

platform blues

the sad states of social media

a one-day conference **21.11.2024**
at the University of Canberra

Curated by Geert Lovink (Institute of Network Cultures, Amsterdam) and Denise Thwaites (Faculty of Arts and Design, University of Canberra)



***A free event. Registration is required.**

institute of
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Platform Blues – Conference at University of Canberra

November 21, 2024

Opening: 10:00 – 10:15am

Welcome – Geert Lovink, Julian Knowles and Denise Thwaites

Session 1: 10:15 – 11:15am

Hiding in and from the internet: Avoidance and Dissociation

Moderator: Nicole Curato

Ella Barclay – Visualising Messy Connectivity in Contemporary Art

This talk provides an overview of her current research, including her recent institutional solo exhibition *Unkempt Cognition* at Canberra Contemporary Art Space and her research as a 2024 fellow at ZK/U: The Centre of Art and Urbanistics, Berlin. Ella's work engages with thematics of agency and fatigue in a 21st Century connected landscape.

Caroline Fisher – Young People, Internet and News Avoidance

More than two-thirds of Australians actively avoid the mainstream news, higher than in many other countries. News avoidance is particularly high among Gen Z and Y, who have the lowest interest in mainstream news and feel the most 'worn out' by it. This sense of fatigue is strongly linked to the use of social media and feeling unable to avoid unwanted news in their feeds. Drawing on ten years of news consumption data and qualitative research, this presentation examines these news avoidance trends among young Australians in the context of an everchanging hybrid media landscape.

Morning break (15mins)

Session 2: 11:30 – 1:30pm

Volatile Spaces: Toxicity and Transformation

Moderator: Ashley van den Heuvel

Erin K. Stapleton – Catastrophic Loss in Computational Systems: Mass Accumulation

*My personal archive is on Instagram.
I rely on cloud computing for my externalised visual memory.
And at any moment, it could all be lost.
And that is completely beyond my control.*

The term ‘catastrophic loss’ describes total, *irretrievable* destruction. While it is a term generally used to describe environmental disasters, the mechanics of digital storage beckons for archival loss on a parallel scale. Here, I explore catastrophic loss as the tension between permanence and instability in digital systems and the constant threat of accumulative overwhelm, irretrievable glitches, absolute obsolescence they offer, while operating in response to the processes of material destructions that loom across our material and social worlds. Computational systems are designed for automation, smoothing difference and complexity into binary, hierarchical and comparative data categories. The storage of digital data operates through reduction of complexity and automated efficiencies, risking the complexities of the information it stores. Simultaneously, digital storage efficiencies encourage the mass production, dissemination and accumulation of data across social media platforms. An abundance of images, videos, sound, artefacts, the possibilities of access to

these overwhelm, mirroring and distracting from the material destructions that produced them.

David Nolan – A Fast-Moving Slow-Motion Car Crash: The 2023 Voice Referendum in Today’s Media Ecology

14 October 2023 was one of the bluest days in recent memory, taking its place among a roll call of dates of extreme settler-colonial violence in Australian history. This paper reflects on the dynamics of a media ecology that constituted both a structure and vehicle of that violence, positioning it as a moment of realism and disillusionment. We have lived through two decades in which resistant practices deploying the affordances of social media have offered crumbs of hope that platforms might offer an ‘innovative’ alternative space to contest and disrupt oppressive mediated politics. This paper reflects on findings relating to the communicative dynamics at play during the 2023 Referendum on an Indigenous Voice to Parliament to argue that this position is fundamentally flawed. Despite, and in some respects because of, the desire, celebration and performance of fresh online voices and interventions, the contemporary media ecology contributes to and constitutes a politics that remains and is increasingly – perhaps overwhelmingly – dank in nature.

Temple Uwalaka – Social Media Activism in Nigeria

Socio-political activism and its relationship with digital media diffusion are an ongoing subject of considerable debate among observers and scholars of social movement. This work discusses the research trajectory on the impact of networked activism. Using the Nigerian economic and socio-political arena as a case study, the paper investigates the contributions of social media in the implementation of contentious politics in Nigeria. It argues that social media platforms play significant roles in the success of socio-political protest movements in the country. The paper discusses how social media platforms give voice and visibility to Nigerians and how this prominence is eroding the power of the

political class, as well as creating alternative deliberative arenas. The paper demonstrates how this innovative use of technology has shaken the political nerve centre of Nigeria. Finally, reactions from the political elites about these changes are outlined.

Phoebe Quinn – Live Polis Experience: Tackling Academic Flying and Climate Change

This interactive session invites participants to experience Polis, a digital democracy platform that has been touted as a ‘pro-social’ alternative to conventional social media. Drawing from recent research, we’ll have a mini-conversation on a hot topic within universities: what to do about staff air travel emissions. Through this hands-on demo, we’ll experience the platform’s design features and critically examine Polis’ capacity to foster productive democratic discussions.

Lunch (1hr)

Session 3 : 2:30 – 4:30pm

Bittersweet Stories: Making Sense of Uncertainty and Chaos

Moderator: Geert Lovink

Sophie Dumaresqu – Inter-Species Connection to Find Joy and Love Among Platform Blues

What is in a postcard? Baby, I Just Want to Make You Smile is an ongoing series of recorded and live cinematic endurance performances. The performances consist of the artist (Sophie Dumaresqu) attempting to share a sunset with her handmade 100 kilo, 5 metres long mechanical shark (Baby) by pulling the shark up a hill. Frankie, the artists’ dog is equipped with their own camera recording and sharing in the performance with Dumaresqu. In this talk, the artist will discuss their experience in collaborating with

both humans and non-humans in creating the different iterations in which the work exists. The artist explores how the goofy and vulnerable nature of hybrid material and digital collaborative performance work can liberate the romantic from the Romantic with a capital R.

Catherine Page Jefferey – Collective Anxiety and Media Panics in an Age of Social and Digital Media

Collective concern about young people’s access to digital media technologies has increased significantly in recent years, culminating in widespread calls to ban social media completely for young people under a certain age both in Australia as well as overseas. These concerns are based on a range of purported harms including the impacts of social media on young people’s mental health, online bullying, exposure to pornography and violent content, algorithmic profiling, and online extremism. These calls have emerged against the backdrop of a long history of media panics about young people and digital media.

Tyne Sumner – TLDR: The Failure of the Internet Novel

What would happen if we read the internet like a novel? Or, what happens when novelists write about the internet? The rise of the so-called ‘internet novel’ genre suggests that there is something worth pausing at in the relation between the novel and contemporary online culture—its immediacy, its banality, its humour, its loneliness, and its fragmentation. But why would someone want to read about the dystopian hellscape that many of us now actively try to get away from? Is it possible to find leisure in the very thing that produces so much anxiety? Perhaps the proliferation of the internet novel can be explained by the innately masochistic drive in human nature. As Sylvia Plath, for instance, wrote: ‘I desire the things which will destroy me in the end.’ This paper begins by asking why several recent internet novels are so terrible. It ends with an attempt to be reasonable, and possibly even optimistic.

Mathieu O'Neil – Countering Platform Blues: Strategies against Disinformation, Toxicity and Polarisation

When people can no longer tell truth from fiction, we are in an epistemic crisis. For Haidder and Sundin this primarily stems from algorithmic curation by online platforms: information is increasingly *volatile* (the origins or status of fast-changing newsfeed content is uncertain), *fragmented* (complex knowledge is re-arranged in continuously shifting shapes), and *personalised* (access is individualised). Aggravating factors are hostile influence campaigns seeking to worsen social divisions. The crisis increases distrust towards the institutions of liberal democracy such as the news media, science, and representative politics. Alternative sources are on the rise. Health influencers have huge audiences; toxic masculinists are idolised by boys and young men. How can democratic education systems counter platform blues? In this talk will I outline three strategic avenues: against disinformation: instilling effective information processing and curating skills; against toxicity: reclaiming martial arts; against polarisation: fostering collaborative values.

Afternoon break (15 mins)

Session 4: 4:45 – 6:30pm

I got the Right to Sing the Blues

Moderator: Denise Thwaites

Melinda Rackam – The Tawdry Nostalgia for Past Forms

I didn't care about the legacy of -empyre- global media arts list founded in 2002 as part of my PhD in Virtual Worlds. Then, after 22 years of robust dialogues between many hundreds of guests and

thousands of members, books, in-person meet ups and exhibitions including Documenta 12, it went silent. A cybersecurity sweep of the servers at UNSW Art & Design had disappeared it and they weren't talking (to me). My simultaneous umbrage and tawdry nostalgia for the lost -empyre- has generated an internal debate on list death as an urgent loss to research culture necessitating reconstruction, or a prompt to forget it and move on?

Litia Roko – Performance

Questioning examples of institutional trolling as community-building praxis or fleeting antidote in the face of a culture of 24/7 networked dejection, this lecture-performance will pick at the ways that museums relate to platforms. In an all-consuming landscape of doom-scrolling, fragmentation, and the general misery of the bind in which we find ourselves, why do institutions continue to approach platforms and the internet as a tool rather than a culture, and how can we intervene?

Geert Lovink – From Sad by Design to Platform Brutalism

Brutalism is the title of Achille Mbembe's 2020 book. Known as the 1950s rough-concrete architecture style, Mbembe presents the concept as a 'thought image' that can be seen as a not-so elegant synonym for the economic laws associated with the term capitalism in which the emphasis shifts from profit to violence. Mbembe explains: "Brutalism is the name given to this gigantic process of eviction and evacuation as well as to the draining of vessels and emptying of organic substances." This results in naturalizing social war, a development many see unfolding since Covid and the wars in Ukraine and Gaza. In this lecture I will map my own trajectory, from Zoom fatigue and the use of memes as copium to the weaponization of social media today. Once we're stuck on the platform long enough, will the mood inevitably turn violent?

Speaker Biographies

Ella Barclay is a Senior Lecturer at ANU's School of Art and Design on unceded Nggunawal and Ngambri Country, Australia. Her written, curatorial, and contemporary art practices engage with network aesthetics and the politics of technological development. Recent exhibitions include *Unkempt Cognition*, Canberra Contemporary Art Space (2024); *Openhaus*, ZK/U, Berlin (2024); *No Easy Answers*, MAMA, Albury (2023); *The Ramsay Art Prize*, Art Gallery of South Australia (2021); *Stacks and Sleeves: a PostHuman Landscape*, Gallery Lane Cove, Sydney (2019); *Experimenta Make Sense: International Triennial of Media Art* (2017-2020); *Curious and Curiouser*, Bathurst Regional Art Gallery (2018-19); *Soft Centre*, Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre, Western Sydney (2018); *Light Geist*, Fremantle Art Centre (2016-17); *Bodies Go Wrong*, Orgy Park, NY (2016); *That Which Cannot Not Be*, Vox Populi, Philadelphia (2016); *Almost, Instant 42*, Taipei (2016); *I Had to Do It*, UTS Art, Sydney (2016); and *Elemental Phenomena*, Griffith University Art Museum, Brisbane (2015). Her work resides in multiple government, institutional, corporate, and private collections and she has received several commissions, residencies, scholarships, and awards.

Nicole Curato is a Fillpina sociologist best known for her academic work on deliberative democracy, and her media work providing academic commentary on politics in the Philippines. She took her bachelor's degree of Sociology at the university of the Philippines Diliman and her Master's and Doctoral Degrees in Sociology in the UK. Curato is the recipient of Discovery Early Career Research Award Fellowship at the Centre for Deliberative Democracy and Global Governance at the University of Canberra. The award is funded by the Australian Research Council.

Sophie Dumaresq is an interdisciplinary artist who brings perspectives of absurdity, queerness and humour to creative, critical robotics, automata and mechanics. Working across photography, video installation, sculpture and performance, her work explores what it is to try and communicate in a universe filled with beings whose brains, existence and or bodies are built inherently differently to that of your own. Her artistic practice explores what it means to share joy, love and laughter in our relationships with both other humans and non-humans.

Caroline Fisher is an Associate Professor of Communication, and core member of the News and Media Research Centre at in the Faculty of Arts and Design. Caroline is a co-author of the annual Digital News Report: Australia and CI on two ARC Discovery Projects: 'The rise of mistrust: Digital platforms and trust in news media'; 'Valuing News: Aligning Individual, Institutional and Social Perspectives'. Prior to academia Caroline worked in journalism and politics.

Ashley van den Heuvel teaches in the Heritage and Indigenous Studies program at the University of Canberra. She is completing a PhD at UC called 'Flight across Country' under an ARC Linkage project called Heritage of the Air. Her research interests link visual culture, technology, connections to Country and storying. Her research interests link visual culture, technology, connections to Country and storying. These interests are linked to her cross-cultural experiences as a Walbanja woman from the South Coast of NSW.

Geert Lovink is a Dutch media theorist, internet critic and activist. His recent books: *Organization after Social Media* (with Ned Rossiter, 2018), *Sad by Design* (2019), *Stuck on the Platform* (2022) and *Extinction Internet* (2022). He studied political science at the University of Amsterdam (UvA) and received his PhD from the University of Melbourne.

In 2003 he was postdoc at the University of Queensland. In 2004 he founded the Institute of Network Cultures at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (HvA). In 2022 he was appointed Professor of Art and Network Cultures at the University of Amsterdam (UvA), art history department.

David Nolan is Associate Professor in the News and Media Research Centre at the University of Canberra. His work focuses on journalism studies and contemporary mediated politics, particularly in relation to the politics of race, ethnicity and belonging. He has led major research projects and produced a wide range of international research outputs related to these themes, and in 2021-2022 was President of the Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand Communication Association (AANZCA).

Mathieu O'Neil is Professor of Communication in the University of Canberra's Faculty of Arts and Design and Honorary Associate Professor of Sociology at the Australian National University. His research interests lie at the intersection of political communication and sociology. Mathieu co-founded the Australian National University's Virtual Observatory for the Study of Online networks.

Catherine Page Jefferey is a lecturer and researcher in the Discipline of Media and Communication at the University of Sydney. Catherine's current research addresses digital media and families, with a particular focus on parenting in the digital age. She is currently a Chief Investigator on an ARC funded Discovery Project exploring digital sexual literacy amongst Australian adults.

Phoebe Quinn is a Research Fellow and PhD candidate at the University of Melbourne, and associate of the Centre for Deliberative Democracy and Global Governance at the University of Canberra. Her work focuses on community wellbeing in the context of climate change and disasters. Through her doctoral research, she is exploring the role of innovations in digital democracy in addressing these challenges, conducting action research using the platform Polis.

Melinda Rackham is adjunct research professor at UniSA Creative in Adelaide. She weaves tales of intimacy and identity in networked and virtual worlds when the net was young. Founder of -empyre-, an online platform for other voices in media arts, their practice expanded to curate, direct, mentor and produce. Melinda's latest book CoUNTess: Spoiling Illusions since 2008, co-authored with Elvis Richardson, probes the persistence of gender asymmetry in Australia's artworld.

Litia Roko is an artist interested in the politics of art, the politics of technology, and the politics of art + technology. She lives and works on unceded Ngunawal land.

Erin K Stapleton is a Lecturer in Communication and Media at the University of Canberra. They research in the intersections between gender, colonialism and queer theory, digital and media cultures, critical theory, and continental philosophy.

Their book *The Intoxication of Destruction in Theory, Culture and Media: A Philosophy of Expenditure After Georges Bataille* was published by Amsterdam University Press in 2022.

Tyne Sumner is an Australian Research Council DECRA Fellow in English & Digital Humanities at the Australian National University. Her primary research areas are C20th and C21st literature, surveillance studies, and digital humanities. She also has expertise in poetry and poetics, critical infrastructure studies, and digital culture. Her current project is [SurveilLit](#), which examines the representation of new and emerging forms of surveillance in contemporary global literature. She has published widely on topics ranging from facial recognition technology and surveillance software to Australian poetry and cultural databases.

She is President of the Australasian Association for Digital Humanities (aaDH) and is on the international steering committee of the [Art, AI & Digital Ethics](#) research collective.

Denise Thwaites is a curator, writer and researcher specialising in contemporary cultural economies, who is currently Senior Lecturer in Interdisciplinary Arts at the University of Canberra. Denise was awarded her PhD in Aesthetics through The University of New South Wales (Australia) and l'Université Paris 8, Vincennes – Saint-Denis (France), before joining UNSW iCinema Research Centre as a Postdoctoral Fellow. She has worked in the contemporary arts sector at Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Australia Council for the Arts and the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, and has curated independent projects for cultural organisations across Australia and internationally. Her research harnesses poetic, experimental and collaborative modes of working to destabilise political, cultural and economic imaginaries.

Temple Uwalaka is a Research Fellow at the Centre for Deliberative Democracy and Global Governance and a Research Associate at the News and Media Research Center. He also lectures at the School of Arts and Communication, Faculty of Arts and Design, University of Canberra, Australia. His research interests include digital activism, digital journalism, brand activism, social marketing campaigns and the use of online and mobile media to influence political change.