourse. French philosopher Michel Foucault argued that it is through subjugated knowledges—local and popular knowledges that are ignored and disqualified—that “criticism performs its work.” I employ a Foucauldian lens to investigate the subjugated knowledges of sex workers and sex trafficking victims and their criticisms of FOSTA. To do this, the study uses qualitative and quantitative content analysis of the Twitter hashtag #letussurvive and the blog “Survivors against SESTA.” It also analyses the inclusion of sex workers’ and sex trafficking victims’ perspectives on FOSTA in the popular press. I argue that the case reveals the power of subjugated knowledges to reframe debate and the ability of social media to disseminate discourses often omitted from the public sphere. The study illuminates, in Foucault’s terms, “an insurrection of subjugated knowledges.”

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### **The gendering of social media’s algorithmic recommendations**

*Ysabel Gerrard, Helen Thornham (University of Sheffield)*

Social media content partly circulates through platforms’ algorithmic recommendation systems; that is, users might search for keywords and view the ‘top’ results, and some platforms suggest new content to users while they browse. Recommendation systems are responsible for showing users what they likely want to see (Gerrard, 2018), but platforms’ methods of ascertaining which posts have similarities to others are notoriously opaque (Gillespie, 2012). In this paper, we argue that recommendation systems are having material effects on how social phenomena – specifically content related to eating disorders (EDs) – are seen and understood by social media users. We used in-platform searches on Instagram, Pinterest on Tumblr to collect a dataset of 975 unique posts, and our content analysis revealed an algorithmic conflation between posts related to eating disorders and those associated with other feminised phenomena, such as fitness, healthy eating, diet plans, cosmetics, and fashion. Although these associations are not necessarily unexpected, they reveal platforms’ complicity in the gendering of social phenomena and a misguided alignment of eating disorders with vanity and thinness (Bordo, 2003).

Our findings also provoke new discussions about the social costs of recommendation systems, particularly for vulnerable publics. For example, although searching is a ‘symbiotic process that both informs and is informed in part by users’ (Noble, 2018, p.25), our concern is that search results could be viewed as a window of truth into how an ED ‘should’ be experienced: thin, hyper-feminised, white, consumerist/middle-class, and young. This paper adds to a longstanding body of feminist scholarship concerned with the gendering of technological systems (amongst others, Wajcman (1991), Cockburn (1992), Bassett (2013)), as well as more recent scholarly and popular writing about the politics of recommendation systems (amongst others, Hallinan and Striphas (2016); Noble (2018); Tufekci (2018)), a fundamental yet under-studied communicative dimension of social media.

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**Du Bois's maps as devices: Changing digital social research with early social data experiments**  
*Laurie Waller (University of East Anglia)*

Digital mapping practices – practices involving digital network cartography and visualisation - today occupy a central place in the work of many empirical social researchers. The introduction of digital mapping into social research has been widely claimed by proponents to unsettle disciplinary ontologies of the social, highlighting entanglements of social data with media and technology. In this paper, I ask to what extent digital mapping practices might not only upset disciplinary conventions but also contribute to a broader revaluing of data-intensive approaches to empirical sociology.

Taking the occasion of recent debates about the sociological contribution of W.E.B Du Bois's early experiments in social mapping, this paper aims to both (1) explore precedents for digital mapping in sociology today and (2) to examine the role Du Bois's data visualisations played as devices that could problematise social ontology. A range of recent accounts have foregrounded Du Bois's data-intensive survey research in the *The Philadelphia Negro* as the locus of the study's originality in empirical sociology. These accounts suggest that Du Bois's maps of Philadelphia's Seventh Ward emerged principally through analytical techniques of "triangulating" results from surveys, observations and census data and projecting the findings onto physical urban space. Such accounts, I suggest, largely overlook the role played by other kinds of 'secondary' data that enabled Du Bois to systematically trace heterogeneous racist constructions of the "negro problem" and visually demonstrate the "color line" as it had materialised within multiple facets of urban life. Through a re-reading of *The Philadelphia Negro* this paper proposes to examine Du Bois's maps as devices designed to experimentally problematise Philadelphia's racist "social atmosphere", showing how the problems of the Seventh Ward were distributed across networks of Philadelphia's social fabric from corrupt practices of the life insurance industry to the racialisation of crime by the criminal justice system.

Relating the concept of the 'map as device' to my own attempts to work with digital mapping practices, I suggest the value of such practices for empirical social research may not lie principally in their localised analytical value so much as their experimental capacities to engage with distributed social problems.

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# Organizers

**Dr Harry T Dyer** is a digital sociologist and lecturer in education at the University of East Anglia (UEA) (Twitter: [@HarryTDyer](#), web: [www.harrytdyer.com](http://www.harrytdyer.com)).

Harry joined as a lecturer after successfully completing his PhD at UEA in the Department of Education and Lifelong Learning. He has a broad academic background, with degrees in linguistics, education, and social science research methods. His research interests are equally broad, and he purposefully seeks to create connections between different academic fields and disciplines.

Harry's current research revolves around four projects:

- How social media platform design affects identity presentation and social interaction. His research proposes a new theoretical framework through which to consider the relationship between platform design and user that results in unique but bound identity performances.
- What fringe groups, conspiracy theories, and in particular the Flat Earth movement can tell us about attitudes towards science, knowledge, and education in the 21st century.
- How technology is shaping our understanding of education as a physical, academic, and social space.
- How educational institutions, students, and policy makers define, teach, and conceptualize digital citizenship.

Harry is currently working on his first book, titled 'Designing the Social: Unpacking Social Media Design & Identity', exploring how social media shapes our identities, and what this means for the integration of social media in educational spaces. The book will be published Autumn 2019 with Springer Publishing.

**Dr Zoetanya Sujon** is a Senior Lecturer in Digital Media and Programme Director of Communications & Media at the London College of Communication, University of Arts London (UAL). She teaches across a range of courses, specialising in social technologies, digital cultures, and platform politics (Twitter: [@jetsumgerl](#), web: <https://www.arts.ac.uk/colleges/london-college-of-communication/people/zoetanya-sujon>).

Driven by a deep curiosity about the depths of digital culture, Zoetanya's research interests broadly address the relationship between "new" technologies, emerging media practices, and socio-political culture. Questions about the epic connections between the technological and the cultural inform Zoetanya's research vision, particularly as related to social change, political and social life and social theory. Currently, these interests are based around four themes:

- social technologies and platform politics;
- the intersections between privacy and sharing culture;
- innovation and virtual technologies;
- and the impact of digital media on changing skill sets and digital literacies.

Zoetanya is also writing her first book, 'The Social Media Age: Power and Participation in a Connected World', which takes up these questions examining the impact of social platforms across political economic and cultural spheres (Sage, publication expected late 2019 or early 2020).