

Digital Politics, Digital Histories, Digital Futures

*New Approaches for Historicising,
Politicising and Imagining the Digital*



Edited by

Adi Kuntsman and Liu Xin

DIGITAL ACTIVISM AND SOCIETY

DIGITAL POLITICS, DIGITAL
HISTORIES, DIGITAL FUTURES

This book offers a much needed holistic and interdisciplinary perspective on digital politics. Adi Kuntsman and Liu Xin stage an engaging conversation between leading and emerging scholars, who examine the history, political economy, and materiality of digital politics. Crucially, they do so from different geo-political, disciplinary, and conceptual angles, which generates vital new insights. And, as icing on the cake, the book offers two experimental research toolkits to explore the histories and social-technical imaginaries of digital politics. In sum, Digital Politics, Digital Histories, Digital Futures is a creative and thought-provoking contribution.

Thomas Poell, Professor of Data, Culture & Institutions,
University of Amsterdam

Combining theoretical reflections and empirical diversity, this collection gathers interdisciplinary conversations about how the digital and the political are reconfiguring one another with implications for social movements, global warfare, infrastructural governance, citizen rights, and the future of archives.

Entangling the socio-cultural and the environmental with the digital, leading scholars and dynamic researchers open up the field of digital politics to the political economy of disinformation, critiques of development discourses and digital divides, and materialities of dirty data. The volume presents insights curated in experimental multi-dimensional and multi-authored forms – interviews, maps, toolkits, and essays – which will inspire researchers and teachers of social media and digital technologies, and set a new benchmark for future collaborative knowledge production.

This volume not only offers a powerful argument for historicizing digital research but also provides innovative methodologies and alternative imaginaries to understand digital histories and futures.

Rahul Mukherjee, Associate Professor of Television and New Media,
University of Pennsylvania and author of *Radiant Infrastructures*

DIGITAL ACTIVISM AND SOCIETY: POLITICS, ECONOMY AND CULTURE IN NETWORK COMMUNICATION

The *Digital Activism and Society: Politics, Economy and Culture in Network Communication* series focuses on the political use of digital everyday-networked media by corporations, governments, international organizations (Digital Politics), as well as civil society actors, NGOs, activists, social movements and dissidents (Digital Activism) attempting to recruit, organise and fund their operations, through information communication technologies.

The series publishes books on theories and empirical case studies of digital politics and activism in the specific context of communication networks. Topics covered by the series include, but are not limited to:

- the different theoretical and analytical approaches of political communication in digital networks;
- studies of socio-political media movements and activism (and ‘hacktivism’);
- transformations of older topics such as inequality, gender, class, power, identity and group belonging;
- strengths and vulnerabilities of social networks.

Series Editor

Dr Athina Karatzogianni

About the Series Editor

Dr Athina Karatzogianni is an Associate Professor at the University of Leicester, UK. Her research focuses on the intersections between digital media theory and political economy, in order to study the use of digital technologies by new sociopolitical formations.

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Politicising and Imagining the Digital

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CONTENTS

<i>List of Contributors</i>	ix
Introduction: Crafting New Approaches for Historising, Politicising and Imagining the Digital <i>Adi Kuntsman and Liu Xin</i>	1
Part I: Theories, Concepts, Explorations	
1. Digital Politics: Defining, Exploring and Challenging the Field <i>Athina Karatzogianni and Jonathan Ong, interviewed by Adi Kuntsman and Liu Xin</i>	11
2. Social Media, the Archives of Tomorrow <i>Nermin Elsherif</i>	25
3. Activism and the Anti-Vaccination Movement <i>Howard Grice</i>	39
4. The Scattered Nature or Sovereign Surveillance: On Internet Models in the Context of Tomorrow <i>Kris Kaleta</i>	57
5. A Post-Developmental Critique of Digital Development and Digital Capitalism <i>Emeka Joseph Nwankwo</i>	71
6. Dirty, Toxic, Dumped: Waste as Data Metaphor <i>Laura Savolainen</i>	89
Part II: Methodologies, Pedagogies, Imaginaries	
7. Historicising Digital Research: From the Histories of the Digital to Histories Written Through the Digital <i>Nermin Elsherif</i>	107

8. Sociotechnical Imaginaries as an Analytical Tool for Examining Digital Histories and Digital Futures <i>Liu Xin</i>	121
9. Digitalised Home as Shell/Membrane <i>Nermin Elsherif, Kris Kaleta and Laura Savolainen</i>	131
10. A Story About the Futures of Digital Storytelling <i>Pierre Chadelle, Tatiana Klepikova and Kerry Anne Maxwell</i>	135
11. Layers of Digital Governance: Governing the Self, Platforms and Engineering <i>Kirsikka Grön, Hannah Guy and David Mee</i>	139
<i>Index</i>	149

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INTRODUCTION: CRAFTING NEW APPROACHES FOR HISTORISING, POLITICISING AND IMAGINING THE DIGITAL

Adi Kuntsman and Liu Xin

DIGITAL POLITICS, DIGITAL HISTORIES, DIGITAL FUTURES

The role of digital technologies such as social media platforms, algorithms and the artificial intelligence (AI) in national and international politics should not be underestimated and continues to grow and evolve. In the last decade alone, global politics were completely transformed by the rise of data mining by social media platforms, fake news and misinformation, cyberwarfare, internet shutdowns, biometric surveillance, and governmental decision-making led by the AI. At the same time, we are seeing a surge in politicised use of everyday digital communication tools such as social media platforms, apps and smartphones, by ordinary people in citizen engagement, mass protest and everyday resistance. And yet, digital politics as a field is rarely explored holistically and interdisciplinary, beyond a narrow focus on digital activism, or cybersecurity and electronic warfare, or internet governance. For example, *Handbook of Digital Politics* (Coleman et al., 2015) discusses digital politics as collective action, political debates and journalism. *Digital Cultural Politics: From Policy to Practice* (Valtysson, 2020) focuses on the cultural side of digital politics, such as communication, archives and user practices. Interestingly, the two ‘sides’ of digital politics rarely intersect and are rarely examined together, which is precisely what this book is trying to do.

One of the ways in which we achieve this is to create a conversation space where digital politics as an area can be explored and where new pedagogies for this field can be crafted. We began this conversation during a highly successful online Summer School which we had organised and led in 2021 – and the conversation continues on the pages of this collection. Following the Summer

School, this collection was put together by junior and experienced scholars to explore the topic of digital politics and to collectively create new conceptual approaches, methodologies, and ethics as well as new pedagogies and practices of knowledge production. In combining the more traditional format of chapter contribution, and the more traditional model of individual authorship, with multi-dimensional, multi-author contributions that span across visual analysis, creative practice and theoretical modelling, we thus explore not only *what* digital politics is but also *how* to study, imagine and teach digital politics. In doing so, we offer this book as a resource for researchers, teachers and students – first and foremost, in the field of digital politics, and more broadly, in the subject of digital technologies, media and society.

The question of *how* to study digital politics is particularly urgent, since there is currently only a handful of publications focussing on digital politics and methods: notably, *Handbook of Digital Politics* specifically addresses methods, but is limited to only three themes – visualities, content analysis and big data. Another notable contribution to this emerging area is *A Research Agenda for Digital Politics* (Dutton, 2020), where digital politics is discussed as a complex field with issues of ethics and rights, platform power and governance, and more. Our collection takes this task further, firstly, by suggesting that we need a range of traditional as well as innovative, collaborative and creative methodologies, such as map-making, story-writing and collaborative knowledge creation. Secondly, our way to push further the agenda around digital politics scholarship is by taking the perspective of histories *and* futures. Rather than merely addressing digital histories or digital historical research (see Dougherty & Nawrotzki, 2013; Fridlun et al., 2020), we call to historicise social research on digital politics and culture, thinking about the contemporary moment of digital politics from historical perspectives.

At the same time, we argue that it is important to develop a future-oriented approach within digital politics. Rather than assuming that the future *is* digital, or that future politics will be unquestionably digital, we ask *what kind* of digitalities is involved in the processes of imagining and making our futures? Inspired by recent publications such as *Horizon Scanner: The Role of Informational Technologies in the Future of Civil Society* (Asmolov, 2021) and *Socio-Technical Futures Shaping the Present: Empirical Examples and Analytical Challenges* (Lösch et al., 2019), we situate, and in so doing re-configure, the methodological framework of socio-technical imaginaries in the context of digital politics, instead of simply and narrowly focussing on practices of technological and political decision-making. Furthermore, this collection puts forward multiple, contested and competing future imaginaries.

Instead of focussing simply on the impact of imaginaries of the future on the present, our contributions – especially those in Part III of the book – call into question the linear and progressive temporality by asking about the duration of socio-technical imaginaries. That is, how do these imaginaries endure and take hold? What kind of digitality will hold our futures, and what kind might destroy it? Finally, contributions in our book offer analysis of the embodied and affective dimensions of digital politics, and provide examples of how to re-imagine digital futures through multi-sensory and trans-genre story telling.

Addressing multiple gaps in how the digital and the political are conceptualised together, this collection opens up a conversation about digital politics to a range of disciplines. We bring together several established areas of research, such as internet and society; and more specifically, topics such as AI and everyday life, digital memory, social media and fake news, digital governance, digital infrastructures and more under a new conceptual umbrella that links theory, epistemology and methodology. The new field conceived here is that of Digital Politics. It is understood broadly to concern not only the questions of internet governance, online activism or democratic participation. The book asks, what is digital politics? When and how is the digital political? How are ‘big’ and ‘small’ political events shaped in digital environments? How does the digital re-configure the political? How has the use of digital tools by political players changed over time? How do citizens understand, experience and feel about digital politics?

THEORIES, METHODOLOGIES, PEDAGOGIES

Part I of the book, titled ‘Theories, concepts, explorations’, focusses on defining and exploring the field of Digital Politics conceptually. Chapter 1, ‘Digital Politics: Defining, Exploring and Challenging the Field’, opens with a conversation between two leading scholars of digital politics – Athina Karatzogianni and Jonathan Ong – whose work is incredibly influential in scholarship on social movements; digital and infrastructural warfare; global conflicts; and violence and mediation. Karatzogianni’s and Ong’s writing resonates with much of the conceptual and empirical work that is at the heart of this book; their work inspired us before we even considered the Summer School and this publication. Placing their scholarship as part of the conversation on digital politics as a field, we also aim to challenge the static nature of academic writing and the authoritative practice of disciplinary canon. Thus, instead of merely citing or summarising their work, we have put together a

chapter that is based on a curated conversation. In preparation, we invited Karatzogianni and Ong to reflect on each other's and their own scholarship and join us in a Zoom conversation, which was recorded and edited afterwards by the four of us. The conversation focused on the following key themes: the history of digital politics as a scholarly area; recent methodological debates and trends in this field; current developments, the political economy and the affective dimension of information warfare; and finally, the materiality of digital politics which includes but is not limited to questions of infrastructure and labour. In shaping the conversation this way, the chapter simultaneously offers a number of conceptual insights *and* develops a practice of collective knowledge production, where the question of 'what is digital politics' emerges in a conversation between several scholars, whose work resonates with, and enriches each other.

The following chapters in this section of the book explore these themes from a range of perspectives, geo-political locations, and disciplinary and conceptual angles. Each chapter, in its way, touches on both histories and futures of the current digital political moments. Chapter 2, 'Social Media, the Archives of Tomorrow', by Nermin Elsherif, brings to the table key questions of past and future, memory and forgetting, preservation and erasure, as these take shape in social media environments. Elsherif's analysis of Facebook as a platform that is involved in, and is redefining, archival futures of tomorrow takes the reader through the figure of the archivist, the notion of a forged account and the hierarchy of credibility. The chapter shifts powerfully and eloquently from the personal to the political and from the individual to the national – Facebook archiving of future history goes beyond technological practicalities and even beyond platform powers. Digital archives, Elsherif reminds us, are 'subject to forgery, looting, and erasure' (p. 34) just as traditional archives are; however, unlike traditional archives they have two masters – the user and the corporation – thus potentially challenging notions of power, memory and futurity itself.

Tackling questions of reactionary online activities as a form of 'activism', Howard Grice's Chapter 3, 'Activism and the Anti-Vaccination Movement' challenges us to think about the usefulness and the limits of 'activism' when applied to reactionary political agendas. Grice's chapter discusses how the 'Anti-Vax' movement, which has a longer history, has gained a particular visibility since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic by using digital technologies to promote its agenda. Grice's discussion focusses on one, particularly interesting tool of misinformation and propaganda – the so-called 'predatory' journals which use dubious publishing tactics and spread misinformation, masquerading as legitimate sources of high-quality research, scientific

knowledge and expertise. The chapter places its discussion of the anti-vaccination narratives in the broader context of misinformation landscapes, reactionary online activism and the complexity of appropriation and tactical mimicry.

Kris Kaleta's Chapter 4, 'The Scattered Nature or Sovereign Surveillance: On Internet Models in the Context of Tomorrow' takes us to another dimension of digital politics – the question of internet regulation and surveillance, and the role of states in controlling internet infrastructures and communication flows. Kaleta's chapter details the history of internet regulation and power dynamics, looking at both governmental and private interferences, in order to turn to what he describes as 'the internet of tomorrow'. Taking an individualistic, liberal approach to internet regulation, the chapter raises a number of important questions regarding dangers and benefits of regulating the internet centrally, or using a mode of governance that relies on dispersed networks. One of the most insightful questions raised by Kaleta's chapter is the role of *both* individuals and states as either free agents that act as nodes in dispersed networks of communication and regulation or as actors of power and control.

Continuing the questions of power and control, Joseph Emeka Nwankwo's Chapter 5, 'A Post-Developmental Critique of Digital Development and Digital Capitalism' brings the discussion of digital politics to a crucial examination through the lens of colonialism and digital imperialism. Critiquing 'digital development' as a conceptual framework Nwankwo dissects the idea of development by looking at the power structures of capitalism, linguistic domination and the constantly evolving forms of neo-colonialism in the supposedly 'post-colonial' order. In other words, rather than using development as a framework for solutions, such as bridging the digital divide, developing the economy, and of course, centring digital technologies as the main solution to under-development, the chapter powerfully conceptualises development as an integral part and a tool of neo-colonialism, of which digital technologies are a key component.

Exploring digital technologies as both material infrastructures and as powerful metaphoric frameworks continues in Chapter 6, 'Dirty, Toxic, Dumped: Waste as Data Metaphor', by Laura Savolainen. Moving from data as something that is manipulated in misinformation activities or capitalised on in the data economy, Savolainen's chapter challenges current theorisations of data as 'effortlessly producing value or insight'. Instead, she traces a range of metaphors which explore data as disturbing, surplus, disruptive, dirty and even toxic. Savolainen's chapter takes us, skilfully and poetically, through many discussions of data that needs to be handled, cleaned and managed, and

asks what happens when there is too much data and it seem to be getting out of control. Moving through a number of environmental metaphors used with regard to data – mostly in contexts and settings that show little to no commitment to the environment – the chapter ends with a powerful intervention, which has impact on the entire field of digital politics. Savolainen asks that we consider the materiality of data – such as the footprint created by data centres and cloud services – and how it intersects with the meanings given to it. Such a consideration is crucial for imagining digital futures and their material tolls through the lens of planetary survival.

While chapters in Part I of the book draw on individual projects and explore various empirical and theoretical issues, Part II of the book, titled ‘Methodologies, pedagogies, imaginaries’, offers exploratory research toolkits, created and authored together by the participants of the Summer School’s Masterclasses, and curated by the Masterclass convenors. Chapter 7, ‘Historicising Digital Research: From the Histories of the Digital to Histories Written Through the Digital’, presents the first toolkit, dedicated to exploring digital politics historically, by looking at a number of theoretical, methodological and ethical dilemmas. Curated by Nermin Elsherif, the chapter sets up conceptual, methodological and ethical parameters for thinking about digital politics historically. The chapter begins with an insightful question – What does it mean to historicise a field that is still new and rapidly unfolding? – and invites the reader to consider the importance of historicising digital research through the intersecting lens of the socio-political, the technical and the material. The chapter then details the pedagogy of the Masterclass which Elsherif had led, where the participants were invited to imagine their own research on digital politics in a historical sense, and then to look at their current research from the perspective of the future.

While learning to move the historical and temporal point of view is one key principle of Elsherif’s pedagogy, the others are visualisation and mapping as a practice of ‘thinking together’. The chapter thus continues to describe map-making as a methodological and pedagogical tool – a description illustrated by the map made collectively by the Masterclass participants. Created using Padlet, the map is presented as an interactive tool of knowledge production and learning: spread over two pages (or a large webpage), the map documents complex relations between various ideas that emerged during the Masterclass. The chapter concludes by zooming in on a series of vignettes located on some of the map’s nodes, ‘Digital memory in the age of the cloud’ by Laura A. Savolainen; ‘Dealing with deleted data/dealing with the erased’ by Hannah Guy; ‘Historicizing the Body of Data’ by Liu Xin; ‘Environmental harms and vulnerabilities of digital memories’ by Adi Kunstman; ‘Relational

infrastructures, relational histories’ by Kirsikka Grön and ‘Chaotic Or Not, Narrative Matters’ by Kris Kaleta. Together, the vignettes lay out a complex story of digital politics that is simultaneously future-oriented and deeply historical, always already in the past, while always thinking about yet another future possibility.

Chapter 8, ‘Sociotechnical Imaginaries as an Analytical Tool for Examining Digital Histories and Digital Futures’ by Liu Xin, presents socio-technical imaginaries as an analytical tool for researching the digital. The chapter offers tools to critically reimagine the digital, which necessitates rethinking how knowledge about the digital is produced. While there is much work on the methods, politics and ethics of analysing digital *data*, less attention is paid to the pedagogical practices around engaging with the digital more broadly. If the foreclosure of imaginaries and the recursive regeneration of the present are some of the main challenges faced in digital research, it is all the more important to consider pedagogical practice as a site of knowledge production in which the specific epistemic and temporal modalities of the digital are thought, and in being thought through, reimaged. To do so, the chapter draws on Liu Xin’s Masterclass and invites the readers to engage with questions such as: How to examine and create sociotechnical imaginaries? Why is it important for digital politics? And why now? These questions provide a broader view of the digital by embedding it in questions of the socio-technical, all the while locating it in the now, that is the specific context in which the questions of the digital emerge, and in so doing asking about its relevance and implications. Pedagogically, the simultaneous zooming in and out movement that these questions perform affords participants a different point of departure and orientation around the problem of the digital. In many ways, they function as prompts that encourage participants to seek alternative ways of reimaging digital practices.

Having outlined the crisis of imagination and the ahistorical tendency in digital research, Liu Xin then introduces the concept of socio-technical imaginaries, underscoring its social, normative and material aspects as well as limitations. This is followed by a list of key points to consider when utilising the concept as an analytical tool. These pointers are formulated as questions that function as prompts to actively look for alternative ways of describing, analysing and imagining digital practices. For example, the question about the ‘spatial relations and scales of measurements’ of the imaginaries allows for reconsideration of the location, genre, scale and representation of the digital, and in so doing facilitates other ways of analysing and imagining digital practices. These open-ended questions can assist researchers and students from various disciplinary backgrounds to find common grounds for discussion and

collaborations. This is important especially as collaboration across disciplines necessitates translation of terminologies and methods that make visible, and potentially challenge, assumptions and enable new forms of narrating, analysing and imagining digital histories, digital futures and digital politics.

To illustrate socio-technical imaginaries in practice, the remaining chapters in Part II of the book present collaborative short pieces made by the participants of Liu Xin's Masterclass, utilising creative visual and textual forms such as speculative fiction, drawing and mapping. Chapter 9, 'Digitalised Home as Shell/Membrane' by Nermin Elsherif, Kris Kaleta and Laura Savolainen, used drawing and performative digital montage and storytelling to explore digital intimacies and the relations between technologies, homes and selves, as a way to reflect on digital experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. Chapter 10, 'A Story About the Futures of Digital Storytelling' by Pierre Chadelle, Tatiana Klepikova and Kerry Anne Maxwell, used creative fiction to imagine futures of global digital authoritarianism and decolonial planetary resistance by narrating a story of the worldwide internet slowdown, navigated by the group 'Communication without Borders'. Chapter 11, 'Layers of Digital Governance: Governing the Self, Platforms and Engineering' by Kirsikka Grön, Hannah Guy and David Mee, used a spatial thinking tool, Kinopio, to mind-map and visually organise multiple levels of analysis regarding digital governance, including self-governance, platform governance and engineering governance.

We hope that the conceptual explorations, and methodological and creative tools demonstrated throughout the book will inspire future research, pedagogy and imagination in the rapidly growing field of digital politics.