

# Workshop



## Strategic Digital Information Operations, Democracy and Social Cohesion

November 16-17, 2023  
Joint GDP & MESF Hybrid Workshop



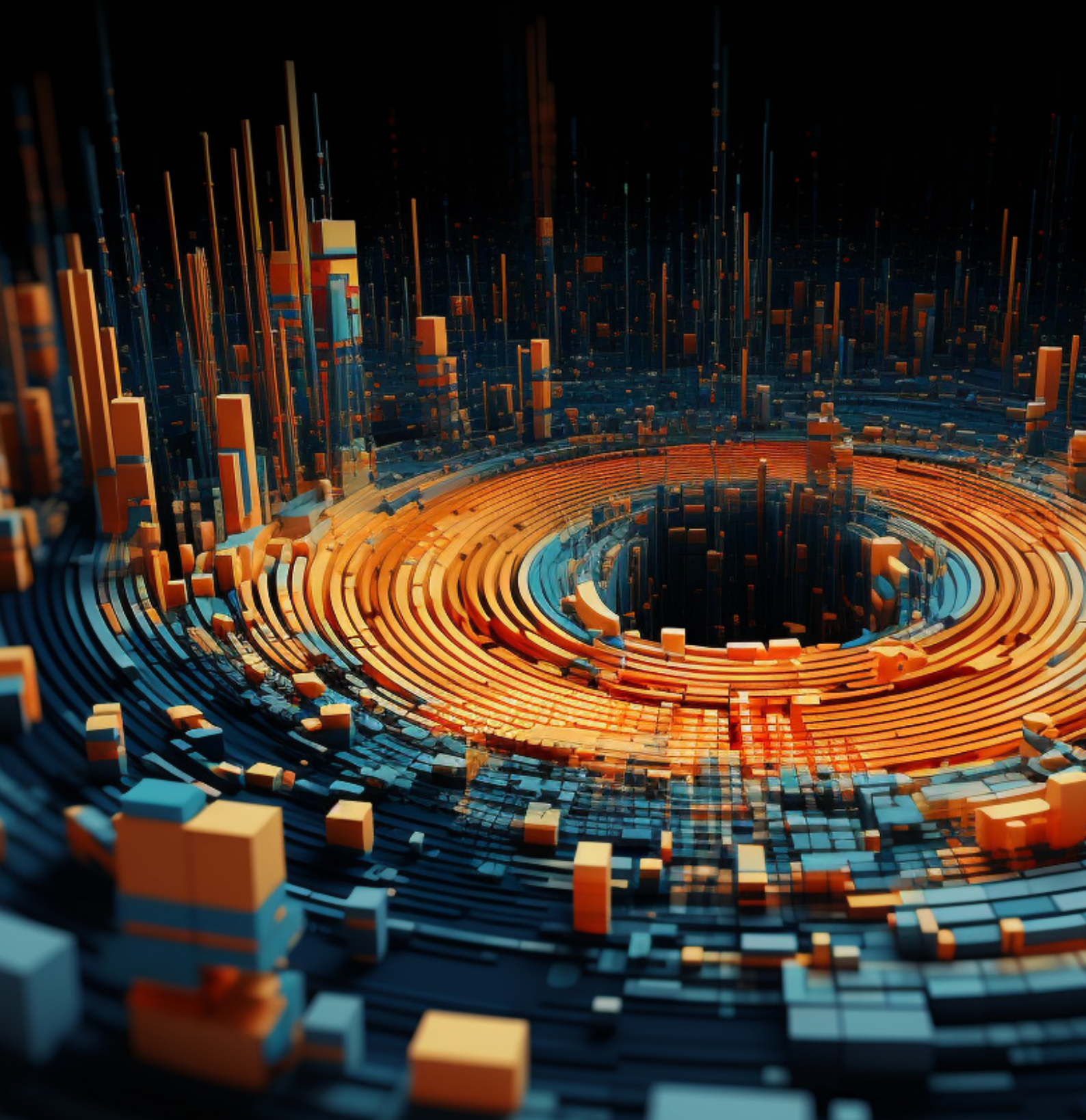
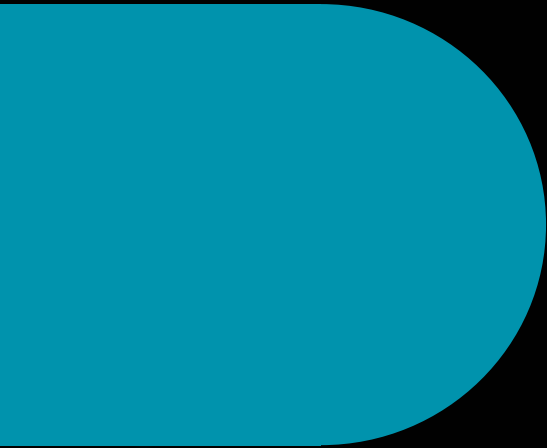
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MIDDLE EAST  
STUDIES FORUM



**ADI**  
ALFRED DEAKIN INSTITUTE FOR  
CITIZENSHIP AND GLOBALISATION





Workshop Organisers  
Prof. Ihsan Yilmaz,  
Prof. Shahram Akbarzadeh

# Strategic Digital Information Operations, Democracy and Social Cohesion

## Joint GDP & MESF Hybrid Workshop

The digital space is filled with “Strategic Digital Information Operations,” where state and non-state actors tactically deploy information to manipulate public sentiment. This term encompasses efforts to use digital technology to shape global perceptions and emotional responses for vested interests.

These operations, both nationally and internationally, employ tactics such as manipulation, disinformation, conspiracy theories, fake news, and PR campaigns. On the international stage, these operations aim to polarize, divert, and garner support for policy objectives, potentially leading to the emergence of “sharp power.”

This workshop emerges from a research endeavour supported by the Gerda Henkel Foundation through the Democracy funding scheme. The project, led by a consortium of scholars from Deakin University, seeks to investigate the methodologies employed by state and non-state actors in deploying strategic digital information operations.

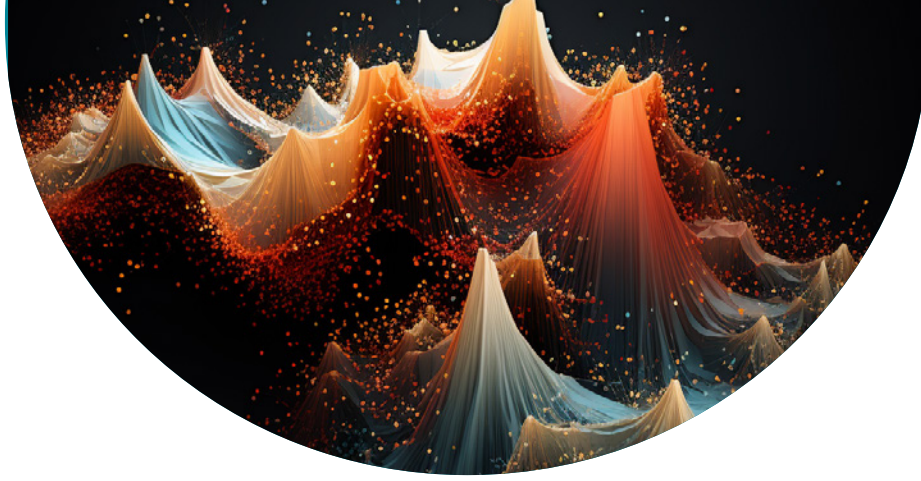
In an era marked by the strategic manipulation of digital media by state and non-state actors, this workshop aims to shed light on the multifaceted tactics, implications, and consequences of these operations on democratic processes, social cohesion, and the complex interplay between digital technologies, information operations, sharp power, and democracy.

This workshop will be held in hybrid format and will bring leading scholars in the field of digital technologies and politics in Australia and Europe in a two-day workshop (16-17 November 2023) to discuss the methodologies employed by state and non-state actors in deploying strategic digital information operations.

Some of the papers that will be presented at the workshop will be looking at:

- The Influence of the Kremlin in the Media Space of Western Balkan Countries;
- Dis/misinformation and Populism;
- Defining Conspiratorial Publics;
- Transnationalisation of Strategic Digital Information Operations;
- Utilization of Digital Tools by State and Non-State Actors;
- Online Disinformation as a Tool of Control;
- State’s Use of Digital Tech In Spreading Conspiracy Theories About the Opposition;
- Digital Dissonance, The Alt-Right, and Masculinity;
- The Digital Information Revolution and Its Impact on Racism and Nationalism;
- Harnessing Civil Society to Combat Strategic Digital Information Operations.





## Panel 1: Populism, Authoritarianism, Disinformation, Sharp Power

Chair [Lydia Khalil](#)

[Martin Solik and Jan Graf \(Ostrava University, Czechia\)](#)

The Influence of the Kremlin in the Media Space of Western Balkan Countries: A Case Study of Serbia

**Discussants:** Timothy Graham, Bakare Najmadeen Ayoola

[Bakare Najmadeen Ayoola \(National University of Sciences & Technology \(NUST\), Pakistan\)](#)

Dis/misinformation, Visibility Politics, Populism, and Digital Information: The Nigerian General Elections

**Discussants:** Itsakul Unahakate, Ali Mamouri

[Ramsha Jahangir \(Global Network Initiative, Netherlands\)](#)

Steeped in Rhetoric:

A Comparative Analysis of Pakistan's Digital Parties

**Discussants:** Ayesha Jehangir, Bec Devitt

[Martin Solik and Jan Graf \(Ostrava University, Czechia\)](#)

Media as Tool for Strengthening Authoritarian and Populist Tendencies in Central European Countries:

A Case Study of Hungary

**Discussants:** Daniel Whelan-Shamy, Galib Bashirov

DAY ONE - Panel 1

November 16, 2023

17:30 - 19:30 (AEDT)

Online Event:  
Zoom link to be provided to  
registered participants

[Register for Day One at  
mesf.org.au/event-2023-11-16](#)



## Panel 2: State and Non-State Actors in National and Transnational Contexts

Chair [Bec Devitt](#)

[Morning Tea - 9:15](#)

[Ayesha Jehangir \(UTS\)](#)

Conflict Influencers and the Strategic Utilisation of Digital Technologies Among Modern Afghan Diaspora in the West

[Discussants:](#) Katherine M. FitzGerald, Ihsan Yilmaz

[Itsakul Unahakate \(University of Sydney\)](#)

Strategic Digital Information Operations in Thailand: A Political Economy of Social Media Approach

[Discussants:](#) Aiden Aylett, Ihsan Yilmaz

[Mohamed Ibrahim \(Swinburne University\)](#)

Differences in the Utilization of Digital Tools for Information Operations between State and Non-State Actors

[Discussants:](#) Itsakul Unahakate, Daniel Whelan-Shamy

[Ihsan Yilmaz, Susan de Groot Heupner, Priya Chacko and Anand Sreekumar \(Deakin, Griffiths, Adelaide\)](#)

Transnationalisation of Strategic Digital Information Operations: The Turkish and Indian Cases

[Discussants:](#) Galib Bashirov, Bec Devitt

DAY TWO - Panel 2

November 17, 2023

9:45 - 11:45 (AEDT)

Hybrid Event:  
BCC Deakin University,  
Burwood Campus  
+ Zoom link to be provided to  
registered participants

[Register for Day Two at  
mesf.org.au/event-2023-11-16](#)



## DAY TWO - Panel 3

November 17, 2023

12:30 - 14:30 (AEDT)

Hybrid Event:  
BCC Deakin University,  
Burwood Campus  
+ Zoom link to be provided to  
registered participants

[Register for Day Two at  
mesf.org.au/event-2023-11-16](https://mesf.org.au/event-2023-11-16)

### Panel 3: Conspiracy Theories and Digital Technologies

Chair [Toija Cinque](#)

Lunch - 11:45

[Katherine M. FitzGerald](#), [Daniel Whelan-Shamy](#),  
[Timothy Graham](#), [Robert Fleet](#)

Defining Conspiratorial Publics:  
A Cross-Platform Analysis of #MauiPsyOps

*Discussants:* [Lydia Khalil](#), [Toija Cinque](#)

[Shahram Akbarzadeh](#), [Amin Naeni](#), [Galib Bashirov](#) and  
[Ihsan Yilmaz](#) (Deakin)

Online Disinformation as a Tool of Control:  
Exploring Iranian Regime's Strategies to Divide and Discredit  
Influential Dissidents

*Discussants:* [Ayesha Jehangir](#), [Ali Mamouri](#)

[Bec Devitt](#) (Deakin)

Conspiracy Theories and Lies: Strategic Digital Information  
Operations During the 2019-2020 Anti-CAA Protests in India

*Discussants:* [Priya Chacko](#), [Aiden Aylett](#)

[Ihsan Yilmaz](#), [Ali Mamouri](#), [Shahram Akbarzadeh](#) and  
[Galib Bashirov](#) (Deakin)

The Use of Digital Technologies by the Egyptian Regime to  
Propagate Anti-Opposition Disinformation and Conspiracy  
Theories

*Discussants:* [Katherine M. FitzGerald](#), [Robert Fleet](#)



## Panel 4: Intergroup Relations, Social Cohesion, Civil Society

Chair [Susan de Groot Heupner](#)

Afternoon Tea - 14:30

[Aiden Aylett, Toija Cinque and Jodi McAlister \(Deakin\)](#)

Digital Dissonance: The Alt-Right, Masculinity, and the Strategy of Information Operations

Discussants: Lydia Khalil, Robert Fleet

[Amanuel Elias, Fethi Mansouri, Enqi Weng \(Deakin\)](#)

Racism and Nationalism in the Digital Era: The Digital Information Revolution and its Impact on Exclusionary Ideologies

Discussants: Toija Cinque, Bakare Najmadeen Ayoola

[Bulent Kenes \(European Center for Populism Studies, Belgium\)](#)

Internal and External Digital Information Operations in Turkey: Impact on Democracy and Social Cohesion

Discussants: Galib Bashirov, Ihsan Yilmaz

[Lydia Khalil \(Deakin, Lowy Institute\)](#)

Harnessing Civil Society to Combat Strategic Digital Information Operations - Case Study of Taiwan

Discussants: Priya Chacko, Timothy Graham

DAY TWO - Panel 4

November 17, 2023

15:00 - 17:00 (AEDT)

Hybrid Event:  
BCC Deakin University,  
Burwood Campus  
+ Zoom link to be provided to  
registered participants

[Register for Day Two at  
mesf.org.au/event-2023-11-16](https://mesf.org.au/event-2023-11-16)





## DAY ONE - PANEL 1

### Populism, Authoritarianism, Disinformation, Sharp Power

#### The Influence of the Kremlin in the Media Space of Western Balkan Countries: A Case Study of Serbia

**Martin Solik and Jan Graf (Ostrava University, Czechia)**

Over the past decade, the Western Balkans have increasingly come to the forefront of the interests of the most powerful countries. Be it the countries of the European Union, China or Russia. It is Russia that has increased its influence in recent years, not only in Serbia but also in the other Western Balkan countries, thanks to the open media space in that country. This allows the Kremlin to fully disseminate a pro-Russian view of the current war in Ukraine, narratives of Serbian-Russian brotherhood or allows Moscow to maintain a positive media image in Serbia. This is evidenced by the fact that pro-Russian demonstrations were held in Belgrade after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. Moreover, contacts between Belgrade and Moscow at the highest political level have not been severed.

Most of the media space in Serbia is filled with pro-Kremlin government propaganda. Russia as a strong protector of the Balkans is presented by the most popular national television and newspapers. The Kremlin also exerts its influence in Serbia through its own media; for example, the news channel Russia Today opened its Belgrade bureau in November 2022 and began producing content in Serbian. In recent years, social media has also grown in popularity among pro-Russian audiences, through which an avalanche of alternative information has been massively disseminated. The most popular platform is Telegram.

The aim of this study is to find out how pro-Russian narratives, disinformation and propaganda are spread in Serbia, what the content of these media messages is and, finally, how these messages contribute to the formation of public opinion in Serbia, which is generally considered to be pro-Russian. It is also important to bear in mind that the spread of pro-Russian narratives can have

a negative impact on the accession negotiations between Belgrade and the European Union. Therefore, this study will also focus on how the EU could help in the context of Russian operations in the media space.

**Martin Solik** PhD, MPA, is an assistant professor at the Department of Human Geography and Regional Development at Ostrava University in Czechia. He has a solid experience with field research in the post-soviet and Balkan space. He visited Russia, Ukraine, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia several times. In his research, he focuses on the issues of political power, new forms of hybrid warfare and the phenomenon of religion (Christianity) in international relations.

**Jan Graf** is a PhD student at the Department of Human Geography and Regional Development at Ostrava University in Czechia. In his dissertation, he deals with Russian hybrid threats in Western Balkans and Moldova. He conducted several field trips in Western Balkans and Moldova in the last three years. In his research, he focuses on the issues of political power, new forms of hybrid warfare and Russian and Chinese geopolitics.

Both authors have recently published several publications dealing with the phenomenon of Russian and Chinese hybrid threats. State operations in the information space are also an integral part of this phenomenon. These include the dissemination of disinformation, propaganda, or the creation of fake news. As part of their research, the authors have focused not only on how Russian and Chinese operations in the information environment work in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, or Moldova, but also on how these target countries counter these operations. The publications mentioned include an article entitled "Hybrid Threats in the Western Balkans: A Case Study of Bosnia and Herzegovina" (2022), and the article entitled "Hybrid Threats to Democracy in Europe Russian and Chinese Influence in the EU Neighbourhood" (2023).



## Dis/misinformation, Visibility Politics, Populism, and Digital Information: The Nigerian General Elections

**Najimdeen Bakare**  
(National University of Sciences & Technology (NUST), Pakistan)

Since 1999, when Nigeria returned to democracy, the country has fairly managed to maintain its democratic credentials, even though it may seem somewhat illiberal. During this period, Nigeria has conducted numerous elections, but the 2023 elections marked a significant turning point in the nation's political evolution, leaving an indelible mark in its political history. Leading up to the 2023 general elections, the Nigerian political landscape was highly charged, with various competing views vying for dominance and prominence in the marketplace of public opinion. Social media platforms played a pivotal role in this competition. The period before and after the elections witnessed an extensive use of digital media technologies, primarily aimed at engaging in the politics of visibility. This was characterised by significant youth political activism, with a strong emphasis on challenging existing power structures. To place the discussion in perspective, the chapter is anchored around five critical objectives (questions), namely: (1) How was disinformation and misinformation strategically used as part of identity politics and the politics of visibility? (2) to analyse the strategic manipulation of digital media to influence election outcomes, including attempts at pre-election rigging well in advance of the election days. (3) To examine how digital information was employed to generate and propagate conspiracy theories against opposing political parties, ultimately advancing a populist agenda in support of a particular political figure who garnered significant appeal among the youth population. (4) To explore how digital media exacerbated ethno-religious politics, deepening political polarisation, fostering ethnic

and religious tensions, and even fueling calls for secession. (5) To analyse the implications of digital media in the resurgence of spatial nationalism - convergence of political actors both within and among the diaspora. Conceptually, this chapter draws upon the framework of "politics of visibility" to analyse how digital media technologies were strategically employed as tools for identity politics within the Nigerian political landscape. The analysis is primarily based on secondary data - existing scholarly research, allowing for a qualitative examination of the role of digital media during the 2023 Nigerian elections. In conclusion, the chapter finds that the 2023 elections marked a significant evolution in Nigerian politics. The strategic utilization of digital media has introduced new dynamics and challenges, which may pose difficulties for the traditional political establishment.

**Najimdeen Bakare** is Associate Professor at the Centre for International Peace & Stability (CIPS), Department of Peace and Conflict Studies, National University of Sciences & Technology (NUST), Islamabad, Pakistan. His principal areas of interest are EU politics, Global politics, African politics, Issues of European Muslims, Regionalism, Developmental studies, Theories of IR, Minority issues, and (Islamic and Western) Philosophy. In addition to having almost two decades of teaching experience, he is also published reasonably on many issues, in different international and local journals and books, which include *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, *Strategic Studies*, *Migration Studies*, *Journals of European Studies*, *IPRI Journal*, *Przegląd Strategiczny*, *Policy Perspectives*, *NUST Journal of International Peace & Stability*, Routledge, Springer, and Rowman & Littlefield, amongst others. His recent book: *Arab-Israel Normalisation - Global Perspective*, is published by Palgrave Macmillan.

## Steeped in Rhetoric: A Comparative Analysis of Pakistan's Digital Parties

**Ramsha Jahangir** (Global Network Initiative, The Netherlands)

The proliferation of social media platforms has opened up new opportunities for democratic politics. Previous research has explored the Internet's potential for democratisation through the lens of populist communication or the emergence of 'digital parties'. However, little research has been dedicated to the interplay between these two concepts in shaping digital communication. Existing literature has captured how political actors use social media to bypass traditional gatekeepers such as media but knowledge is still scant on how they use digital platforms to build political power. This article aims to expand research on the interplay between populist communication and the political organisation of digital parties in an authoritarian context beyond the geographical scope of the West. Through a comparative analysis of social media use by Pakistan's two largest political parties as a case study, this article explores how they function as digital parties and to what extent their digital communications strategy adopts populist rhetoric to gain political success. Not only does the Pakistani case expand the focus of digital populism research beyond the US and Europe, but it also has strong implications for studying how digital parties use social media to further polarization and hyper-nationalism.

**Ramsha Jahangir** is an award-winning Pakistani journalist and policy expert, specializing in technology and human rights. Ramsha holds a Master's in Journalism, Media, and Globalisation from the University of Amsterdam and received the Erasmus Mundus Journalism scholarship. For her Master's dissertation, Ramsha studied the populist communication style of Pakistani leader Imran Khan during his tenure as prime minister on Twitter. Over the last seven years, Ramsha has extensively reported on platforms, surveillance, digital politics, and disinformation in Pakistan. Ramsha previously reported for Pakistan's leading English newspaper, Dawn, and her investigative reporting has been published in Coda Story, among others. Currently, Ramsha leads policy and communications at the Global Network Initiative. She is a regular speaker at events related to internet and democracy, press freedom, and gender. Ramsha divides her time between Amsterdam and Karachi.

## Media as Tool for Strengthening Authoritarian and Populist Tendencies in Central European Countries: A Case Study of Hungary

**Martin Solik and Jan Graf (Ostrava University, Czechia)**

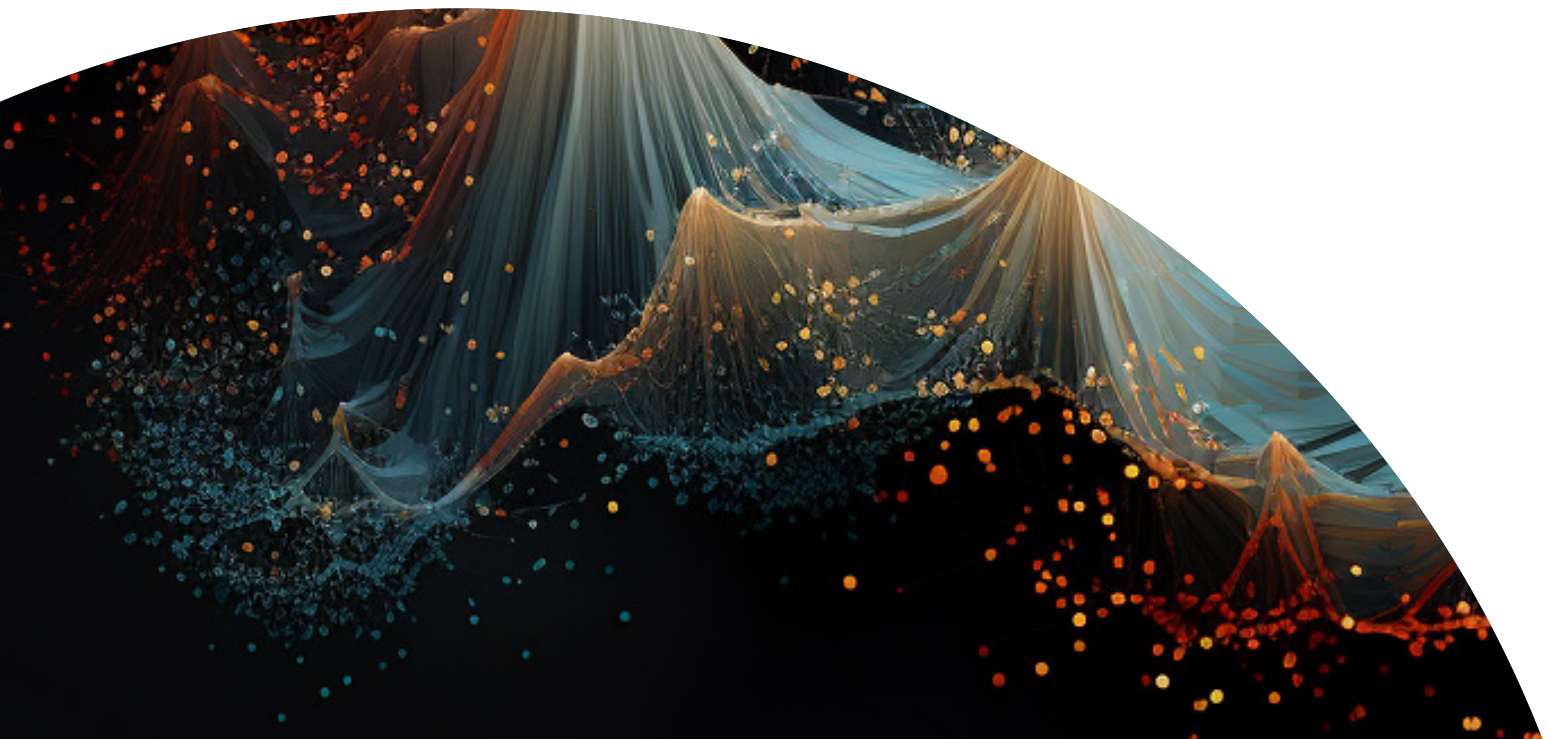
The phenomena of disinformation, fake news or hoaxes are increasingly present in the public sphere. These tools are often used in the context of political struggles in the countries of Central Europe, where governments with populist (Czechia, Slovakia) or authoritarian (Poland) tendencies have recently come to power or are still in power. Authoritarian tendencies are also on the rise in Hungary, which, although a member of the European Union and openly committed to democratic values, is increasingly criticised by European politicians for abandoning the values of liberal democracy. Hungarian President Viktor Orbán himself, in a major speech in 2014, made it clear that the concept of liberal democracy was not working in practice and that illiberal democracy was on the rise. At the same time, Viktor Orbán began to restrict the freedom of the Hungarian media. Since 2010, there has been a clear tendency of the ruling party in Hungary to bring the private and public media under its control. It is using both political and economic pressure to do so. The state media have been politicised by the Orbán government and the inconvenient private media have been partially eliminated. The government has even used blocking access to advertising and threats to eliminate the private media. The private media that were harassed in this way and deprived of part of their income were subsequently bought up by friendly businessmen already loyal to Viktor Orbán and his government, while parasitising on their loyalty in the above-mentioned way. A case in point from the world of "free private media" in Hungary is the once respected Figyelő magazine. After the weekly was taken over by Mária Schmidt, historian, scholar, Orbán advisor and founder and director of the controversial Terror Háza Museum, through the family firm K4A Lapkiadó, the magazine's obvious pro-government orientation and actions were noted. The aim of this study is to assess how the media in Hungary are used to support the ruling Fidesz party, how democratic and liberal values are undermined by pro-government Hungarian media, and what

narratives these media use in the context of current events in Ukraine. Indeed, in the context of Russian aggression in Ukraine, the Hungarian president has gone against the general European view that Ukraine should be supported not only financially but also militarily. This study aims to contribute to the understanding of how a relatively stable democracy can turn into a country with authoritarian tendencies over a few years, and how state-owned media can contribute to the weakening of the quality of democracy.

**Martin Solik** PhD, MPA, is an assistant professor at the Department of Human Geography and Regional Development at Ostrava University in Czechia. He has a solid experience with field research in the post-soviet and Balkan space. He visited Russia, Ukraine, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia several times. In his research, he focuses on the issues of political power, new forms of hybrid warfare and the phenomenon of religion (Christianity) in international relations.

**Jan Graf** is a PhD student at the Department of Human Geography and Regional Development at Ostrava University in Czechia. In his dissertation, he deals with Russian hybrid threats in Western Balkans and Moldova. He conducted several field trips in Western Balkans and Moldova in the last three years. In his research, he focuses on the issues of political power, new forms of hybrid warfare and Russian and Chinese geopolitics.

Both authors have recently published several publications dealing with the phenomenon of Russian and Chinese hybrid threats. State operations in the information space are also an integral part of this phenomenon. These include the dissemination of disinformation, propaganda, or the creation of fake news. As part of their research, the authors have focused not only on how Russian and Chinese operations in the information environment work in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, or Moldova, but also on how these target countries counter these operations. The publications mentioned include an article entitled "Hybrid Threats in the Western Balkans: A Case Study of Bosnia and Herzegovina" (2022), and the article entitled "Hybrid Threats to Democracy in Europe Russian and Chinese Influence in the EU Neighbourhood" (2023).







## DAY TWO - PANEL 2

### State and Non-State Actors in National and Transnational Contexts

#### Conflict Influencers and the Strategic Utilisation of Digital Technologies Among Modern Afghan Diaspora in the West

Ayesha Jehangir (University of Technology Sydney)

Diasporic digitality plays a decisive role, particularly for those who have fled conflict zones with authoritarian governments, in considerably transforming how these people communicate, mobilise, and engage in political events in their homeland. By leveraging social media and other digital technologies, these groups not only engage in participatory politics for 'networking democracy', they also enhance their transnational reach. However, at the same time, the use of digital technologies also enables state and non-state actors within these diasporic communities to manipulate public sentiment, spread mis/disinformation to alter public understanding of the conflict and those involved, sway political support, and create a new information environment to serve a certain political agenda. Moreover, these state and non-state actors – who the author refers to as *conflict influencers* – leverage their network to reach out to national and international media to garner public support for domestic and foreign policy objectives, and how the outside world sees a political development unfolding in their homeland.

This paper examines the role of emerging state and non-state actors in the modern Afghan diasporic political communication and mobilisation process on Twitter Space – a live communication tool introduced by Twitter in December 2020. In so doing, it explores how conflict influencers, including members of the Taliban and ISIS, leverage digital technologies to launch, both at national and international levels, orchestrated online campaigns to influence public understanding of the antagonistic conflict with the Taliban *de facto* government. The paper also explores where these conflict influencers operate from and what strategies they use to deliberately misrepresent political and social reality and

polarise digital audiences/followers by delegitimising the genuine efforts of diasporic activists and other civil society members by evoking doubt and uncertainty.

Of particular interest to the author is how mis/disinformation and conspiracy theories about Afghanistan and Afghans circulate among these digital spaces, and what methods are used by ordinary Afghans, and also activists, to resist and counter online mis/disinformation, especially that emanating from sources close to the authoritarian *de facto* Taliban government. Additionally, using the case study of #StopHazaraGenocide, which garnered 10 million retweets within two weeks, the paper also explores how these conflict influencers hijacked the campaign to sow ethnic divide and uncertainty among diasporic groups, with an intention to undermine substantive debate, acts of mobilisation and social cohesion, and fact-based political engagement. The author finds that some of these conflict influencers use populist strategies to embed appropriated narratives of victimhood, pity and compassion in their individualised digital activism, which can have adverse political implications for younger generations of Afghans.

[Ayesha Jehangir](#) is a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow with the Centre for Media Transition at the University of Technology Sydney. She holds a PhD in peace and conflict journalism from the School of the Arts, English and Media at the University of Wollongong. Ayesha's research focuses on the mediation of human suffering and social justice from war and conflict zones, with a focus on peace and humanitarian journalism, media coverage of extremism, media and the refugee voice, and digital activism among diasporas from the Global South. Ayesha's forthcoming book is *Afghan Refugees, Pakistani Media and the State* (Routledge, 2024). She is also co-secretary of Journalism Education and Research Association of Australia. Prior to joining academia, Ayesha worked as a journalist in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Germany, and for *SBS Radio* in Australia.

## Strategic Digital Information Operations in Thailand: A Political Economy of Social Media Approach

**Itsakul Unahakate (University of Sydney)**

The so-called 'Strategic Digital Information Operations (SDIOs)' are thought to have played a key role in several political campaigns, most notably the 2016 US presidential election and the Brexit referendum. Furthermore, organised social media manipulation has also been used in a number of developing countries, mainly authoritarian ones. In order to fully understand this phenomenon, we must first comprehend a broader context, namely the relations between media and communication systems and the social structure of the society. This Chapter, then, proposes a political economy of social media approach to examine why and how state and non-state actors engage with the use of SDIOs.

Using Thailand as a case study, this Chapter argues that SDIOs are employed in response to the changing communication landscape, from mass media to social media. It revisits the propaganda model, represented by Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky in their seminal book, *Manufacturing Consent*, to examine how a state bureaucracy and corporations 'filter' the news exposed to manipulate people's opinions. The Chapter demonstrates that, in the social media era, these filters: ownership, advertising, sourcing, flak, and ideology, are different from those in the mass media era. These differences make it harder for both the state and big companies to make people comply with or consent to the

agendas of dominant groups. Also, various political economies of social media in different countries might explain why the SDIOs are designed and function differently.

This Chapter also discusses the tactics and practices of the SDIOs in Thailand. The country has long been studied for using the SDIOs by the state, mainly the military. For example, the army has employed information operations, along with other tools, to achieve its goals in the south Thailand insurgency and other political conflicts, including recent youth protests. As a result, both Twitter and Facebook took down some of these suspected social network accounts. Non-state actors, notably pro-monarchy movements and political organisations have recently begun to deploy the SDIOs. There have been reports about the SDIO-like practices during the recent general election. It has also been observed that large domestic companies might use the tactics and practices of the SDIOs on significant economic policies such as telco mergers and acquisitions. The Chapter concludes with implications and future research issues.

**Itsakul Unahakate** is a PhD candidate at the Department of Political Economy, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. His research interests include the political economy of social media, particularly misinformation and disinformation. His thesis focuses on the state's responses to 'fake news' in Thailand. He is also a lecturer at the Faculty of Economics, Thammasat University, Thailand, where he teaches political economy and institutional economics.

## Differences in the Utilization of Digital Tools for Information Operations between State and Non-State Actors

**Mohamed Ibrahim (Swinburne University)**

In today's hyper-connected world, the ability to influence public perception using digital tools is paramount. State and non-state actors engage in information operations for varying objectives, leveraging an array of digital platforms. Given the stakes, understanding the differential strategies and methodologies becomes crucial for governments, organizations, and individuals alike. This chapter aims to fill the knowledge gap, offering a comprehensive comparative analysis, serving as an academic foundation for future research and policy formulation.

The current proliferation of social media outlet makes the need to meticulously explore and evaluate the contrasts in the utilization of digital tools for information operations between state and non-state actors, urgent and necessary. Recognizing the digital age's pivotal role in shaping political, social, and economic narratives, this chapter delves into the strategies, motivations, and capacities of various entities. The study will hinge on both qualitative and quantitative methodologies to offer a nuanced understanding, further informing policies and countermeasures in the digital information space.

The chapter will offer a comprehensive understanding of how state and non-state actors differently use digital tools in information operations. It will highlight the changing landscape of digital information warfare and the implications for global security. It will adopt a thematic structure, beginning with a solid theoretical foundation, progressing into separate examinations of state and non-state actors, followed by a comparative analysis, and concluding with broader implications and actionable recommendations for entities to safeguard against malicious

digital campaigns and to promote the responsible use of digital tools in the information space.

**Mohamed Ibrahim** is a former Somali Telecommunication minister and now a fellow and researcher at Swinburne University and involved in community related activities with Melbourne University. He is focused on researching the role of Fintech in enhancing the national economies of developing countries. Mohamed Ibrahim has been in the IT industry over the last twenty-five years, before moving into Academia. He has worked for organizations including Papua New Guinea's Electricity Commission (Elcom) as an IT engineer, Kuwait Oil Company as a system analyst, United Arab Emirates' Higher Colleges of Technology as a researcher, lecturer and ICT consultant. He has been an honorary senior lecturer at Monash University, ICT strategy Director at Deakin University and Chief Information Officer at Peninsula where he was responsible for delivering technical strategies focusing on their social and community impacts. Founder of the Somali ISOC Chapter which promotes internet access in Somalia. Mohamed was also the Chairman of the Centre for Research and Dialogue during 2010-2014 and Somalia's Internet Governance Forum (IGF) representative. He is an active participant and contributor of Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) conferences. He is involved in the ICANN country code names supporting organization (ccNSO), the African Top level Domain Names (AfTLD) and ICANN Government Advisory Council (GAC) on behalf of Somalia among other fora. Other ongoing current activities Mohamed is involved are in the Fintech industry; Yeel, iiKEEN, and iiSHEEG startups which are online businesses that deliver remittance and online data storage and retrieval solution for the Somali community in Australia and in the wider global diaspora. Somsog (somsog.org) is also another of his initiatives which is part of online education platforms targeting the Somali community with the intention of raising awareness civics duties, secure ways of using online services.



## Transnationalisation of Strategic Digital Information Operations: The Turkish and Indian Cases

Ihsan Yilmaz, Susan de Groot Heupner, Priya Chacko and Anand Sreekumar (Deakin, Griffiths, Adelaide)

This chapter employs the concept of 'Strategic Digital Information Operations' to examine how authoritarianism can transcend geographical borders through digital information operations. This chapter examines how populist authoritarian regimes conduct 'Strategic Digital Information Operations' *domestically* and then *transnationalise* them to their emigrant diaspora populations abroad. It asks how 'Strategic Digital Information Operations' conducted by state and pro-government non-state actors take place. The chapter will comparatively examine the tactics, tools, methods, practices, actors and content of these operations in India and Turkey. There is limited scholarship on digital authoritarianism and an investigation into these two countries, both of whom with ruling populist governments, is useful to understand the *similarities* and *differences* in the way digital information operations are deployed in distinct social and political contexts. The chapter examines information strategies employed by Turkey's AKP and India's BJP government, focusing but not limited to state-sponsored disinformation campaigns, censorship, intimidation of influential netizens, and manipulation of legislation. Based on the textual evidence, the chapter develops a concise dictionary of terms, concepts, names, and words that are specifically used to target Turkish and Indian diasporas communities. Lastly, the chapter examines how strategic digital information operations are used to transnationalise authoritarianism through diaspora mediatisation.

**Ihsan Yilmaz** is Research Professor and Chair at the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalization, Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia. He is also a Non-Resident Senior Fellow at Oxford University's Regent College and the European Center for Populism Studies, Brussels. He co-leads the Gerda Henkel Foundation (Germany) project with Professor Shahram Akbarzadeh titled: "Smart Digital Technologies and the Future of Democracy in the Muslim World" (2022-2025). He also leads two ARC Discovery Projects: "Civilisationist Mobilisation, Digital Technologies, and Social Cohesion: The Case of Turkish & Indian Diasporas in Australia" (2023-2026) and "Religious Populism, Emotions, and Political Mobilisation: Civilisationism in Turkey, Indonesia, and Pakistan" (2022-2025).

**Dr. Susan de Groot Heupner** is a political sociologist with a research focus on populist mobilisations and the formation of hegemonic ideological constructions. She is an Adjunct Fellow at the Griffith Centre for Social and Cultural Research and an Associate Research Fellow at the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation. She works on two Australian Research Council projects examining religious populism, transnational polarisation, and emotive mobilisation. Furthermore, she is coordinating a national survey on Indigenous media in Australia. Susan is Managing Editor for the *Journal of Alternative and Community Media*, and Editorial Board member for the Political Sociology section at Sociology Compass. She has published in journals such as *Politics and Religion*, *Religions*, *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, and *Journal of International Communication*, and has a forthcoming monograph with Leiden University Press. She has also contributed to public media platforms like *The Conversation*, *ABC*, and *Enlighten*.

**Dr. Priya Chacko** is Head of the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Adelaide. Her current research focusses on the political economy of authoritarian populism in Indian, India's transnational repression and legitimisation strategies. She is a Chief Investigator, with Ihsan Yilmaz, on an ARC Discovery Project on Digital Technologies, and Social Cohesion: "The Case of Turkish & Indian Diasporas in Australia" (2023-2026). She is an Editor-in-Chief of the journal *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*.

**Anand Sreekumar** is a PhD candidate at the Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Adelaide. He holds an MPhil in diplomacy and disarmament from the Centre for International Politics, Organization and Disarmament (CIPOD) at the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University. His works have appeared in *International Affairs*, *European Journal of International Security* and *World Scientific*, among others. His research interests span South Asia, political economy, intellectual history, and nuclear issues.







## DAY TWO - PANEL 3

### Conspiracy Theories and Digital Technologies

#### Defining Conspiratorial Publics: A Cross-Platform Analysis of #MauiPsyOps

Katherine M. FitzGerald, Daniel Whelan-Shamy, Timothy Graham,  
Robert Fleet, (Queensland University of Technology)

The purpose of our chapter is twofold. Firstly, we provide an exploratory analysis of 13,500 posts on X (formerly Twitter) collected during the 2023 Maui wildfires using exploratory digital methods. Secondly, we will use the aforementioned analysis to provide a series of speculations on the nature of modern conspiratorial theories and how they originate and circulate on digital platforms, often with involvement from a myriad of State and non-State actors. These speculations are linked to *space, time and the permissiveness – or malleability – of these events themselves* and how, through a complex web of conspiratorial canon, these events braid together with each other to form narratives. Moreover, we will thread these three motifs to examine the role of digital communications technologies in this complex web.

We hypothesise that the transitory nature of conspiracy theories, and the ability to rejuvenate older theories that make up the conspiratorial canon are leveraged on digital platforms as a form of political control. We see this in counternarratives proposed by State actors and other political groups whose response to criticism is often to revitalise conspiratorial narratives that support their positions. This has most recently been seen in the Maui bushfires, where critics of the United States government revitalised previous anti-Democrat conspiracies in addition to criticising the current actions of the government. Through this analysis we can address a gap in digital information operation literature as to why conspiratorial narratives are ephemeral and why others remain pervasive in public discourse.

The intention of this work is not to provide a normative theory of conspiratorial thinking but rather to synthesize insights gained from computational methods to inform social theory more broadly. Specifically, we aim to shift scholarly conversation from event-specific analyses of acute events to a broader analysis of the fertile socio-political ground from which conspiratorial movements grow. To phrase it differently, this chapter offers what Herbert Blumer (1954) termed as a sensitizing concept – a set of speculative theoretical observations to inform the subsequent discussion on topics relating to social theory.

**Katherine M. FitzGerald** is a PhD student and lead analyst at the QUT DMRC. Her research interests include online conspiracy theories along with mis- and disinformation. Katherine's research has a specific focus on QAnon, conspiratorial narratives within the political sphere, and the platform affordances that allow for the spread of these ideas.

**Daniel Whelan-Shamy** is a PhD student at the QUT DMRC. His PhD work investigates Generative AI (such as Chat GPT) as being epistemological extenders of knowledge, within the complexity of a post-truth information-scape. He has interest more broadly in international politics, online- coordination and information operations.

**Associate Professor Timothy Graham** is a Senior Lecturer in Digital Media at QUT. His research combines computational methods with social theory to study online networks and platforms, with a particular interest in online bots and trolls, disinformation, and online ratings and rankings devices. He develops open-source software tools for social media data analysis, and has published in journals such as *Information, Communication & Society*, *Information Polity*, *Big Data & Society*, and *Social Media + Society*. In 2021, Tim was



announced as an ARC Discovery Early Career Researcher Award recipient and was awarded funding for his project, *Combating Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour on Social Media*.

**Robert Fleet** is a Data Scientist and Developer at QUT's Australian Digital Observatory. With a passion for analysing human data on the internet, he designs platforms and tools for this purpose.

Robert's unique research interest lies in studying MMO game data, specifically to investigate the structure of organized criminal groups. Robert has previously contributed his expertise as a on a cutting-edge drone surveillance project.

### Online Disinformation as a Tool of Control: Exploring Iranian Regime's Strategies to Divide and Discredit Influential Dissidents

**Shahram Akbarzadeh, Amin Naeni, Galib Bashirov and Ihsan Yilmaz (Deakin)**

The Iranian regime has increasingly harnessed the power of online disinformation as a potent tool of control to suppress influential dissidents both within and beyond its borders through information operations. The 2022 "Women, Life, Freedom" protests suggested the escalation of pro-regime disinformation campaigns. This study delves into the multifaceted strategies employed by the Iranian government to manipulate information and perception. They are aimed at dividing and discrediting prominent dissidents, thereby preventing the formation of an alternative perception within Iranian public opinion. Drawing upon a comprehensive analysis of the authorities' speeches, social media data, and state-affiliated media, this paper elucidates the various tactics employed by the Iranian regime in its disinformation campaigns. These tactics encompass the creation and amplification of fake news, the dissemination of false narratives, trolling and harassment, character assassination, and the exploitation of social media platforms. Therefore, this study examines how disinformation campaigns seek to sow discord, erode trust, and undermine the credibility of influential figures. The paper takes a nuanced approach by investigating three distinct groups targeted by the Iranian regime's information operations: influential figures in society such as actresses, potential political voices inside the country, and prominent dissidents in the diaspora. In a broader picture, this aims to contribute to the understanding of the evolving landscape of online disinformation as a tool of control in authoritarian regimes.

**Professor Shahram Akbarzadeh** is Convenor of Middle East Studies Forum (MESF) and Deputy Director (International) of the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation, Deakin University (Australia). He co-leads the Gerda Henkel Foundation (Germany) project "Smart Digital Technologies and the Future of Democracy in the Muslim World" (2022-2025) with the ADI's Ihsan Yilmaz. He held a prestigious ARC Future Fellowship (2013-2016) on the Role of Islam in Iran's Foreign Policy-making and recently completed a Qatar Foundation project on Sectarianism in the Middle East. Professor Akbarzadeh has an extensive publication record and has contributed to the public debate on the political processes in the Middle East, regional rivalry and Islamic militancy. In 2023 he joined Middle East Council on Global Affairs (Doha) as a Non-Resident Senior Fellow.

**Amin Naeni** is a Ph.D. candidate and Research Assistant at the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation (ADI) at Deakin University in Australia. He works on the relationship between the rise of digital technologies and socio-political developments in Iran. Also, Amin is a Fellow at the Center for Middle East and Global Order (CMEG). He has contributed to publications including the Middle East Policy Journal, the Middle East Institute, The Conversation, the Brookings Institution, and the Atlantic Council, among others. He completed his M.A. in Middle East and North Africa Studies at the University of Tehran in 2018 and participated in two research projects at the same university between 2019 and 2021.

**Dr Galib Bashirov** is an associate research fellow at Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalization, Deakin University, Australia. His research examines state-society relations and the impact of digital technologies on political processes in the Middle East and Central Asia. His previous works have been published in Review of International Political Economy, Democratization, and Economy & Society.

**Ihsan Yilmaz** is Research Professor and Chair at the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalization, Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia. He is also a Non-Resident Senior Fellow at Oxford University's Regent College and the European Center for Populism Studies, Brussels. He co-leads the Gerda Henkel Foundation (Germany) project with Professor Shahram Akbarzadeh titled: "Smart Digital Technologies and the Future of Democracy in the Muslim World" (2022-2025). He also leads two ARC Discovery Projects: "Civilisationist Mobilisation, Digital Technologies, and Social Cohesion: The Case of Turkish & Indian Diasporas in Australia" (2023-2026) and "Religious Populism, Emotions, and Political Mobilisation: Civilisationism in Turkey, Indonesia, and Pakistan" (2022-2025).

## Conspiracy Theories and Lies: Strategic Digital Information Operations During the 2019-2020 Anti-CAA Protests in India

**Bec Devitt (Deakin)**

This book chapter aims to discuss how the Bharaitya Janata Party led by Narendra Modi employed strategic digital information operations during protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in 2019-2020. The BJP along with online Hindutva activists engaged in disinformation campaigns targeting academics, activists and women. The Anti-CAA protest movement was highly visible on social media and was sustained offline from December 2019-March 2020. The Modi BJP government with its considerable resources and socio-political network of the Hindutva far right was able to lead a coordinated effort to suppress, counter and silence the Anti-CAA discourse online and offline.

Disinformation often works not through a single narrative or piece of content but as a campaign, and often occurs through implicit coordination and collaboration between various actors. Whilst the dynamics of disinformation as put forward by Benkler et al are driven by media and political elites from the top down, this chapter aims to explore the collaborative nature of strategic digital information operations conducted by online Hindutva operatives during the Anti-CAA protests. Strategic digital information operations targeting opposition during the protests included conspiracy theories claiming protestors were terrorists and invaders who wanted to tear India to pieces. Using historical discourse analysis, this book chapter examines tweets and media appearances by far right influencers, BJP ministers and operatives and anchors from online far right YouTube channels such as Republic TV.

This book chapter aims to explore the question of how the BJP and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) use conspiracy narratives as well as stereotypes and tropes to create a politics of fear. In addition, this book chapter explores the question of how narratives that invoke historical grievances tap into individuals' sense of belonging and identity and how these narratives reshape and remix the concept of citizenship in India online. Finally, this book chapter seeks to explore whether the strategic information operation employed by the BJP, far right extremists and influencers during the Anti-CAA protests constitutes participatory disinformation.

Contrary to prevailing views regarding strategic information operations, the findings of the book chapter suggest that rather than this campaign being an elite driven effort, the strategic information operations in India during the Anti-CAA protests are far more complex and tend to be more participatory in nature. This demonstrates how strategic information operations may occur in a hybrid form with dynamics that can be both top-down and bottom-up. In addition, this research finds that the women and children of Shaheen Bagh, who embodied and were at the heart of resistance against the state, were used as emotional vectors by the Hindutva right to appeal to masculine notions of the nation state. Overall this book chapter aims to contribute to the understanding of how strategic digital information operations shape the concept of citizenship in India and how the normalisation of narratives of hate undermine the democratic process.

**Bec Devitt** is a PhD candidate at the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation. Her research investigates how far-right groups and state actors in India have produced and reproduced exclusionary language targeting those that challenge state authority through digital networks to shape public discourse and influence decision making within political institutions. It examines to what extent the relationship between the digital space and the Indian state represents a distinct form of digital authoritarian practice in India. Focusing on two new case studies regarding political discourse online during the Anti-CAA protests in 2019-2020, her research will contribute to the understanding of digital authoritarianism in India as within both instances, the digital market was instrumental in spreading what Starbird argues is "participatory disinformation." Bec was previously Digital Sherlock Fellow with the Digital Forensic Lab at the Atlantic Council and has worked on a number of research projects at Deakin University including a Rapid Evidence Assessment on Alternative Narratives and has previously worked as a speech writer at the Parliament of Victoria.





## The Use of Digital Technologies by the Egyptian Regime to Propagate Anti-Opposition Disinformation and Conspiracy Theories

Ihsan Yilmaz, Ali Mamouri, Shahram Akbarzadeh and Galib Bashirov  
(Deakin)

As is often the case in authoritarian regimes, conspiracy theories garner significant public attention, prompting authorities to employ them more extensively as a means of political manipulation and control over society. The widespread digital technologies have assisted authoritarian regimes in promoting their agendas through systematic conspiracy narratives made by various media tools affiliated with them. Within such a climate of conspiratorial thinking, the Russian war against Ukraine offers a fertile ground for the Egyptian propaganda apparatus to construct multifaceted conspiracy narratives. The aim of this article is twofold. It investigates the main conspiracy theories produced and disseminated by the regime after the Russian invasion of Ukraine and how the regime has been using digital technologies to spread these theories that are utilised to demonize the opposition. The paper shows that digital technologies are widely used by the regime and pro-regime actors to spread conspiracy theories that share a triangular construct, wherein the Egyptian leadership is depicted as an autonomous and robust entity, Russia as a steadfast ally, and Western powers as clandestine actors in a conspiratorial framework that help the opposition in Egypt to undermine the country.

Ihsan Yilmaz is Research Professor and Chair at the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalization, Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia. He is also a Non-Resident Senior Fellow at Oxford University's Regent College and the European Center for Populism Studies, Brussels. He co-leads the Gerda Henkel Foundation (Germany) project with Professor Shahram Akbarzadeh titled: "Smart Digital Technologies and the Future of Democracy in the Muslim World" (2022-2025).

He also leads two ARC Discovery Projects: "Civilisationist Mobilisation, Digital Technologies, and Social Cohesion: The Case of Turkish & Indian Diasporas in Australia" (2023-2026) and "Religious Populism, Emotions, and Political Mobilisation: Civilisationism in Turkey, Indonesia, and Pakistan" (2022-2025).

Dr. Ali Mamouri is a scholar and journalist in the fields of philosophy and theology. Currently, he serves as a Research Fellow at the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation at Deakin University. Dr. Mamouri has previously held positions as a lecturer at the University of Sydney (2014 - 2015), the University of Tehran (2008 - 2011), and Al-Mustansiriyah University (2009 - 2011). From 2020 to 2022, he served as a strategic communication advisor to the Iraqi prime minister, contributing to regional dialogue efforts between Iran and Saudi Arabia within Iraq. Dr. Mamouri also served as the editor of Iraq Pulse at Al-Monitor from 2016 to 2023, where he covered Iraq political development during this crucial time. His work focuses on themes such as political Islam, secularism and religiosity, religious minorities, and interfaith dialogue. His writings and analyses have been featured in publications including Al-Monitor, The Conversation, the Washington Institute, BBC Persian, and Al-Jazeera, among others.

Professor Shahram Akbarzadeh is Convenor of Middle East Studies Forum (MESF) and Deputy Director (International) of the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation, Deakin University (Australia). He co-leads the Gerda Henkel Foundation (Germany) project "Smart Digital Technologies and the Future of Democracy in the Muslim World" (2022-2025) with the ADI's Ihsan Yilmaz. He held a prestigious ARC Future Fellowship (2013-2016) on the Role of Islam in Iran's Foreign Policy-making and recently completed a Qatar Foundation project on Sectarianism in the Middle East. Professor Akbarzadeh has an extensive publication record and has contributed to the public debate on the political processes in the Middle East, regional rivalry and Islamic militancy. In 2023 he joined Middle East Council on Global Affairs (Doha) as a Non-Resident Senior Fellow.

Dr Galib Bashirov is an associate research fellow at Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalization, Deakin University, Australia. His research examines state-society relations and the impact of digital technologies on political processes in the Middle East and Central Asia. His previous works have been published in Review of International Political Economy, Democratization, and Economy & Society.





## DAY TWO - PANEL 4

### Intergroup Relations, Social Cohesion, Civil Society

#### Digital Dissonance: The Alt-Right, Masculinity, and the Strategy of Information Operations

Aiden Aylett, Toija Cinque and Jodi McAlister (Deakin)

This chapter closely examines digital strategies deployed by the alt-right masculinity movement, highlighting their role within the broader landscape of 'Strategic Digital Information Operations'. The alt-right masculinity movement supports far-right ideologies, often emphasising traditional male roles and opposing perceived mainstream political correctness (Sunderland, 2023). These groups heavily utilise digital platforms, especially social media, to propagate their ideologies, manipulate public sentiment, and control the perceptions of their members (Salojärvi, Palonen, Horsmanheimo & Kylli, 2023). A pivotal framework aiding this analysis is Stephen Hassan's (2020) BITE model of authoritarian control. This model offers insights into how groups can digitally influence their members, encompassing behaviour control, information control, thought control, and emotional control. Such digital operations are emblematic of larger trends in the strategic deployment of narratives online. Alt-right masculinity leaders digitally market themselves as experts, guiding men to 'true' masculinity and a perceived 'right' way of life. They frequently include digital self-help courses, advertisements for dietary supplements, and various online financial schemes (Woolley & Luger, 2023).

Drawing on the BITE model, we argue that the alt-right masculinity movement's online operations encapsulate elements of authoritarian control that resonate with strategic digital information manipulation. This includes spreading misinformation on diverse topics, ranging from health concerns like unfounded apprehensions over soy products to political misinformation, such as the claims of election fraud in America endorsed by many alt-right figures. The work of Michelle Grossman (2017) regarding

youth resilience to violent extremism is a crucial touchstone when considering the digital strategies of the alt-right masculinity movement. Grossman's insights shed light on how online platforms can either fortify or exploit youth resilience factors. The alt-right's digital manoeuvres, often intricate and targeted, endeavour to reach susceptible youth by playing on vulnerabilities and identity concerns. Grossman emphasises the importance of critical media literacy, suggesting that equipping youth with discernment tools can counteract these digital tactics.

To undertake this research, we analyse a corpus of episodes from alt-right podcasts. Our analysis here blends quantitative and qualitative methods. Using Voyant, a suite of digital humanities tools for mapping and comparing linguistic features such as word frequency, common phrases, concordances and distinctive vocabularies, we develop a list of keywords and phrases used in these podcasts which feed into this model of authoritarian control. We select a smaller number of episodes for close reading and analysis, to explore how this works at a more granular, narrative level. We also take into consideration the mode of delivery: the audio context. One of the affordances of audio media is the 'human emotional intimacy effect' (Rodero & Lucas 2021): that is, listening to another person tell you a story – directly into your ear, if you are wearing headphones – is very powerful, which may add another layer to these podcasts' persuasive abilities.

This chapter seeks to illuminate some of the tactics of the alt-right masculinity movement within the digital realm. Our goal is to underscore the movement's online tactics as a prime example of how digital platforms and media can be leveraged for coordinated information operations.



**Aiden Aylett** is a PhD candidate with full scholarship at Deakin University, specialising in the study of digital creative writing communities. Previously, they focused on the communal production of genre in fanfiction communities for their Honours thesis. This topic was further extrapolated in a paper presented at the 2021 Independent Publishing Conference and formed the basis for an article now under review for a renowned Q1 Journal. Aiden's current research centres on communal worldbuilding and writing processes, particularly how digital platforms facilitate user collaboration. Their research approach integrates both qualitative and quantitative methods to analyse the structure, functionality, and communication within digital communities.

**Toija Cinque** is Associate Professor in Communication (Digital Media). Cinque draws on a broad scope of theoretical and methodological approaches, with projects focused on using emerging screens and digital technologies for educational effect and change. Her research focuses on problems and affordances of digital life, particularly on media developments of digitisation, datafication and platformisation (i.e., data-driven and algorithmically steered platforms), and their cultural, social and political implications. Cinque leads a newly instituted cross-faculty research group, Critical Digital Infrastructures and Interfaces (CDII), and co-leads the Data Cultures strand of the cross-faculty Science and Society Network at Deakin University. Cinque publishes extensively in Q1 journals, has 8 books with research presented

in the sole-authored monographs *Changing Media Landscapes: Visual Networking* (Oxford University Press, 2015) and *Emerging Digital Media Ecologies* (Routledge, forthcoming). Co-edited/written works include *The Dark Social: Online Practices of Resistance, Motility and Power* (Routledge, 2023); *Materializing Digital Futures: Touch, Movement, Sound and Vision* (Bloomsbury, 2022); *Communication, Digital Media and Everyday Life* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

**Jodi McAlister** is Senior Lecturer in Writing, Literature and Culture. Her work focuses on popular fiction and culture, with a particular interest in the role that emotions play in popular storytelling, and the affordances of different genres, structures and media in facilitating emotional communication. Her research combines traditional literary study methods with sociological and more experimental approaches, seeking to understand not just texts but the conditions in which they are produced. She is the author of three monographs – *The Consummate Virgin: Female Virginity Loss and Love in Anglophone Popular Literatures* (Palgrave 2020), *New Adult Fiction* (Cambridge UP 2021) and *Publishing Romance Fiction in the Philippines* (co-authored, Cambridge UP 2023) – as well as numerous book chapters and articles in journals such as *Continuum*, *Sexualities*, *Porn Studies*, *Celebrity Studies*, *Sexuality and Culture*, *Creative Industries Journal* and *Media International Australia*. She is also a novelist, and her seventh novel will be published in January 2024.

## Racism and Nationalism in the Digital Era: The Digital Information Revolution and its Impact on Exclusionary Ideologies

**Amanuel Elias, Fethi Mansouri, Enqi Weng (Deakin)**

Social divisions based on race, ethnicity and national identity have influenced historical and contemporary global social relations. Today, such divisions are accentuated by the social transformations we are witnessing facilitated by the ubiquity of digital information technology. This digital revolution has significantly contributed to the recent resurgence of nationalism and populism which has created conditions for the rise of racialized discourse and expressions of racist views, often under the guise of free speech and liberal ideologies. It has been argued that the outburst of racist discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic was a manifestation of an environment of intensifying exclusionary nationalism. The pandemic's impact on social attitudes was arguably accentuated by nativist currents shaped by unprecedented digital connection. This paper examines critically how the technologically empowering web also transforms and, in many ways, reinforces tribal nationalism by facilitating the manifestations of racism and exclusionary nationalism within this digitally connected social world. It argues that while digital technology and its provision of unprecedented connectivity has empowered many millions, they have also become conduits for polarised discourse and the broadcasting hate, racism, and various forms of exclusionary sentiments. The resurgence of ongoing nationalism and xenophobic racism during the past decade is a clear example of how the digital world diffuses exclusionary sentiments that widen racialized cleavages. The paper also discusses possible trends in racial discourse and implications for social cohesion and social policy.

**Dr Amanuel Elias** is a Research Fellow at Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship & Globalisation, Deakin University. His research focuses on racism, anti-racism, ethnic inequities, and cultural diversity. Dr Elias received PhD in economics (2015) from Deakin University. His interdisciplinary research has measured the costs and prevalence of racial discrimination, and the intersecting inequities impacting minority and migrant groups in Australia and internationally. Dr Elias' work combines quantitative and qualitative methods to examine the prevalence of economic inequities, and its relationships with racism and multiple aspects of diversity. His PhD innovatively estimated the economic cost of racial discrimination in Australia, drawing on the human effects of racism and discrimination. In other collaborative works, Dr Elias conducted systematic reviews and meta-analysis on racism and intercultural dialogue, and produced an international index on intercultural dialogue, comparing intercultural relations across countries. His recent research analysed the patterns of resurgent nationalism and its effects on racism during the COVID-19 pandemic. Dr Elias' work has been published in leading international journals including *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *GeoForum*, *PLoS One*, *Social Indicators Research*, *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, *BMC Public Health*, *IZA Journal of Migration*, *Social Science Research*, and *Systematic Reviews*. Moreover, Dr Elias has recently co-authored a book entitled *Racism in Australia Today* (with Mansouri, and Paradies). His upcoming book (with Emerald Publishing, In Press) involves a comparative study of racism and anti-racism globally. Dr Elias has presented his research to a wide range of across several national and international academic conferences. Dr Elias is a member of the Economic Society of Australia, The Australian Sociological Association, and the Centre for Inclusive and Resilient Societies (CRIS).

**Dr Enqi Weng** is a sociologist with emerging expertise in religion, ethnic relations and decoloniality. She is a Research Fellow at the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation at Deakin University and has worked on the Australian Research Council Linkage and Discovery projects on 'Mapping social services in multicultural societies' and 'Religious diversity in Australia: Strategies to maintain social cohesion'. She completed her PhD from the School of Media and Communications at RMIT University in 2018 and is the author of *Media Perceptions of Religious Changes in Australia: Of Dominance and Diversity* (Routledge, 2020). She has developed skills in quantitative and qualitative methods in content and discourse analysis, semi-structured interviews and digital ethnography through her doctoral and postdoctoral work. Her research interests include: decolonising 'religion'; decolonising methodologies; race and religion; media and religious/social changes; cultural/religious diversity; religious literacy in journalism. She has taught media studies and sociology of religion units at Deakin University and RMIT University. She is Vice President of the Australian Association for the Study of Religion (AASR), Co-Convenor of the Religion Thematic Group at The Australian Sociological Association (TASA) and Reviews Editor for the *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture*. She has published in high impact journals such as *Culture and Religion*, *Continuum*, *Journal of International Students* and *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture*, and her expert opinion has been sought in mainstream media that include *The Conversation*, Radio National's *God Forbid* and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's *Religion and Ethics*.

**Alfred Deakin Professor Fethi Mansouri** (PhD, FASSA) holds a Deakin University research chair in migration and intercultural studies and is the founding Director of the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation (ADI). In 2013 he was awarded a UNESCO Chair in comparative research on 'Cultural Diversity and

Social Justice'. He is the Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Citizenship and Globalisation Studies*, editor of the *Journal of Intercultural Studies* (Routledge) and founding co-editor of the international journal of *Social Inclusion* (Cogitatio). Professor Mansouri is a global expert advisor to the United Nations (Alliance of Civilisations) on cultural diversity and intercultural relations and is a prominent scholar nationally and internationally. He was elected a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia (FASSA) in 2020. Professor Mansouri has won more than forty competitive grants (including ten ARC grants); published twenty scholarly books, ten major research monographs, more than one hundred refereed research articles and book chapters, and presented more than 180 invited conference papers and keynotes at national and international symposia. His scholarly books include: 'Islam and Political Violence: Muslim Diaspora and Radicalism in the West', (2007); 'Youth Identity and Migration: Culture, Values and Social Connectedness' (2009); 'Building bridges: Creating a culture of diversity' (2009); 'Australia and the Middle East: A Frontline Relationship' (2011, second edition); and 'Migration, Citizenship and Intercultural Relations: Looking Through the Lens of Social Inclusion' (2011); 'Muslims in the West and the Challenges of Belonging' (2012); 'The Arab Revolutions in Context: Civil Society and Democracy in a Changing Middle East' (2012); 'Global Perspectives on the Politics of Multiculturalism' (2014); 'The Multicultural Challenge' (2015); 'Women and Migration in the Global South' (2017); 'Interculturalism at the crossroads' (2017); and 'Contesting the Theological Foundations of Islam and Violent Extremism' (eds, 2019). His most recent books include: 'Racism in Australia Today' (2021), and the just released (25 September 2023) 'The Global Politics of Forced Migration: An Australian Perspective'. 'Professor Mansouri's 2004 book 'Lives in Limbo: Voices of Refugees under Temporary Protection' was short-listed for the 2004 Human Rights Medals and Awards.

## Internal and External Digital Information Operations: Impact on Democracy and Social Cohesion in Turkey

**Bulent Kenes (European Center for Populism Studies, Belgium)**

This book chapter delves into the complexities of digital information operations, both internal and external, and their significant impact on democracy and social cohesion in Turkey. By employing the concept of "Strategic Digital Information Operations" (SDIOs), it explores the intricate world of information manipulation in the digital age, examining the strategies, actors, and objectives involved. The SDIO framework provides a valuable lens for understanding digital manipulation's various forms, affecting both local and global contexts. Recently, Turkey has faced a surge of digital disinformation campaigns aimed at influencing elections, shaping public opinion, and deepening societal divides. These campaigns have eroded trust in institutions, fostered polarization, and disrupted democratic processes. In addition to these operations by domestic actors, Turkey has also become a battleground for external, international actors such as Russia that have engaged in digital information warfare. This chapter explores their methods, motivations, and impact on Turkey's political landscape and social fabric. Moreover, the chapter delves

into the repercussions of these digital information operations on social cohesion within Turkey. It investigates how the spread of disinformation and the erosion of trust have strained societal bonds, contributing to heightened tensions and divisions across various fault lines.

**Bulent Kenes** (Ph.D.) is an academic and a journalist who has over 25 years of professional experience. Beside of his academic studies he has managed multiple publications, both in Turkish and English. He has held top editorial positions at various media outlets such as Zaman daily, Turkish Daily News, and Anadolu news agency. Kenes was editor-in-chief of Bugün daily (2006) and founding editor-in-chief of Today's Zaman (2007-2016). Kenes was among the founders of the Stockholm Center for Freedom. He served as voluntary chief editor from 2017-2019. He is based in Stockholm, where he lives as an exiled Turkish journalist and academic. He is also among the founders of European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS). Kenes received his B.A. in international relations and political science from Bosphorus University; his M.A. from the Institute of Middle East Studies at Marmara University; and an MBA from now-closed Fatih University. He also received his Ph.D. from Marmara University's Institute of Middle East Studies



and wrote his dissertation on Iran's foreign policy after the 1979 revolution. Dr. Kenes lectured on international relations, the Middle East, political science, and media and communications at Fatih University. Kenes has been a regular columnist and opinion writer for many publications, including Turkish Daily News, Turkish Probe, Bugün, Zaman, Today's Zaman, the Guardian, and TR724. He's also served as a TV host and commentator/debater on political

shows, and published six books in Turkish and one book in English on Iran, Turkish politics, human rights, and Islam's image. He is currently researching the ubiquitous impact of rising populism and authoritarianism across the globe. Kenes, who is a member of the Swedish Union of Journalists (Journalistförbundet), Swedish Publishers' Club (Publicistklubben), can speak Turkish (native), English, and Swedish.

## Harnessing Civil Society to Combat Strategic Digital Information Operations - Case Study of Taiwan

**Lydia Khalil (Deakin, Lowy Institute)**

Taiwan has been the target of persistent information warfare campaigns from the CCP in its efforts to undermine Taiwan's social cohesion, democratic processes and elected government as well as to erode confidence in its international democratic allies, all in order to advance the military and geo strategic goal of reunification, and submission, to China. While China's strategic information operations are well studied, this chapter will focus on how Taiwan as a society has responded, particularly its successful and novel approaches of harnessing grass roots, civil society efforts, that stand in contrast with other nation states' top down, government led initiatives to combat adversarial strategic information operations. Taiwan has embraced the use of digital technology and incorporated a combination of deliberative and participatory mechanisms in its government policy making processes and in countering disinformation and information warfare operations through the leadership of its first digital minister Audrey Tang and the development of the vTaiwan platform, among other initiatives. While Taiwan is somewhat unique in that it is a relatively small and innovative democracy, with a highly engaged and tech literate citizenry, this chapter will highlight applicable lessons and approaches that can be considered across contexts.

**Lydia Khalil** is a Program Director for the Transnational Challenges at the Lowy Institute where she also directs the Digital Threats to Democracy Project. She is also a Senior Research Fellow at the Alfred Deakin Institute at Deakin University where she convenes the Addressing Violent Extremism and Radicalisation to Terrorism (AVERT) Research Network. Lydia has published widely in both popular and academic publications on her areas of expertise. She holds a BA in International Relations from Boston College and a Master's in International Security from Georgetown University. She is the author of the recent book *Rise of the Extreme Right: The New Global Extremism and the Threat to Democracy* (Penguin, 2022).



Gerda Henkel Foundation Funded Project (2022-2025):

# Smart Digital Technologies and the Future of Democracy in the Muslim World

Prof. Shahram Akbarzadeh, Prof. Ihsan Yılmaz, Dr. Galib Bashirov

Smart digital technologies have had a dual impact on global democracy. They've bolstered decentralized grassroots movements, enhancing political engagement and access while also posing risks through increased surveillance and data availability. This paradoxical influence is evident in the Muslim world, particularly in Iran, Turkey, Pakistan, and Egypt. The project, funded by the Gerda Henkel Foundation, has been investigating the impact of smart digital technologies on social and political processes in these countries.

A [workshop](#) organized by the project team in May 2023 brought together a group of scholars who work on broader regional contexts to discuss emerging technologies, digital activism, and digital authoritarianism, leading to a successful edited book application with the Edinburgh University Press. The Gerda Henkel project team presented their findings on the rise of digital authoritarianism in Pakistan and Turkey, and ongoing ideational battles over the cyberspace in Iran.

The project team's publications have so far discussed the rise of digital authoritarianism in Pakistan as a strategy to govern online and offline environments (<https://www.populismstudies.org/digital-authoritarianism-and-activism-for-digital-rights-in-pakistan>), the concept of "Strategic Digital Information Operations" as a framework to discuss all forms of digital manipulation at both domestic and international levels organized by either state or non-state actors (<https://www.populismstudies.org/comprehending-the-tactics-of-strategic-digital-disinformation-operations-sdios>), and the Turkish government's linking of Islamist values to state policies as a means of justifying its repressive control over digital technology (<https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/14/6/747>).

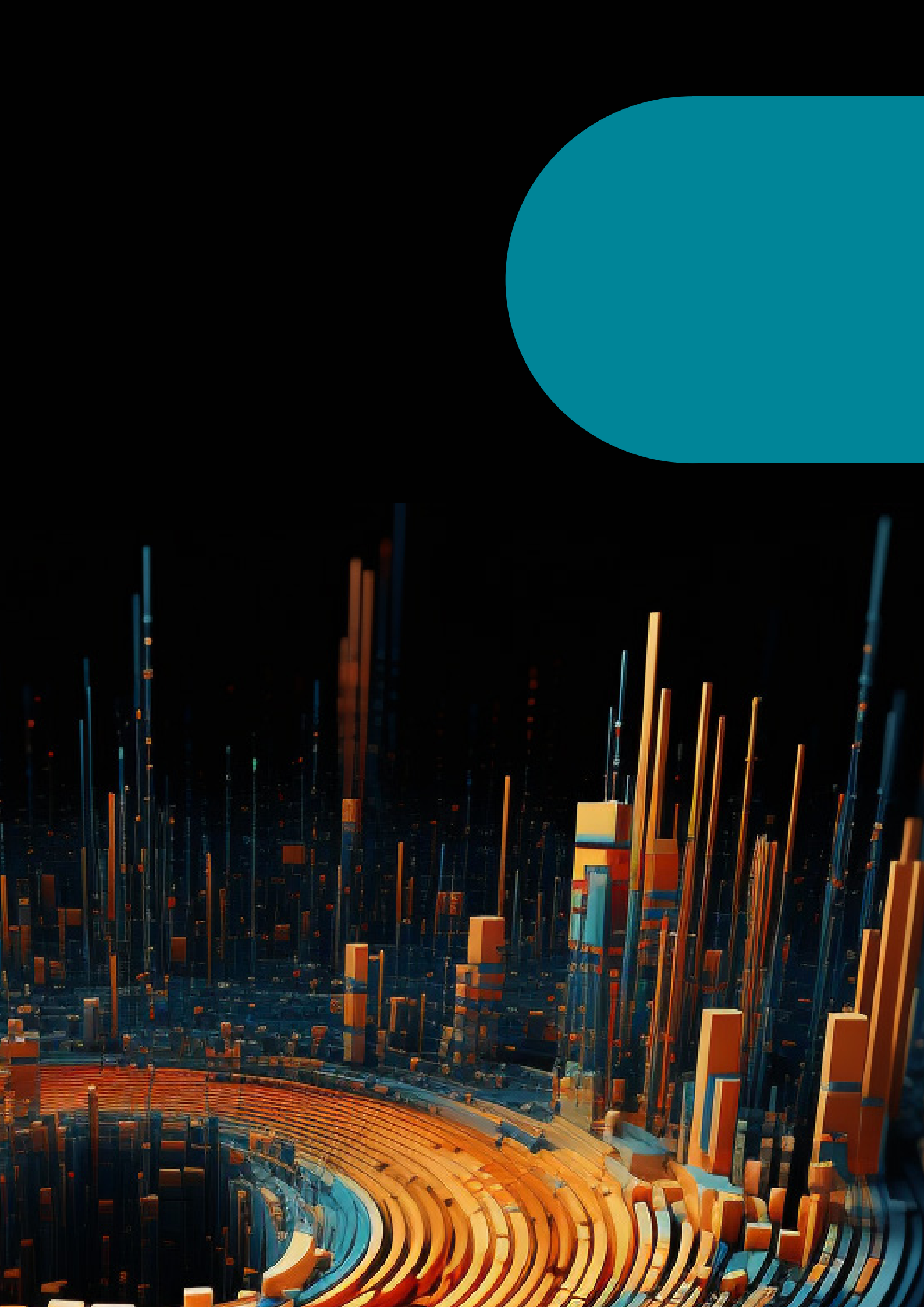
Ongoing work of the project examines the ways in which digital authoritarian practices diffuse across the Muslim world, the new internet governance regime in Pakistan, the deployment of fake Virtual Private Networks (VPN) by the Iranian government, public attitudes toward state surveillance in Muslim-majority countries, and the relationship between online political expression and democratic attitudes in the Arab world.

This second workshop of the project is held in hybrid format and brings leading scholars in the field of digital technologies and politics in Australia and Europe to discuss the methodologies employed by state and non-state actors in deploying strategic digital information operations.

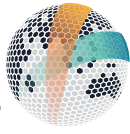
The Gerda Henkel project team will present their findings through 3 papers at the workshop, discussing the use of digital conspiracy theories in disinformation operations, the online demonization of the opposition, and the targeting of dissidents in transnational contexts.







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