Digital Democracy: Global Dimensions

International Studies Association Workshop

March 26, 2019, 9 am – 5 pm
Community Room, L.R. Wilson Hall Room 1003
McMaster University, Hamilton, Canada

Co-organizers:
Tony Porter and Netina Tan
Department of Political Science, McMaster University

Welcome to the workshop!

A reminder that each presenter should take no longer than six minutes to speak to your paper. Each discussant’s remarks should be kept to two minutes, which can simply be a question or two to provoke discussion.

A projector will be available. Please bring your presentation on a USB key and load onto the computer prior to your panel session, if you like, but given time constraints it may be best to simply talk about your paper.

A campus map is below. If you get lost on campus during the workshop please email or call Landon Fama at 905-928-8316 or famalj@mcmaster.ca or Tony Porter at 289-244-3976, tporter@mcmaster.ca.
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| 9-9:15     | Welcome and overview of the day  
*Tony Porter and Netina Tan* |
| 9:15-10:30 | **Panel 1: Elections, Authoritarianism, and the Backlash Against Democracy**  
Chair: Sara Bannerman  
“Digital Democracy and Self-Determination: Lessons from First Nations in Canada”  
*Brian Budd, Nicole Goodman, Chelsea Gabel and Liam Midzain-Gobin*  
Discussant: Tero Erkkilä  
“Gender Ideology, Technology and Brazilian elections”  
*Cristiana Gonzalez and Luisa Lobato*  
Discussant: Linda Monsees  
“The Race Against SARA (Disinformation and Hate Speech) in Indonesian Elections”  
*Vasu Mohan*  
Discussant: Lawrence Quill  
“Digitization and the Backlash Against Democracy”  
*Netina Tan and Tony Porter*  
Discussant: Hasmet M. Uluorta  
“On the Measurement of Public Opinion in the Age of Big Data”  
*Cliff van der Linden*  
Discussant: Sara Rose Taylor  
Panel discussant: Dan Bousfield |
| 10:30-10:45 | Break                                                                 |
| 10:45-11:45| **Panel 2: Data and Algorithms**  
Chair: Tony Porter  
“Algorithmic Power and Democratic Governance: Efforts to Rein in Digitalization”  
*James Mittelman*  
Discussant: Jackie Smith  
“Statistical presence in digital times: Feminist insights for data-feeling compositions”  
*Isabel Rocha de Siqueira and Chris Leite*  
Discussant: Petra Rethmann  
“Algorithmic Imperialism and Fake News”  
*Sara Bannerman*  
Discussant: Stefania Milan  
Panel discussant: Nina Hall |
<p>| 11:45-noon | Walk to lunch—a buffet “Taste of India” lunch in the University Club  |
| 12:00-1:20 | Lunch                                                                  |</p>
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### Algorithmic Imperialism and Fake News

In part one of this paper, I define algorithmic imperialism, drawing on Dal Yong Jin's (2015, 2013) notion of platform imperialism. Algorithmic tools and techniques, in the hands of multinational corporations and nation states alike, help to deepen existing intersecting global inequalities (Barbrook and Cameron 1996; Eubanks 2018). In part two, I discuss the neocolonial dynamics of the algorithmic governance of fake news. Algorithmic governance produces scopic regimes that can either reinforce, or challenge, colonial modes of seeing. In part three, I review the main responses if media organizations, platforms, states to the phenomenon of fake news on social media. I distinguish governance responses to fake news that extend the colonial gaze from those that disrupt that gaze and distribute the tools of seeing. I argue that approaches in the latter category are a required component of decolonizing platforms’ responses to fake news.

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### Democratizing Surveillance: Digital Rights beyond the Consumer

The EU’s implementation of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) has foregrounded the tensions between individual, corporate and state interests in ensuring the protection rights in a digital world. In an effort to ensure digital privacy, the emphasis on the individual as the bearer of rights places additional duties and obligations on corporate and non-state actors through empowering disciplinary governance mechanisms (such as the GDPR’s administrative fines). This paper adopts a critical governance studies framework to argue that digital rights are being distorted by market-based visions of rights, which view the individual primarily through a consumer-based model rather than a human rights-based one. This results in the hyper-surveillance of consumers valued by market actors alongside the omission of basic rights for transient, marginalized and racialized groups. Democratizing surveillance is a way to rebalance the obligations of human rights to ensure equal participation in a digital democracy.

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### Digital Democracy and Self-Determination: Lessons from First Nations in Canada

Digital technology is often associated with new and novel forms of politics, be that in the form of online organizing, or increased participation from all corners of the globe. This paper instead looks to the way in which digital technology has been deployed in Indigenous elections and referendums in First Nations in Canada, with an aim of increasing participation and improving community capacity and self-determination. The paper identifies a tension within communities between those who see this as a way to increase voter participation, improve administrative capacity and support the movement toward self-determination, and those that see the technology as supporting historically imposed systems of colonial governance and administration. Drawing on case studies of
First Nations’ experiences with internet voting in Ontario and Alberta, this paper uses the concept of ‘digital self-determination’ to explore this tension, and to offer insights regarding how online voting and other tools of electoral modernization can respond to critiques of self-government initiatives to better serve the needs of First Nations and support self-determination efforts within communities.

Tero Erkkilä
Associate Professor of Political Science, University of Helskinki, Finland

Global Knowledge Governance, Human Capital and Automation
This paper explores theoretical and empirical links between political economy of human capital, global knowledge governance, and automation. Current ideas on global political economy highlight the role of knowledge and human capital in economic competitiveness and prosperity. At the same time, economic competitiveness is ideationally increasingly linked to automation and numerical governance. The shift towards “fourth industrial revolution” or “second machine age” now also informs the activities of global knowledge brokers, such as World Economic Forum, that measure and rank the performance of nation states and innovation hubs. The paper further explores potential tensions in the above perspectives. Knowledge resources of states as well as education systems and higher education institutions have been shaped by long historical trajectories that also cause significant differences between countries. Yet they are currently being exposed to uniform policy scripts that are promoted with grand narratives of change and echoed by global indicators. While human capital is highlighted as a key element of global competitiveness, there are also heavy emphasis on automation and use of algorithms that are supposedly making it obsolete. There are also new questions about states’ knowledge monopolies being challenged by private corporations and global knowledge brokers.

Cristiana Gonzalez
PhD candidate in International Relations, Researcher at the Information, Communication, Technology and Society of the Laboratory on Scientific Journalism (ICTS/Labjor) at State University of Campinas, Pontifical Catholic University (PUC-Rio), Brazil

Luisa Lobato
PhD in progress, International Relations, Researcher, Cybersecurity and Digital Liberties in Brazil at the Igarapé Institute, Pontifical Catholic University (PUC-Rio), Brazil

Gender Ideology, Technology and Brazilian Elections
The intensification of the fight against an alleged "gender ideology", that is, discussions involving gender issues and sexual orientation in the educational system and arts fueled the dissemination of anti-feminist memes in Whatsapp during the 2018 electoral campaign. Some attributed the rise of the radical right-wing groups behind this fight and Jair Bolsonaro's victory to a failure of identity politics movements and feminist groups in communicating in an inclusive language and building on a more transversal solidarity that could encompass different classes and identities. But the experience of Latin American feminists show that this isn't necessarily the case. In recent years, Brazilian women have occupied online spaces and used digital tools for many purposes, such as organizing political protests and producing and sharing information and knowledge about ICTs. A burgeoning feminist movement was thus able to craft collective agency out of singularity. We look at these opposed political movements to show that digital technologies can work both as platforms for control and domination and provide infrastructures for resistance. They are also profoundly embodied, for we technologize ourselves through our relation to digital environments and constantly negotiate our presence in relation to and in mediation with each device. In this context, a feminist "hacking" of such technologies, i.e., subverting the masculinized, privatized logic that came to dominate it by building autonomous tools and software, sharing of technical knowledge based on ideas of sisterhood and solidarity, and collectively constructing technology, might carry today's most powerful promises of constructing alternative spaces for political and democratic action.

Nina Hall
Assistant Professor of International Relations, John Hopkins/SAIS, United States

Stefania Milan
Contemporary Transformations of Global Digital Advocacy
This paper explores the emergence and diffusion of distinctive forms of digital-based advocacy. It reflects how datafication and digitalisation alters power structures and dynamics within the advocacy sector worldwide. It draws on the authors’ work on, on the one hand, new forms of digital advocacy (e.g., MoveOn.org) and the turn of mainstream nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) to digital mobilisation (e.g. Greenpeace and MobLab) and on the other hand, how the politics of datafication affect civic engagement and activism, and alter the dynamics of the global civil society. Overall, the paper contributes to understand current challenges for NGOs as they emerge at the crossroads of digitalisation, datafication, and artificial intelligence.

Algorithmic Power and Democratic Governance: Efforts to Rein in Digitalization
International Relations scholars offer only fragmentary accounts of the rise of algorithms. They address topics such as asymmetries in cyber power and competition between Chinese and American tech producers, but have rarely linked them to parametric transformations in capitalism. The best analytical work on challenges that algorithms pose to world order has been carried out mostly outside the field of International Relations. I will try to fill in some of this void by showing how in a capitalist world, national governments, international organizations, and civil societies embrace data-driven approaches to politics, actually shrinking state power and not in the manner that libertarians favor or in the philosophical sense of facilitating the good life. Advances in protection against digital harms by governance agencies and legal remedies are partial because the technocratic structure is little understood and has become a domain subject to lax oversight. Efforts to correct the democratic deficit in algorithmic governance may be bracketed under four rubrics: initiatives to attain greater transparency, regulation, audits by third-party inspectors, and accountability. After examining each of these categories, this paper will turn to larger ethical and philosophical quandaries about how human agents might assert control over nonhuman agency, i.e., self-learning machines.

The Race Against SARA (Disinformation and Hate Speech) in Indonesian Elections
On April 17, 2019, Indonesia will hold its first simultaneous parliamentary and presidential elections. With more than 190 million registered voters eligible to vote at over 800,000 polling stations across the country of 17,000 islands, this will be one of the world’s largest and most complex one-day elections. Indonesia has strong, independent and competent election management bodies, a vibrant civil society and robust electoral process. However, in recent years election campaigns are increasingly flashpoints for hate speech and incitement to violence. Malign actors are also increasingly deploying polarizing, technology-fueled disininformation campaigns. It is estimated that 60% of all content in Indonesia’s social media in 2018 were hoaxes and that there were over 800,000 sites spreading disininformation. These campaigns of hateful rhetoric and disininformation undermine public trust and confidence in democratic institutions and the electoral process. The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) is supporting the General Election Commission (KPU), the Election Oversight Body (Bawaslu), civil society organizations (CSOs) including inter-faith groups and social media platforms to create joint strategies and campaigns to counter disininformation and incitement to communal hatred and violence. This paper looks at the strategies employed by these actors to counter disininformation and hateful rhetoric and seeks to
understand through a few case studies on why certain strategies were successful in de-escalating tensions and others less so.

**Linda Monsees**  
Post-doctoral researcher, Goethe University Frankfurt, Germany

**Multiple Publics and New Modes of Contestation**

My paper contributes to the emerging literature on publics within International Relations in the context of networked technology. The focus of my contribution lies on the emergence of publicness in the context of contesting security technology. However, the main argument is a general, theoretical one and the focus on security serves mainly as an illustration. Contemporary security practices are characterised by diffusion and dispersion. As a result, contestation of security technology is also dispersed and diffuse and requires an account of publics that is sensitive to this aspect. The article conceptualises ‘multiple publics’ as a mode of fundamental contestation of established political institutions. In order to achieve this aim, this article discusses previous approaches to socio-technical controversies and material participation. In doing so, it becomes apparent that we need a concept of publics that does not reduce political contestation to a pre-existing set of institutions. I develop a notion of publicness that emphasises the way in which publics are embedded in societal struggles. This is achieved by reading John Dewey as a theorist to whom contestation is a vital part of democracy. It becomes possible to understand contestation against diffuse security practices as forms of emerging publics, even though they might not feed back into governmental decision-making. This theoretical argument will be briefly illustrated with a short case study on contesting surveillance.

**Petra Rethmann**  
Professor, Department of Anthropology, McMaster University, Canada, Director, Institute on Globalization and the Human Condition

**Maintaining Sovereignty in Russia: Internet Governance and the State**

Since the 2011 mass demonstrations within the context of the Russian 2012 presidential elections runet, the Russian-language segment of the internet, has gained in significance. Given the highly personalized ways in which Russian politics seems to operate (Gabowitsch 2015), this was largely so because one of Vladimir Putin’s foremost opponents – the anti-corruption activist and lawyer Alexei Navalny – began to draw on live blogs as a significant source of governmental opposition. As one response, Russia’s government began to push for modes of digital governance that would maintain the derzhava (“great power” in Russian; often translated as sovereignty) of the Russian state. In my contribution I look at how internet governance and policy in Russia has been and is designed to uphold the sovereignty of the state, including the sovereignty of Putin. I trace such efforts through a number of domestic government practices, including the shut-down of IP-addresses with no judicial oversight, the employment of paid users to distribute regime-supportive comments and news, the ways in which aggregators are used to both filter and censor news (Yandex.ru), and the potential creation of RuNet 2020 (an effort to delink runet from international providers and servers).

**Tony Porter**  
Professor, Department of Political Science, McMaster University, Canada  
**Netina Tan**  
Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, McMaster University, Canada

**Has Digitization Altered the Global Struggle Between Authoritarianism and Democracy?**

The past decade has seen a surprising and disturbing shift from optimism to pessimism in assessments of the impact of digitization on democracy. In a February 2018 *Foreign Affairs* survey of expert opinion, the prevailing view was that recent technological changes have favoured authoritarianism. Researchers have analyzed the ways that digital activism is more fragile than its ability to mobilize large nearly spontaneous movements first suggested, and how authoritarian governments have begun to master digital technologies to consolidate their rule and repress dissent. A cross-border dimension in this has become evident, as the disruptive effects of hacking and
disinformation campaigns originating from authoritarian countries on democratic countries have been documented by researchers and government investigations. The notion of China’s “sharp power” is one controversial characterization of one aspect of this. This conflict involves a complex mix of clashing principles and practices, including democratic legitimacy, sovereignty, national interest, hegemonic transitions, human rights, and whether or how these differ across digitized and non-digital settings. In this short paper we set out the key ways that digitization has altered the struggle between authoritarianism and democracy and propose policy and governance initiatives to strengthen the legitimacy and effectiveness of democracy in this struggle.

Lawrence Quill
Professor of Political Theory, San Jose State University, United States

Hasmet Uluorta
Associate Professor, Department of Politics / Department of International Studies, Trent University, Canada

Smart Cities 2.0: Empathic AI and Managed Urban Utopianism
Empathic AI is an emergent aspect of smart city initiatives that is associated with a new urban utopianism. We regard this latest development as an important addition to the current discussion concerning digitization, democracy, and the redefining of public-private boundaries. We argue, empathic AI signifies a new transformative possibility for smart city development or Smart City 2.0. At one level, empathic AI represents a continuation of the colonization of the everyday world by dissolving the traditional conception of privacy and selfhood associated with life in liberal democracies. At another level an explicit goal of empathic AI is to modify individual behavior (e.g., self-actualization, mental health) and the behavior of groups/societies at scale (e.g., consumption, public health initiatives). We explore how individual autonomy and related notions of privacy, independence, and self-reliance are in the process of being supplanted by empathy and predictive empathy in order to more completely enable immersive consumption in the virtual world of surveillance capitalism.

Isabel Rocha de Siqueira
Assistant Professor, Institute of International Relations, Pontifical Catholic University (PUC-Rio), Brazil

Statistical Presence in Digital Times: Feminist Insights for Data-Feeling Compositions
There is increasing pressure to define and account for ‘participation’ in modern politics. To balance concerns of equal access and service provision, governments are increasingly turning towards indicators of local participation for items ranging from development projects to numbers of participants in online forums, as well as from likes and views in digital media to registrants at online and in-person service counters. These participation data are often included in accountability reports, despite the growing acceptance that these forms of social participation should never be taken as absolute values. The debate over participation metrics and government programs points us to feminist insights about the role of creativity in thinking about presence and politics in times of increasing complexity. If participation implies presence, what kind of presence are we dealing with in digital times? We might need to think of artful ways of understanding political participation in times of social media, fast and often-superficial information. We depart from what is termed here ‘data-feeling compositions’ to better understand data and related sensitivities, as the concept addresses what we feel in, around, and with data production and interpretation. The aim is to look at the ways that population groups interact with the different forms of government data designed to engage, frame, and provide services to those same population groups – in other words, we explore issues of statistical presence in a digital world.

Sara Rose Taylor
PhD student, Balsillie School of International Affairs, Canada

Strength in Numbers: Data Activism, Open government, and the Sustainable Development Goals
In a digital and data-driven global context, data activism holds promise for affecting social change. One avenue is by driving progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs form the UN system’s current anti-poverty agenda and are built on a framework of indicators for measuring progress. The SDGs’ reliance on open consultations and civil society engagement, combined with their data-driven nature, provide new opportunities for engagement with government affairs and encourage data activists and others to hold their national governments to account. This paper explores the opportunities and challenges for data activism in promoting national compliance with the SDGs taken from the Canadian context, in light of Canada’s Third Biennial Plan to the Open Government Partnership and associated commitments. By engaging with forms of open government, data activists can participate in democracy, empower marginalized individuals, and challenge existing power relations.

Jackie Smith  
Professor of Sociology, University of Pittsburgh, United States

Communications Technologies, Corporate Power & Democracy: The Roles of Academic Professionals in Defending Democracy, Human Rights, and the Knowledge Commons
The expansion of digital communications is a key element of capitalist globalization, and it has contributed to the growth and consolidation of corporate power in the technology sector. Corporate globalization’s intensified commodification of information and attention has created increasingly urgent crises for democracy around the world. This presentation explores how digitization has impacted work in the academy and affected possibilities for greater equity in our society. Drawing from my work as an editor of an open access scholarly journal and as an activist-scholar working with local and global human rights advocates, I outline some important ways academic workers can contribute to efforts to democratize communications policies, address growing racial and international inequalities in the technology and communications sectors, and support a growing global movement for human rights and democracy.

Cliff van der Linden  
Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, McMaster University, Canada

On the Measurement of Public Opinion in the Age of Big Data
Democracy is predicated on the idea that governments are responsive to the publics which they are elected to represent. In order for elected representatives to govern effectively, they require reliable measures of public opinion. Traditional sources of public opinion research are increasingly complicated by the expanding modalities of communication and accompanying cultural shifts. Diversification of information and communications technologies as well as a steep decline in survey response rates is producing a crisis of confidence in conventional probability sampling. An increasingly rich yet relatively untapped source of public opinion takes the form of extraordinarily large, complex datasets commonly referred to as Big Data. These data present numerous challenges for statistical inference, not least of which is that they typically take the form of non-probability sample. This paper argues that, under specific circumstances, certain types of non-probability sample may be capable of yielding reliable inferences about a population of interest. To demonstrate this argument, it analyzes the inferences derived from the most extraordinary probability and non-probability samples collected during the 2015 Canadian federal election campaign—the Canadian Election Study (CES) and Vote Compass, respectively. It uses the election outcome as a benchmark and models the observations collected from each sample to assess how accurately they are able to forecast the distribution of the vote.
Description of how the workshop went

All the participants were very enthusiastic about the content and organization of the day-long workshop. The discussions were lively, fascinating, wide-ranging, multi-dimensional, and highly productive. A copy of the agenda and paper abstracts is attached. A brief summary of the workshop is also available here: https://digitaldemocracy.mcmaster.ca/conferences/pre-isa-workshop-global-dimensions-of-digital-democracy. Each participant circulated a short paper in advance, and then spoke to it for six minutes at the workshop, with each paper having a discussant speaking for two minutes. This left time for more general integrative discussion after each panel and at the end of workshop. This format worked very well. A subset of the workshop participants presented regular longer papers on panels at the regular convention and those panels provided opportunities to continue and extend the workshop discussion.

The workshop topic, the global dimensions of digitization and democracy, is both highly topical, and well-suited to multidisciplinary discussion. The value of the mix and variation of expertise that was in the room became very apparent as the day’s discussions continued. During the workshop we worked to bring out the distinctive themes that scholars associated with the International Studies Association are especially well-suited to addressing, such as the cross-border aspects of the governance issues associated with problems such as “fake news” or unaccountable forms of “algorithmic governance”. The topicality of these issues, including much recent news coverage, meant that the workshop provided an opportunity to collaboratively analyze emerging problems and solutions. Digitization is reshaping the boundaries, content, and context of traditional liberal democratic practices, especially when combined with the ongoing effects of globalization. Our discussion ranged over all aspects of these problems, including the impacts on elections and polling, on activism, on new forms of authority and concentrations of power, such Facebook and other digital platforms. The last session of the workshop included discussion of publication plans (see section below).

With regard to specific participants, some invitees had to withdraw due to unexpected competing obligations. This included Laura Mahrenbach (pregnancy); Craig Murphy (book tour); Maximilian Mayer (obligation related to taking up new employment); Fenwick McKelvey (job-related obligation). We had a team of four who had originally intended to all participate but two (Chelsea Gabel and Nicole Goodman) had an unexpected obligation with a large project involving Indigenous communities that they are responsible for, and a third (Brian Budd) had responsibilities for a different ISA workshop occurring at the same time. Their joint paper was presented by Liam Midzain-Gobin. We were fortunate that some scholars were unexpectedly able to attend. This included Vasu Mohan, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems’ (IFES) regional director for Asia-Pacific and technical lead on election, conflict and security, with decades of practical electoral integrity experience in Asia, highly relevant to the workshop. It also included Petra Rethmann, Professor of Anthropology at McMaster, internationally known for her research on Russia, who was able to speak to the important Russian dimension of the digital democracy issues. Niels ten Oever, a PhD student from Amsterdam
working with workshop participant Stefania Milan, who has had many years of practical experience in internet governance, was also able to attend. None of these unexpected attendees will be receiving any funding from the ISA workshop grant. Two talented McMaster students assisted with the workshop logistics and also benefitted from being present at the discussions.

**Plans for future publications**

The topicality and importance of the global dimensions of digitization and democracy, the workshop focus, means that there is likely going to be strong interest from publishers and audiences in publications resulting from the workshop. We had had initial discussions at the workshop and since but specific publication plans will be formulated and implemented in the next two months. We envision at least one special journal issue and one edited book. We have a list of journals and book publishers that we consider to be our top priorities. Jackie Smith, a former editor of the *Journal of World Systems Research* (JWSR), was a workshop participant, and has suggested that journal as one possible one for a special issue. Our next step is to create a more detailed prospectus and to contact book publishers, and to select subsets of the workshop papers for this book proposal, and to create a proposal for a special issue. This will require some further discussion with the authors, and then communication with journal editors.