

Networked (In)Justice: An Introduction to the #AoIR17 Special Issue

by Alison Harvey and Koen Leurs

For the last ten years, *Information, Communication, and Society* has published a special issue including some highlights from the annual Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) conference. This, the 11th special issue, continues in the tradition of sharing rigorous, interdisciplinary, critical research from the event. #AoIR2017 was themed on “Networked Publics” and took place from October 18-21 in Estonia in the Baltic region of Northern Europe. The conference was hosted by the program chair Andra Siibak, Professor of Media Studies at the University of Tartu, and facilitated by the Institute of Social Studies and the Centre for the Information Society. Held at the Dorpat Convention Center in picturesque downtown Tartu, the conference drew together attendees from a broad range of national, disciplinary, and methodological backgrounds, and we present here a selection of papers reflecting this broadness and diversity of internet research.

338 participants from 29 countries participated in #AoIR2017, and the programme included the presentation of 129 papers, alongside 18 pre-constituted panels, 4 fishbowl sessions, 10 roundtables, an experimental session, 9 pre-conference workshops and a doctoral colloquium. The pre-conferences focused on topics ranging from visual social media research to digital methods to academic freedom to sessions dedicated to the experiences of early career researchers.

Furthermore, the association also engaged with the local situated context, hosting a preconference on e-Estonia. *Wired* magazine describes Estonia as the “most advanced digital society in the world” (Hammersley, 2017). This networked republic is praised for its digital innovation - Skype is for example an Estonian startup. In e-Estonia, a favourable business climate is established as most government services can be engaged digitally. This is a distinct form of nation branding and reputation management, aiming to communicate Estonia’s “global competitiveness” (Tammpuu & Masso, 2018, p. 7). The Estonian identity card, a mandatory identification card - which comes with its own email address employed by the government as its official communication channel - is celebrated for making life easier in many ways, which includes public transport, accessing restricted areas, checking-out books and printing at the library as well as banking. Estonia was the first country in the world enabling citizens to cast their vote online for parliamentary elections, which could help prevent exclusion of less mobile people from civic participation. Additionally the identity card allows parents to communicate the name of their newborn digitally, allowing them to avoid the trip to the local government office, which is especially convenient in the heart of winter when temperatures can drop below -30 celcius. Linnar Viik, an architect of the system, sees the initiative as an internet of the people as “governments are realizing they are losing the digital identities of their citizens to American companies”. The Estonian ID system creates a “parallel ecosystem”, a “public alternative” to the privately-owned networked publics of Google, Amazon, Facebook and Apple (Keen, 2018, pp. 87-91). However, the commoditization of the state, and its digital push for efficiency and identification, also raised controversy. Before users can leave their opinions on commentary sections of newspapers including the daily *Eesti Päevaleht*, they have to authenticate their identities using their ID cards. This measure prevents anomized trolling but also raises concerns

about privacy. Scholars have also demonstrated the card can be emulated, and therefore it does not ensure the identity of the card holder. These paradoxical imaginaries of Estonia's "virtual residency" (Tamppuu & Masso, 2018) illustrate how Tartu offered a prime location for the internet researchers community to gather and scrutinize the workings and implications of networked publics locally and across the world.

The thematic of "Networked Publics" as articulated in the conference Call for Proposals is one that opens up conversation about the plurality of potential publics as well as dialogue about the ideological weight of the concept of the public sphere. Encouraging participants to consider the at times conflicting visions of what might be entailed by networked publics, the call also emphasized the political significance of these questions, seeking contributions on activism, counter-publics, inequalities in networked publics, and submissions exploring empowerment and, implicitly, disempowerment in our digitally-mediated publics:

Networked publics play an important role in shaping the political, social, economic, cultural but also moral, ethical and value-laden landscapes of contemporary life. In spite of – or perhaps because of – the emergence of digital technologies and platforms, the concept of a single, overarching public sphere has remained not only an unreachable ideal, but also, for many, an uncomfortable ideology. Scholars have been crafting many different, sometimes conflicting conceptualisations of 'publics' – from affective publics through personal publics to algorithmic publics, and from ad hoc publics through issue publics to platform publics (and beyond) – while activists have been crafting publics by building new digital spaces for expression, engagement, and protest.

This special issue is pleased to share the emphasis on the diverging and contradictory consequences of the formation of networked publics. We have chosen to focus in particular on studies of publics that scrutinize how they may exacerbate injustices or work towards social justice. The seven articles included in this special issue were first peer reviewed by members of the AoIR community. Building from these reviews, we together with the conference programme chair made a selection of provocative papers to be consider for the special issue. As an additional selection protocol, we explicitly sought to reflect the diversity of the internet researchers community, and as such we selected authors to accommodate scholars in various career phases, geographical focus areas, both student and non-student papers, paying additional attention to axes of power including gender, race, and nationality. Twelve authors or author teams were invited to submit full papers, and after a double-blind peer-review process and several rounds of revisions, we are happy to present 7 articles of exceptional internet research. Each critical, contextually-sensitive analysis considers the constraints as well as opportunities afforded by networked publics for equitable and fair communication and social exchange.

The keynotes and plenary panel presented at #AoIR2017 also engaged with challenges to networked justice in Tartu. Andrew Chadwick, Professor of Political Communication in the Centre for Research in Communication and Culture and the Department of Social Sciences at Loughborough University, tackled the role of the media logics, both old and new, in a hybrid media system that Donald Trump mobilized to success in the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign. In addition to providing a nuanced analysis of how mediated networked publics are shaped by social and organizational norms as well as technologies, Chadwick discussed three timely

features of networked publics shaping politics - fake news, bots, and hacking - as well as resistance to these challenges to democratic processes such as the Women's March (Chadwick, 2017).

Marju Lauristin, Professor of Social Communication at the Institute of Social Studies at the University of Tartu, drew on her experiences within Estonian politics and as a Member of European Parliament to interrogate the question "Will algorithms kill deliberative democracy?". Noting the threats to deliberative democratic communications online posed by fake news, political memes, and proliferating stereotypes, Lauristin turned to the potential of crowdsourced new platforms supporting wider participation and the discussion of expert knowledge. The principles of effective public networks - freedom of choice, safety, privacy - can only be met with greater resources and buy-in across international civil society and democratic organizations in coordination with activists (Lauristin, 2017).

The four distinguished female speakers of the plenary panel - chaired by past AoIR president Jennifer Stromer-Galley - subverted the male-centred focus of tech scholarship and did not shy away from the difficult questions shaping networked publics either. In their discussion on "Social media and digital activism – #powerful or #meaningless?", Adi Kunstman, Kaarina Nikunen, Eugenia Siapera, and Cindy Tekobbe challenged simplistic judgements of the potential for activism in the networked publics on social media. In a plea to move beyond the superficial fetishization of technologies, Adi Kunstman prompted the audience to be attentive about the many people for whom activism is a question of survival and not a matter of choice. In a moving account of working with fellow members of her indigenous community, Cindy Tekobbe

highlighted the urgency of taking seriously the voice and perspectives of communities in order to avoid exacerbating hierarchies and exploitation. In her intervention on the affectivity of migration debates, Kaarina Nikunen spoke of the urgency and challenges of media solidarity. Eugenia Siapera took an infrastructural perspective and addressed the concentration of material and symbolic power by monopolistic U.S. corporations controlling the Internet. In her call to action, she addressed why we need to claim back power. Their critical and nuanced approaches to discussing the affordances and exigencies of action in and through these technologically-mediated publics, as well as those of the keynote speakers, is one that is carried through the articles in this special issue.

The approach to networked (in)justice here is informed by public sphere theories and technology and social media studies. The ideal-typical notion of the public sphere, as famously put forward by Jürgen Habermas, revolves around a singular, overarching public where members of society could deliberate and decide about matters of public concern. Habermas' theory is informed by the 18th century bourgeoisie in Western-Europe who met in Britain's coffee houses, France's salons and Germany's *Tischgesellschaften* and formed a public: "between the two spheres, as it were, stands the domain of private persons who have come together to form a public and who, as citizens of the state, mediate the state with the needs of bourgeois society" (2002, p. 95). Nancy Fraser argues that when transposed to contemporary stratified societies, a singular overarching public sphere would necessarily exclude a variety of subjects. In response, marginalized groups mobilize and form alternative publics in response to the dominant public sphere, in "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter

discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (Fraser 1990, p. 67).

There is a long tradition of media and internet research addressing forms of mediation, democracy and community contestation through the prism of the public sphere. Among others, Douglas Kellner (1998), Lincoln Dahlberg (2001) and Roza Tsagarousianou (1996) deploy public sphere theory in their studies of communication flows. More recently, Christian Fuchs argued that a public intervention is necessary to stop the “colonisation of the social media lifeworld” (p. 64) and to make the internet commons-based (2014). Media, internet and social media scholars have drawn on danah boyd (2011), the originator of the idea that the take-up of particular social networking site affordances such as “persistence”, “replicability”, “scalability”, and “searchability” could sustain networked publics. This focus underpinned subsequent works on “hashtag publics” (Rambukkana, 2015), “affective publics” (Papacharissi, 2015) and “selfie-citizenship” (Kunstman, 2017), to name a few. The articles in this special issue in their own ways engage with Taina Bucher and Anne Helmond’s (2018) call for nuance in discussions of the complexities of social media affordances, considering the interplay of technical features such as interfaces and algorithms, design decisions, user perceptions, and contexts of engagement.

Scholars have demonstrated the vital importance of bringing to the foreground the specifically geographically, gendered, classed and racialized subjects and communities entailed in negotiating increasingly digitally mediatized power hierarchies. In his work on African-Americans use of Twitter, André Brock argues #BlackTwitter is both a “venue for civic activism (or public sphere)” as well as an amplifier of “deficit-based Black cultural stereotypes” (2012, p.

529). Jac sm Kee (2018) describes how transnational feminist activists have had a long struggle to set 'online gender-based violence' on the agenda of international human rights organizations. This is changing gradually, but activists have collaboratively published a joint document on "The feminist principles of the internet" (www.feministinternet.org) containing visions of "the kind of internet we would like to have" (Kee, 2018, p. 2). Roopika Risam argues selfies made by refugees during the so-called European refugee crisis may counter "the imposition of disciplining gazes" through which they are seen as problems, terrorists, or uncivil (2018, p. 67). However their digital traces are also used for the purpose of surveillance and control and most commonly mainstream media use photos of refugees taking selfies to frame them as undeserving, bogus asylum seekers. Olu Jenzen notes LGBTQ youth mobilize digital cultural strategies to navigate between their own "counter publics" and mainstream gender binary SNS's (2017, p. 1626). Focusing on #gamergate, Tamara Shepherd and colleagues highlight how online hate groups and far-right movements mobilize libertarian opportunities offered by digital platforms to engage in misogyny and racism, forming "less progressive 'counter publics'" (2015). By focusing on the ambiguities and contradictions of networked publics and (in)justice, we would also like to foreground the normative focus of the critical scrutiny of publics as a way to assess and improve the means and experiences of interaction and participation between the state, organizations, activists, and citizens. In the words of Nancy Fraser "the knowledge society is generating a new grammar of political claims-making" (2001, p. 2) and in this context, social justice must be understood at operating at three interrelated levels, on the level of "redistribution" in the economic domain, "recognition" in the socio-cultural domain and "representation" in the political-symbolic domain (2001).

In alignment with this body of scholarship, we propose a focus on networked (in)justice drawing attention to:

- How mainstream scholarly conceptualizations of publics and platforms prioritize some networked publics and marginalize others
- How networked publics are shaped as an assemblage of hardware, design, algorithms, discourse, bodies, collectives, and affect
- How networked publics reflect and shape intersecting power relations of geography, gender, sexuality, race and sexuality among others
- How networked publics are distinctively local, but simultaneously shaped by transnational and global dynamics

The articles in this special issue provide insights to these questions, through the development of approaches including “affective storytelling” and “routinising political and rights-based engagement” in feminist networked publics (Lokot, pp. Xx [in this special issue](#)); studying the connections between “platform vulnerabilities” and “the vulnerabilities of women of color” (Lawson, pp. Xx [in this special issue](#)); addressing student discourse as “meme-based publics” (Ask & Abidin, pp. Xx [in this special issue](#)); navigating transnational migration and sexuality in “mobile networked publics” (Wang & Cassidy, pp. Xx [in this special issue](#)); “La revolución digital” in Cuba as emerging from city dwellers in Havana and their “site-specific connectivity, mobility, sociability, and space” (Grandinetti and Eszenyi, pp. Xx [in this special issue](#)); “localized appropriation practices” of refugees in Austria (Kaufmann, pp. Xx [in this special issue](#)); and “leadership” in mediatized civic organizing (Bakardjieva, Felt & Dumitrica, pp. Xx in this special issue).

In “#IAmNotAfraidToSayIt: Stories of sexual violence as everyday political speech on Facebook”, Tetyana Lokot analyzes how affective networked publics on Facebook can support feminist activism, through the power of narrative. Considering a case study of an Ukrainian online campaign focused on gender-based violence, Lokot demonstrates the potency of affect-expressions of fear, shame, fault- as well as the power of collective discourse- in bringing the body and gendered power dynamics into discussions of rights and justice. Through a consideration of 3500 Facebook posts and in particular of the affordances of social media supporting this campaign and helping to combat a culture of silencing, she provides nuance to a conversation about feminist activism that has been henceforth largely Western- and English-language focused.

This focus on online action continues in Caitlin Lawson’s article “Platform vulnerabilities: Harassment and misogyny in the digital attack on Leslie Jones”, which contributes nuanced analysis of harassment that circulates across multiple platforms, focusing on the intersection of race and gender in the attack on *Ghostbusters* (2016) star Leslie Jones. Her analysis of this issue public demonstrates the ways in which discourse here aims to ‘patch’ the double vulnerabilities faced by marginalized people on platforms claiming to offer neutral digital spaces for interaction. While a range of commentators flooded the harassment with supportive discourse, Lawson notes that these discursive patches do not replace structural change to better address the vulnerability of women of colour in their online participation and presence.

Turning to visual and humor-based online connections, Kristine Ask and Crystal Abidin explore the use of memes among students to express and circulate feelings of anxiety in “My life is a mess: Self-deprecating relatability and collective identities in the memification of student issues”. These memes act as form of affective social glue in student publics, but not every kind of conversation is allowable within these humorous contexts. While expressions range from the light-hearted to the serious, from self-deprecation to self-blame, a normative frame is placed around ‘the student’ and ‘the student experience’ within these publics, limiting inclusion of, for instance, mature and international students as well as discussions of mental health and structural problems enabling omnipresent stressors. Therefore while these publics make visible the low wellbeing of many students, they do not create a politicized context for coordinated action to confront the challenges this population faces.

Shifting to a focus on local contexts, the structural features shaping mobile media use in Cuba, political, economic, historical, as well as social, are the starting point of “Mobile media use in Cuba” by Justin Grandinetti and Marie Eszenyi. In this analysis, local, everyday practices in light of these constraints are foregrounded, highlighting how mobile media become static in their use due to infrastructural and political limits on pervasive connectivity and the ways in which hard controls on sharing shape sociability in online and offline social networks. The focus on urban daily connectivity and digital sharing practices in Cuba provides an insight glimpse into the negotiated and dynamic character of local networked publics, highlighting again the importance of considering context and activity in the Global South when we theorize access, online sociality, and mobility.

Our 5th paper, “Gay men’s digital cultures beyond Gaydar and Grindr: LINE use in the gay Chinese diaspora of Australia” by Wilfred Wang and Elija Cassidy, provides another exploration of networked publics beyond the familiar Western sites and populations that predominate in Internet studies, considering the mediating and remediating role of LINE in gay dating culture in Australia by Chinese migrants. While not a dating app nor specifically targeted at migrants nor LGBTQ users, they found in their study that this communication app played a significant intermediating role in the lives of their participants. By considering this digital intermediary in a range of processes and an ecosystem of social media use specific to this group, the authors highlight the necessity of transnational approaches to understanding the role of networking publics in everyday life.

Katja Kaufmann’s article, “Navigating a new life: Syrian refugees and their smartphones in Austria”, follows this lead and engages with the relationship between mobile devices and migration, though her study focuses on refugees living in Europe. Her qualitative research - which includes the innovative mobile media method of having day-long WhatsApp chats with informants - confronts the negative portrayals of forced migrants using sophisticated technologies such as smartphones, demonstrating the ways in which their apps and locative services provide important means for participants to not only connect with distant family but also to integrate into their new homes. This grounded analysis of the use of networked smartphones provides another instance of the ways that networked publics and their impact on justice are riven with context factors we need to account for, across online platforms, technological features, and location.

Finally, in “The Mediatization of Leadership: Grassroots Digital Facilitators as Organic Intellectuals, Sociometric Stars and Caretakers”, Maria Bakardjieva, Mylynn Felt, and Delia Dumitrica confront the seductive concept that mobilization online arises in a flat hierarchy without leaders. Through an analysis of three Canadian case studies of civic activism, they demonstrate that leadership is enacted through three, at times overlapping, types of practice-intellectual, social, and caring. They take a mediatization approach to understand these activities and approaches, providing a nuanced perspective on the contributing features of the media networks through which action and organizing occur, demonstrating that while leadership is not always identified as such (and can be difficult to trace due to plurality, anonymity, and relative degrees of performativity), there are still agents catalyzing movements within our networked publics requiring attention when examining action against injustices.

As this indicates, four dynamics form the connective thread in this special issue. Firstly, affect and marginalization in networked publics, and at times their intersections, are chief entry-points to approach justice and injustice. Feeling arises as a key dimension of (in)justice, from shame and guilt to solidarity and love. Secondly, location-specific analysis also characterizes the papers here, considering non-Western networked publics in Ukraine, China, and Cuba, and questions of justice in the Global South to complement a wide and growing bodies of scholarship on, in turn, networked feminist activism, queer digital culture, activist publics, and mobile media use. Thirdly, the special issue features experiences of mobility, migration, and diaspora with voluntary and forced migrants including Syrian refugees in Austria, urban dwellers in Havana who keep in touch with family in North America and elsewhere and Chinese LGBT people who navigate socio-cultural norms in Australia and the diaspora. The quest for social justice among

these groups of “connected migrants” is visible both in their “encapsulating” transnational practices with family and friends in the diaspora and “cosmopolitanizing” efforts in connecting with people in their new settings (Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2018). Fourthly, the papers included draw on a range of empirical data: from in-depth critiques to large-scale analyses, the special issue demonstrates that networked (in)justice benefits from multi-perspectival qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods research. With this special issue, we aim to broaden the conversation about networked publics to include consideration of these dynamics and their relationship to justice on a global level.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the AoIR executive committee for inviting us to publish this special issue. It was a great and inspiring journey for us to see arguments develop from initial conference submission to presentation in October 2017 to final printed manuscript four months later in February 2018. A special thanks to the authors and reviewers for working with us, particularly given the short time frame. Thank you Michelle K. Gardner, AoIR Association Coordinator, for your input and thanks also to Sarah Shrive-Morrison, Information, Communication & Society Pre-Production Manager for keeping us on track. #AoIR2017 was financially supported by Enterprise Estonia, the city of Tartu, the University of Tartu and the Estonian Research Council.

Koen Leurs discloses receipt of the following financial support for the authorship of this introduction and guest-editing of this special issue: the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) Veni grant “Young Connected Migrants. Comparing Digital Practices of

Young Asylum Seekers and Expatriates in The Netherlands,” project reference 275-45-007 (2016–2019).

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