LSE
Media and Communications
PhD Symposium
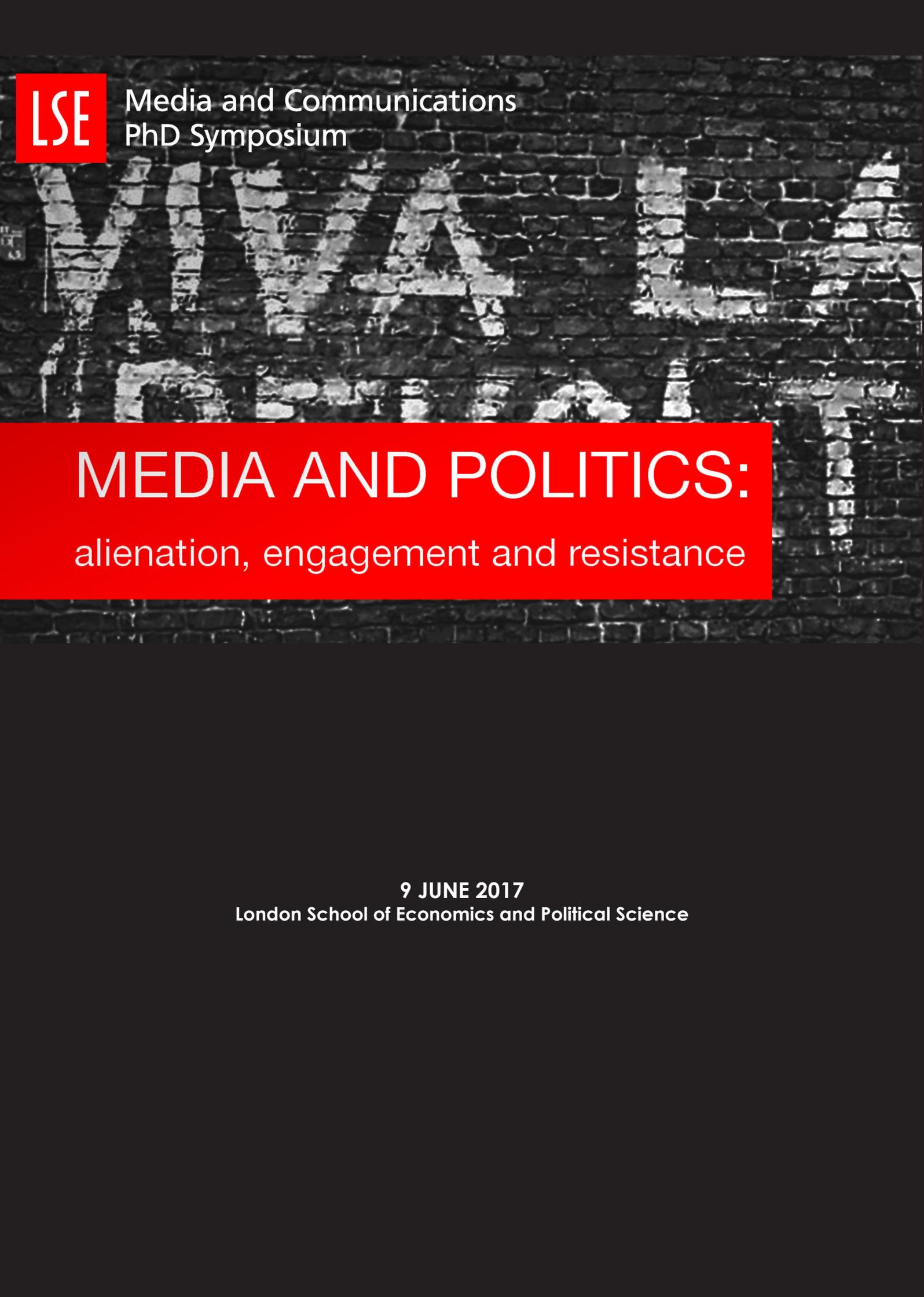
MEDIA AND POLITICS:

alienation, engagement and resistance

9 JUNE 2017
London School of Economics and Political Science

09h30	Welcome
10h15	**TRUTH AND TRUST** Kamila Fernandes & Gianfranco Polizzi
11h15	**TEA & COFFEE**
11h30	**PLATFORMS** Samuel Kininmonth, Jakob Bæk Kristensen & Niall Docherty
13h00	**LUNCH**
14h00	**ACTIVISM & PROTEST** Aliaksandr Herasimenka & Nada Mubarak
15h00	**TEA & COFFEE**
15h30	**MARGINAL IDENTITIES** Qi Li & Amena Amer
16h30	Finish

LSE Media and Communications

OPENING SPEAKERS

Prof. Sonia Livingstone, LSE

Sonia Livingstone OBE is Professor of Social Psychology in the Department of Media and Communications at LSE. She teaches master's courses in media and communications theory, methods, and audiences and supervises doctoral students researching questions of audiences, publics and youth in the changing digital media landscape. She is author or editor of nineteen books and many academic articles and chapters. She has been visiting professor at the Universities of Bergen, Copenhagen, Harvard, Illinois, Milan, Oslo, Paris II, and Stockholm, and is on the editorial board of several leading journals. She is a fellow of the British Psychological Society, the Royal Society for the Arts, and fellow and past President of the International Communication Association, ICA. Sonia has received honorary doctorates from the University of Montreal and the Erasmus University of Rotterdam. She was awarded the title of Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in 2014 'for services to children and child internet safety.

Dr Bart Cammaerts, LSE

Dr Bart Cammaerts is now associate professor in the Media and Communications Department of the LSE and director of the MSc in Media and Communications. He is the former chair of the Communication and Democracy Section of the European Communication and Research Association - ECREA and former vice-chair of the Communication, Technology & Policy-section of the International Association for Media and Communication Research - IAMCR. His current research focuses on the relationship between media, communication and resistance with particular emphasis on media strategies of activists, media representations of protest, alternative counter-cultures and broader issues relating to power, participation and public-ness. He publishes widely and his most recent books include: Youth Participation in Democratic Life: Stories of Hope and Disillusion (co-authored with Michael Bruter, Shakuntala Banaji, Sarah Harrison and Nick Anstead, Palgrave MacMillan, 2015) and Mediation and Protest Movements (co-edited with Alice Matoni and Patrick McCurdy, Intellect, 2013).

The mainstreaming of radical rightwing populism in the Low Countries: What is to be done?

In both the Netherlands and Belgium, radical right political actors have managed to mainstream their divisive and racist discourse through processes of othering – constructing 'in' and 'out' groups through a type of populism that articulates 'the people' in an exclusionary manner. Key to this is the identification of a set of ideological enemies and fear mongering. The mainstreaming of the radical rightwing populist discourse and ideas occurred through a politics of provocation, which leads to reactions of moral outrage from the so-called 'liberal elite', which is subsequently positioned as as a politically correct witch-hunt. The media and mediation plays a central and in some cases complicit role in this successful war of position. A second way in which the radical rightwing discourse is mainstreamed is through the appropriation of parts of that discourse and populist strategies by traditional rightwing parties.

All this prompts a pressing and difficult question for public intellectuals and democratic journalists alike; namely how to 'deal with' and ultimately how to combat this fundamentally anti-democratic discourse and the politics of provocation which accompanies it.

TRUTH AND TRUST

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Journalism is in the middle of a deep crisis, partly caused by the context of high fragmentation of media production and consumption (Dahlgren, 1996), which creates this confused and uncertain post-truth mediatic scenario. Hence it is important to discuss the journalistic practice and its values. One of the aspects of this practice that must be problematized is the false opposition between journalism and political engagement, imposed by the precepts dictated by journalistic objectivity (Forde, 2011; Hall, 1978). From a bibliographical review and a theoretical reflection, I propose in this article to discuss how weak this opposition is and to think of the meanings that can be produced by a journalism that comes close with an activist practice, as numerous groups of alternative journalism (Atton & Hamilton, 2008) have done today. If, on the one hand, values regarded as essential to the practice of mainstream and professional journalism are abandoned, such as neutrality, balance and detachment, on the contrary, involvement with certain social causes can stimulate or inspire effective citizen practices, through values such as transparency, passion and commitment to the search for effective social change (Harcup, 2015; Papacharissi, 2015). However, such politically engaged journalism can suffer limitations, imposed even by the difficulty of seeing contradictions or imperfections in the movements it supports. In this discussion, examples of practices of alternative journalism in Brazil will be used. Among the conclusions, we note the importance of stimulating an increasingly pluralistic and agonistic (Mouffe, 2013) media ecosystem, including traditional journalistic practices, but also politically engaged ones, as a means of broadening relevant public discussions to society.

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Critical digital media literacy and political engagement

This presentation proposal deals with Western democracy, political engagement, digital media and, from a citizen/digital media user perspective, critical media literacy. After unpacking political economy constraints inherent to Western liberal democracy, the presentation which is here proposed will address what has been referred to, in the United Kingdom and the West, as a crisis of the political communication system. Western democracies have been undermined by the inability of institutions and traditional media to represent citizens' voices and listen to their concerns. Consequently, citizens' democratic participation remains affected by citizens' high levels of distrust, apathy and lack of interest in public life as well as low levels of political efficacy. Under these premises, the presentation here proposed will look at the role played by digital media, which, particularly since the advent of Web 2.0, have been championed for their potential to redress the democratic participation deficit and allow citizens to participate in both institutional and non-institutional politics. While they have been advocated for facilitating, for instance, deliberative democracy, as well engagement among marginalised groups and diversified political content, it will be contended that digital media remain constrained, among several issues, by elitism, a commodified public sphere and government surveillance. Further limitations concern content fragmentation, polarisation and, as the post-truth narrative epitomises, questionable reliability. By looking at political participation from a user perspective, it will be argued that critical digital media literacy – the ability to engage critically with digital media in relation to issues of power – is essential to citizens' informed, reflective engagement and political empowerment and, at the macro level, to reinvigorating democracy. For this to happen, it will be proposed that critical media literacy needs to be reconceptualised in a way that incorporates users' critical understandings of digital media's affordances and limitations as technologies embedded within wider power structures.

PLATFORMS

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Benevolent Dictatorships? Moderation as a tool of platform governance on Reddit.

This paper examines the use of moderation by social media platforms as a means of governing the discourse they host. Through a case study of Reddit, I show how platforms do not simply host communication neutrally but rather intervene in opaque ways for their own ends. Moderation is a key part of this governance — the act of governing beyond the bounds of the nation-state or government that includes a range of organisations, groups and individuals. Platforms use moderators to regulate the public discourse of millions of people everyday. I argue that Reddit's architecture deliberately enables different standards of discourse on the platform by shifting responsibility of governance to moderators. Because moderators act within separate subreddits, debates over standards of discourse are dispersed and siloed across the platform. By giving amateur moderators almost complete autonomy within a particular sphere of action, Reddit complicates responsibility for the discourse it hosts. I illustrate this system by comparing Reddit moderators to benevolent dictators — a term used by open-source software developers to describe individuals who control open source projects. The only way to undermine the control of benevolent dictators is to create a "fork" and split the

community. Reddit's moderation functions in the same way — moderators operate unopposed and users' only means of protest is to create new communities — fragmenting the debate instead of fostering consensus. This paper contributes to the growing research field of platform politics and platform vernacular that seeks to re-politicise the business and methods of hosting public speech. Understanding moderation is important to better interrogating the sometimes convoluted and opaque ways by which platforms govern a growing amount of the public and private communication.

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Tracing Patterns of Triviality, Agonism, Echo Chamber Formation and Deliberation in Public Commentary on Facebook – A Big Data Enhanced Analytical Frame

This paper presents a Big Data enhanced analytical frame for sorting through the massive quantities of user commentary around news media on Facebook in order to shed light on contemporary issues about online political engagement in relation to a healthy democracy. News consumption on social media is increasing along with the presence of politicians and political movements. News postings on Facebook generate commentary that has the potential for increasing the civic engagement and political knowledge of individual users. The present study seeks to elicit some of the general trends by asking whether communication forming around news posting can be characterized as 1) trivial 2) agonistic 3) a political echo chamber 4) deliberation.

The main contribution of this study is the development and validation of an analytical framework, which is implemented as a computational method for finding general trends in news posting commentary on Facebook. Contrary to many previous studies, the algorithms developed for pattern detection do not rely on the content of comments, but instead on the past political behavior of individual users, which makes it more flexible across different countries. The results show how the framework can be used to distill a large quantity of digital traces in order to show how different types of commentary emerge around different content or certain media organizations. The analytical framework is thought to provide a first step for research that seeks to further our understanding of political engagement on social media in a large-scale quantitative perspective. By employing a Big Data methodology, the method can be used for future studies in a way that is flexible, dynamic and highly scalable since individual samples do not need to be collected.

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Facebook Beyond the Filter Bubble: Algorithms, EdgeRank, and Political Subjectivity

My paper considers the algorithm that orders Facebook's News Feed, EdgeRank, as a necessary site of investigation if we are to understand the ways in which Facebook intervenes in and shapes the social, cultural, and political contexts of its use. Moving beyond current framings that prioritize its propensity to exacerbate the 'filter bubble' effect, I demonstrate that the esoteric calculations that determine what is and isn't seen on each user's News Feed contain certain cultural assumptions that promote certain modes of behaviour at the expense of others. The 'filter bubble' argument states that in its effort to only show people those stories that 'matter most to them', Facebook inadvertently undermines the very foundations of any good democracy: an informed electorate with access to objective information and alternative opinions at times of political decision. I suggest that this argument not only relies upon unstable definitions of what Facebook actually is, but more significantly fails to take into account the historical specificity and precise technical arrangement of the platform itself. Developing a software studies approach that recognizes the notion that software, objects and technology introduce and ratify codes of conduct in the world through our use of and engagement with them, my paper addresses the limitations of the 'filter bubble' argument and begins with the EdgeRank algorithm in of itself as productive of a certain cultural and epistemological bias that influences the behaviour of its users. My paper questions the key calculations of 'freshness,' 'popularity' and 'technological novelty' that determine how far up the News Feed each object is placed within a discussion of neoliberal modes of valuation and digitalized capitalism. I propose that the ordering practices of EdgeRank ought to be subject to scrutiny beyond its perceived production of good or bad democratic citizens, opening up new methodological and conceptual avenues of discussion that illuminate the emerging links between digital media and politics.

ACTIVISM & PROTEST

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Authoritarian political communication and digital activism in Trump era

Since the 2016 presidential elections in the US, some scholars started using term 'authoritarianism' in relation to political communication in countries that until recently were considered to be liberal democracies. For instance, Fuchs (2017) discusses the rise of authoritarian populists around the world in connection with Donald Trump's victory. Fuchs also demonstrates how Trump's communication on social media platforms reflects various elements of authoritarian populism. The proliferation of populism and Trumpism suggests that we should think about how to understand political communication built around authoritarian political systems.

My research explores authoritarian systems from the perspective of political communication on platforms like Facebook or Instagram. It asks questions like whether unrestricted digital political communication is possible in authoritarian political environments. What is the role of architecture, ownership, policy and norms of digital platforms in everyday practices of political actors? Whether bonding and identity-building processes are different in digital environments of non-democracies?

I explore these questions focusing on experience and practices of digital activists in Russia and Belarus. Employing participant observation, feature analysis, and interviews, the paper outlines some results of my doctoral research project. The results suggest that political activists negotiate digital communication spaces of authoritarian countries in accordance with their cultural and political premises. Therefore, they shape technological and cultural components of digital platforms and political context around them.

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Diversity of narratives and perspectives forms in its very nature a counter power to the dominant narrative and threatens its singular truth. Hence the rise of social media activism in Saudi Arabia is a critical one. This study argues that social media in Saudi Arabia have created space for the diversity in opinions and cultural practices to flourish and acquire receptive power. Aided by a post– September 11 political turn to reform religious ideology and eliminate extremism, and a – later on – Arab Spring revolutionary atmosphere, social media have shown a shift in expression, changing the equation of power from Islamists/liberals into traditionalists/reformers. That is, those who seek reform and change at the level of political, ideological or social structure, and those who remain close to the orthodox narrative of the religious-state. Social media platforms, perhaps for the first time in Saudi Arabia, have put people – identified by pictures and mini-biographies – into dialogue, allowing a public sphere to exist between the privileged and the under-privileged, clergy-men and non-believers, officials and the public, women and men. A phenomenon which is arguably challenging the elitist, patriarchal as well as religiously fundamentalist representation of Saudi culture and society.

The study, hence, questions how independent voices appearing in social media forms contest and challenge - to varying degrees - the dominant narrative of the Kingdom, prevailing power structure and ideology, and acquiring significant receptive power. The study analyses narratives of dissent in four main terrains: Liberty, religion, gender and art , through focusing on modes of resistance and control. An number of 37 in-depth as well as semi-structured interviews are thoroughly examined, highlighting different approaches to activism by those who have navigated their ways using social media as a tool for expression. Including (former)academics, lawyers, economists, feminists as well as filmmakers, artists and comedians.

Together Saudi activists and artists unfold a holistic narrative of diversity, change and reform—one that ruptures the discursive construction of the nation's fundamental narrative, break the imposed monolithic nature over culture and society, and shift structures of power and ideology

MARGINAL IDENTITIES

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Visualizing Queer Activisms in Cyberspace

The Internet has revolutionised popular expression worldwide, enabling mass population to participate in online contention via unprecedented ways, including "pictivism (a portmanteau of "picture" and "activism)", an activism where netizens show support for a movement by overlaying profile pictures with particular filters or badges on social media. After tracking the genealogy of image in the field where Media Studies intersects with Social Movement Studies, my research critiques that the current research is Anglo-American centered, real image based, and activism lopsided. The study of digital images in cyberspace remains as yet a terra incognita in academia.

Engaging in both a de-Westernisation perspective and critical queer theory, my research examines two online queer pictivisms comparatively: "Facebook Rainbow Campaign" sparked by the US Supreme Court decision on same-sex marriage and the "Big Love Gay Rights Movement" happened on the Weibo, the Chinese equivalent of Twitter. At the outset, my research develops the poaching theory proposed by Michel de Certeau and re-theorized by Henry Jenkins, and take digital images as an entry point to reveal how digital image as a symbolic arena of meaning (re-)production where shapes and is shaped by queerness in pictivism. Second, collecting media coverage from both traditional and new media provides a close reading of two pictivisms in a comparative lens. Then a visual analysis is applied to interrogate the communication mechanism of digital images collected via digital visual ethnography in both cases. In the end, this research proposes a term pictorial poaching to illustrate how digital images are differently manipulated and respectively explored to counter social gender/sex binarism in both Anglo-American and Chinese contexts. By juxtaposing a Chinese pictivism with a West counterpart, my research theorises pictivism and takes the digital image as a site not only for meaning-making but also for problematizing communication theory beyond the West-China dichotomy.

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Constructing the threat of the Other: representations of white British Muslims across British mainstream and British Muslim newspapers

Represented as the religion of the 'Other', Islam in Britain and its followers are frequently depicted and positioned as outsiders, foreign and a threat, both religiously and culturally, to British society. In this way British Muslims are racialised as non-white, propagating the image of the dangerous brown body. White British Muslims pose a challenge to this by simultaneously being a part of the in-group (white British) and the out-group (Muslim), raising questions about 1) where and how they are positioned, and 2) why they are positioned in this way. By drawing on tools from Critical Discourse Analysis to develop Social Representations Theory on a micro-analytic level, this paper examines the role of power and constructions of threat in relation to media coverage of white British Muslims in six national and two British Muslim newspapers. It draws out and compares how discourses about white British Muslims are used to create, perpetuate and challenge the 'hegemonisation' of social representations in both majority and minority press outlets, and examines to what extent these discourses overlap and/or diverge. This has some important insights for social psychology, particularly with regards to how mainstream media uses power to exaggerate the differences between the constructed categories of 'them' and 'us'. While contestation does occur, particularly in the shape of discourses produced by minority-led newspaper, the 'truths' so created, perpetuated and legitimised by mainstream media can be difficult to erase, highlighting the need to be aware of the possible implications and consequences this can have on the nature of our society and on intergroup interaction.

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