Call for Papers

Digital Threats to Democracy: Comparative Lessons and Possible Remedies
A Media & Democracy Workshop

Social Science Research Council  |  June 13–14, 2019

OVERVIEW

In recent years, democracies appear to have been caught off guard by pitfalls associated with the rise of digital media. Issues such as mass surveillance, disinformation, declining trust in journalism, challenges to journalistic institutions, electoral interference, partisan polarization, and increasing toxicity online threaten democratic norms, institutions, and governance. While these phenomena have raised widespread concerns in the United States and have been the subject of vast bodies of US-centric research, there is much to be learned from addressing these issues in a comparative perspective—by studying digital media and politics both inside and outside the US and highlighting generalizable implications.

While the media and political system in the United States function in ways that are quite different from most Western democracies, to the point that many have spoken of “American exceptionalism,” the United States is not alone in experiencing political pressures associated with the rise of digital media. Not only have other countries also experienced high levels of polarization, substantial foreign interference, erosion of democratic norms, and weak media institutions; sometimes these developments occurred and required political responses well before the same issues became politically heated topics in the United States.

Comparative research, both across time and across space, can shed light on how countries adapt and respond to digital threats to democracy. How can democratic competition, representation, and inclusiveness be safeguarded amidst challenges to their foundations? What lessons might we learn from countries, including nondemocratic ones, that have been dealing with these issues longer than the US?

WORKSHOP THEME

To encourage comparative research on the impact of digital media on democratic processes and institutions, the Media & Democracy program at the Social Science Research Council invites submission of abstracts for a research workshop organized in collaboration with Cristian Vaccari (Loughborough University), to be held in New York City on June 13–14, 2019.

The workshop aims to explore the impact of the rise of digital media on politics by asking three key sets of questions. First, what insights can we glean from comparing liberal democracies to one another? How have these regimes approached the frequently competing goals of protecting free speech, privacy, and anonymity; regulating political speech on digital media; ensuring fair elections; and promoting competitive digital markets? Second, what lessons can we learn from the experiences of countries where liberal and democratic norms cannot be taken for granted? In all cases, how do existing political and media institutions shape the political impact of, and responses to, digital disruptions and threats?

We invite submissions that make both theoretical and empirical contributions to existing bodies of knowledge in the comparative study of political communication, elections, public opinion, digital media, and democracy. Potential themes may include the following:
**Disinformation Campaigns:** How is the propagation of (or accusation of propagating) disinformation used to damage opponents and mislead or confuse segments of the public? How are these strategies resisted in practice?

**Surveillance:** What is the relationship between the need for connectivity and the need for privacy? What are the consequences of failing constitutional, regulatory, or normative protections of privacy?

**Violence and Intimidation:** What are the implications of the fact that mechanisms that allow citizens to coordinate collective action can also facilitate violence against other citizens? Are journalists, politicians, and activists more vulnerable to threats and coercion when professional norms require they maintain a social media presence that potentially exposes them to abuse and limits their privacy?

**Mobile Politics:** What are the implications for political equality of the global growth in mobile online connectivity, especially among sectors of the population that do not use computers? What are the implications of easy-to-use, ephemeral, and encrypted mobile communication for political discourse, mobilization, and engagement?

**Platform Politics:** How well can US-born or US-centric platforms respond to democratic challenges in other countries? Should digital platforms provide bespoke solutions to non-US problems, and how can they accomplish that?

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**TRAVEL AND ACCOMMODATION EXPENSES**

The organizers will coordinate and pay for travel and accommodation for all invited participants.

**PUBLICATION OF SELECTED PROCEEDINGS IN THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF PRESS/POLITICS**

A selection of participants in the workshop will be invited to submit full manuscripts of up to 8,000 words for publication in a special issue of the *International Journal of Press/Politics (IJPP)*, subject to peer review.

*IJPP* is an interdisciplinary journal for the analysis and discussion of the role of the press and politics in a globalized world. The journal publishes theoretical and empirical research that analyzes the linkages between the news media and political processes and actors around the world, emphasizes international and comparative work, and links research in the fields of political communication and journalism studies and the disciplines of political science and media and communication.

Website: [http://journals.sagepub.com/home/hijb](http://journals.sagepub.com/home/hijb)

Editor-in-Chief: Dr. Cristian Vaccari, Loughborough University, [c.vaccari@lboro.ac.uk](mailto:c.vaccari@lboro.ac.uk)

**TO APPLY**

Please send the following materials to mdapplications@ssrc.org by February 3. Please include “Application for Digital Threats to Democracy” in the subject line.

- Current C.V. of maximum two pages.
- An abstract of up to 500 words. The abstract should clearly outline the main theoretical and/or empirical contribution of the paper, as well as identifying the (types of) countries the contribution aims to shed light on.