Guest Editorial

Challenging Technological Utopianism

On March 17, 2018, the *New York Times* and London's *Observer* published revelations about what eventually became known as the "Cambridge Analytica scandal" (Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison, 2018; Rosenberg, Confessore, & Cadwalladr, 2018). Both newspapers reported that 50-million Facebook profiles of Americans were harvested by data analytics firm Cambridge Analytica, in developing tools to support Donald Trump's campaign in the United States 2016 presidential election. In the following weeks, journalists, pundits, and scholars immediately called for greater scrutiny of the case, declaring both companies, and Facebook in particular, a threat to democracy (Applebaum, 2018; Kennedy, 2018; Saunders, 2018; Summers, 2018). Facebook and Cambridge Analytica have been held responsible not only for the victory of Trump in the United States (Grassegger & Krogerus, 2017) but also for helping the Brexit campaign (Scott, 2018), and even affecting election outcomes in Kenya (Madowo, 2018) and Nigeria (Cadwalladr, 2018). Beyond the Cambridge Analytica case, some believe that social media in general are creating "a global crisis of democracy" (Ferguson, 2018, para. 14) by their unrestricted access to personal data on hundreds of millions of people and their powerful experimental manipulation of the algorithms (Dalli, 2018; Saunders, 2018; Summers, 2018). Indeed, a grim—and even simplistic—image emerged.

In recent years, especially with the rise of right-wing populism and violent extremism across the world, media and academic discourses surrounding societal implications of social media have indeed taken a dystopian turn. This dystopian turn stands in stark contrast to the utopian discourses that previously dominated media coverage and scholarly literature, where the very same media were lauded as tools for democracy and social change. The amnesiac and ahistorical shift from utopian to dystopian tones, or vice versa, is foreseeable. Discourses that characterized the predecessors of social media technologies—from telegraph to telephone, radio, television, and, ultimately, the internet—underwent similar trajectories. The telephone and television, for instance, were both construed as tools for democracy that would equalize, empower, and liberate, as well as instruments that would cause the end of privacy, the homogenization of society, and indecent communication (Fisher & Wright, 2001). While one projects hope and the other despair, technological utopias and dystopias "are convergent in that one is based on the existence of the other … hope about technology is a projection of despair over a current situation, while dark constructions of technology are a mirror of the realization that technological innovation should be the central element of a narrative" (Alrasheed, 2017, p. 43). Both technological utopias and dystopias "place technology at the centre of an ailing society or a flourishing community"

(Alrasheed, 2017, p. 43). Scholarly analyses on communication and media technologies rarely reflect strong or extreme utopias or dystopias. And, undeniably, there are more subtle and nuanced works that reflect complexities. And yet, as pointed out by Christian Fuchs (2012), academic discourses of technology, especially in communication studies, are largely technologically deterministic, emphasizing either the positive or negative impacts and roles technologies have in society, prompting polarization between techno-optimists and techno-pessimists. At the heart of the techno-centric inquiry is the idea that technologies are autonomous agents that effect societal changes, neglecting the societal construction of these artefacts and the agency of their users.

This special issue comprises five articles, all of which challenge technological utopianism by neither prescribing dystopias nor postulating pessimistic views but, rather, by critically examining continued societal issues through technological lenses. These articles move beyond the headlines of Cambridge Analytica to interrogate topics that are similarly framed in narrow terms by legacy media. This issue also confronts the reductionist nature of technologically deterministic approaches without necessarily prescribing social determinism or suggesting that technologies are neutral. Instead, by centring human experiences and embracing the complexities of people's lives and realities, the issue reveals deeper societal problems of inequality and exclusion that are often obscured in techno-centric analyses.

Technologically deterministic approaches to technology are also characterized by a focus on impact, a term that suggests a strong act, a forcible contact with another object (Pannabecker, 1991). By using the term impact, technology is thus viewed as forcing certain changes in society. This view promotes a framework that emphasizes a causal relationship between technology and social change, with technology being a primary cause (Pannabecker, 1991). It also simplifies the complexity of the technology-society relationship, reducing it to a mechanistic relation. Rather than pinpointing their impacts in society, articles in this issue identify the limits and potentials of technologies as well as their affordances and constraints. By so doing, they reveal nuances, ambiguities, contradictions, and even paradoxes that might otherwise remain concealed.

Keywords for this special issue include animal rights, Canada, citizen journalism, computer science, crowdsourcing, driving, electronic culture (internet-based), embodiment, feminism, gender, framing, Indigenous rights, legacy media, memes, portability, Reddit, Saudi Arabia, seal hunts, social media, socio-technical, stereotypes, Sweet Brown, Syria, #sealfie, technological utopianism, technology, Twitter, and Women2Drive. The keywords associated with the five articles demonstrate the breadth of topics, and also exemplify cases from diverse geographical contexts, covering not only urban settings but also rural and remote areas, specific locations and regional or even global phenomena, and the range of ways in which people engage with social media technologies. The various contexts analyzed in this special issue are not presented as universal but they provide a necessary contrast to many North American and/or urban-centric works that often implicitly claim to be the general case. Cases covered in this special issue also highlight the lived experiences of different social groups, including under-represented ones such as low-income African Americans, the Indigenous communities, and Arab women.

In the first article, " 'Ain't Nobody Got Time for That!': Framing and Stereotyping in Legacy and Social Media," **Kathy Dobson** and **Irena Knezevic** undertake a careful and thorough examination of the case of Sweet Brown, an African American woman who was made famous overnight after her media interview in 2012 about a local fire went viral. Dobson and Knezevic conduct a frame analysis of her portrayals in both legacy and social media, and their findings demonstrate that social media platforms both facilitate and encourage a reductionist approach to messaging. By exploring the case of Sweet Brown, they reveal that social media has functioned as a reductionist and essentialist echo chamber for marginalizing stereotypes prevalent in legacy media. This article further discloses that the so-called participatory nature of social media embodies both potential and limitation. On one hand, it provides an opening for a multitude of voices; on the other hand, it can also reinforce the construction of stereotypical and discriminatory images.

In "Too Crowded for Crowdsourced Journalism: Reddit, Portability, and Citizen Participation in the Syrian Crisis," **Scott S.D. Mitchell** and **Merlyna Lim** take the readers to r/SyrianCivilWar, an online community where users actively discuss, generate content, and deliberate around the Syrian crisis. r/SyrianCivilWar is a subreddit, or a sub-community of Reddit, a social networking platform that aggregates user-generated content. Utilizing platform and discourse analyses, Mitchell and Lim's critical examination reveals that r/SyrianCivilWar represents a vibrant community and a successfully crowdsourced journalism project. Yet, at the same time, the platform design and the stratified nature of the community also perpetuate elitism (of young, male, and educated middle class users), reinforce inequality, and obscure decision-making processes. The r/SyrianCivilWar case highlights the paradoxical relationship between alternative citizen journalism and the larger media ecosystem. While encouraging the production of user-generated content, Mitchell and Lim argue that the commodified landscape of media is "too crowded" for comprehensive and multifaceted crowdsourced journalism such as r/SyrianCivilWar.

In the third article, "Seal Hunts in Canada and on Twitter: Exploring the Tensions between Indigenous Rights and Animal Rights with #Sealfie," **Irena Knezevic**, **Julie Pasho**, and **Kathy Dobson** examine the #Sealfie case, where a Twitter discussion of seal hunting incited an online battle between Indigenous rights in Canada and animal rights movements. Analyzing tweets with a #sealfie hashtag generated between 2014 and 2017, they critically explore the tensions between the two rights movements that touch on issues of race, class, and geography. They reveal that Twitter provides a platform for discussing issues surrounding sealing in Canada, but fails to generate a climate of genuine debate and, instead, serves as an echo chamber for stereotypes and discriminatory discourse. Further, they argue, Twitter-enabled discussions obscure the fundamental concerns with neoliberal policies and resource development that are at the heart of both movements' discontent.

Rena Bivens and **Anna Shah Hoque**, in their article "Programming Sex, Gender, and Sexuality: Infrastructural Failures in the 'Feminist' Dating App Bumble," explore Bumble, a self-declared "feminist dating" app that claims to encourage equality by ensuring that "the woman always makes the first move." Relying on a material-semiotic

analysis of Bumble's software and related online contents, this article examines how gender, sex, and sexuality are given meanings and programmed into the infrastructure of this app. Bivens and Hoque argue that by encoding control and safety under a framework of straight, White, and cisgender women, the epistemological underpinnings of Bumble's infrastructure centre gender as the solitary axis of oppression. Consequently, Bumble's infrastructure restricts the app's capacity to achieve its creator's stated social justice objectives.

The last article, "Unveiling Saudi Feminism(s): Historicization, Heterogeneity, and Corporeality in Women's Movements," by **Merlyna Lim** attempts to disrupt current Western techno-utopian discourses on women's movements in Saudi Arabia. Employing critical discourse and historical analyses as her chief methods, Lim argues that to produce a better and more comprehensive understanding of the women's movements in Saudi Arabia, one must abandon and even counter overly simplistic, Orientalist, and techno-utopian frameworks. In doing so, she proposes three interventions: historicizing the movements, recognizing the heterogeneity of the movements, and, ultimately, centring the corporeality—the women's bodies—of the movements.

All of the authors are affiliated with the communication program at Carleton University's School of Journalism and Communication in Ottawa, as graduate students and faculty members. This special issue is in celebration of the 40th anniversary of the program and it offers notable insight to mark the occasion. Over the past four decades, media technologies have changed dramatically and continue to change at a faster and faster pace, but the study of media and communications has kept pace with this evolution, offering ever more complex analyses and interpretations of how we engage with those technologies.

All articles in this special issue break away from the preoccupation with the role and impact of technology, prone to overlooking socio-political contexts, neglecting history, and decentring human agency (Rodríguez, Ferron, & Shamas, 2014). They do so by decentring technology and, instead, paying attention to socio-political and historical contexts, and centring human experiences and agency. Collectively, they offer multiple epistemological insights into the multifaceted relationship between technology and society. Utilizing diverse methods of analysis and informed by theories and knowledge from varied perspectives—such as critical communication studies, humanities, feminist studies, and platform studies—they generate nuanced narratives that highlight the heterogeneity and complexity of technology-society relations. Dealing with pressing social issues such as inequality, justice, sexism, racism, and poverty, these articles also reveal ontological relationships between technology and identities: gender, sexuality, class, and race. Together, these articles attempt to disturb the persistence of the binary opposition of the utopia-dystopia, optimist-pessimist, and positive-negative views of technology.

Acknowledgement

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