

2023 Book Roundup: Navigating the Complexities of Our Digital Era

July 3, 2024

In the fast-evolving landscape of the digital age, authors in 2023 have produced insightful works that delve into the intersections of technology, human rights, data, and societal values. In this year's book roundup, we delve into thought-provoking works that dissect the multifaceted dimensions of our digital existence and propose visionary solutions for navigating its challenges. From countering extremism to reclaiming human rights, these books offer invaluable insights into shaping a more equitable and humane digital future.

Books

Title: [Manufacturing Consensus: Understanding Propaganda in the Era of Automation and Anonymity](#)

Author: Samuel Woolley

Published: January 2023, Yale University Press

SSRC Summary: *Manufacturing Consensus* examines the complex landscape of how propaganda has evolved for the digital age. Just as social media remade the gatekeepers of information spread, Samuel Woolley argues that propaganda has been democratized – moving away from a traditional process of top-down, elite control to a model driven by anonymity and automation. In short, “anyone can be a producer of propaganda, and anyone can be manipulated.” Woolley draws on an impressive body of original research, including interviews with political campaign workers, technology industry experts, journalists, and digital propagandists, as well as his own observations of bots, sockpuppet accounts, and sophisticated AI-enabled systems. Case studies of the United States, United Kingdom, Turkey, and Ecuador are supplemented by data from another dozen countries around the world. Across this analysis, Woolley interrogates: who is complicit in the spread of computational propaganda, and who profits from it? What are its effects for democratic institutions? How do bots change how we understand the basic units of actors and agency in political communication? *Manufacturing Consensus* urges academics, policymakers, and tech companies to address the ever-more-pervasive nature of digital propaganda, and concludes with a set of potential solutions.

Title: [Beyond Data: Reclaiming Human Rights at the Dawn of the Metaverse](#)

Author: [Elizabeth M. Renieris](#)

Published: February 2023, MIT Press

SSRC Summary:

Beyond Data argues that the prevalent focus on data protection and privacy laws has inadequately safeguarded essential human values, including privacy, amidst the rapid advancement of technology. Elizabeth Renieris asserts that the fixation on data, though codified through flawed policies, fails to address the actual stakes of technological development — human dignity and autonomy. Renieris presents a comprehensive history of how laws and corporate policies framed around data privacy have proven insufficient in protecting individuals. Instead, she advocates for a human rights-based approach that places human dignity and autonomy at its core, offering a visionary alternative to current paradigms. *Beyond Data* serves as both a meticulous application of legal theory to technology and a compelling call to action, offering a perspective that challenges the prevailing disregard for human values in the era of the metaverse.

Title: [The Propagation of Misinformation in Social Media: A Cross-platform Analysis](#)

Editor: Richard Rogers

Published: March 2023, Amsterdam University Press

SSRC Summary: A collection of research by scholars across digital media, artificial intelligence, and communication studies, *The Propagation of Misinformation in Social Media* offers a look into the state of affairs of online information spread. Its overarching theme focuses on the ways in which social media has come to mainstream the extreme, and marginalize the mainstream; through a diverse and complementary set of methods, scholars explore questions of content moderation, election information ecosystems, alternate influence networks, the impact of deplatforming, computational and human-driven amplification of hyperpartisan viewpoints, cross-platform misinformation spread, and social media as a vehicle for civic engagement and political expression. Notably, its analyses — which include most major platforms, like Google Web Search, Facebook, YouTube, Reddit, Twitter, Instagram, 4chan and TikTok — strike an important balance between generalization and specificity. Each site has its own nuances and subcultures which, in turn, influence how their (mis)information ecosystems “behave.” *The Propagation of Misinformation in Social Media* serves as a timely guide to (and critique of) the role that social media platforms now play as authorities of truth.

Title: [When the Hood Comes Off: Racism and Resistance in the Digital Age](#)

Author: Rob Eschmann

Published: May 2023, University of California Press

SSRC Summary: *When the Hood Comes Off* is an unflinching look at how racism exists in

digital spaces – how technology “renegotiates the rules of racial discourse,” and the consequences for people of Color. Building on a decade of social media analysis and an extensive body of interviews with students of color across the United States, Rob Eschmann argues that the Internet has made racism more visible. The anonymity of digital communication encourages explicitly racist expression, and could normalize that same behavior offline. Viral videos of police brutality have exposed the pervasiveness of racism to parts of the U.S. population who may not have yet seen it for themselves. The Internet is also, Eschmann demonstrates, an important organizing tool, enabling innovative practices of resistance among Black people and people of color, on- and offline. A skillfully-written examination of the American “collective racial, political, and social consciousness” in the digital era, *When the Hood Comes Off* outlines the digital unmasking of racism in the United States – and asks how we, as a society, want to respond.

Title: [Digital Unsettling: Decoloniality and Dispossession in the Age of Social Media](#)

Authors: Sahana Udupa and Ethiraj Gabriel Dattatreyan

Published: April 2023, New York University Press

SSRC Summary: *Digital Unsettling* explores the intricate ways in which digital networks shape – and are shaped by – ongoing struggles against coloniality. Anthropologists Sahana Udupa and E. Gabriel Dattatreyan combine traditional and digital ethnography to examine how events like campus protests, #BlackLivesMatter activism, the toppling of colonial statues, and the rise of Hindu nationalism in North America played out online, drawing from data in the United States, United Kingdom, India, South Africa, and Germany. Later chapters bring a critical eye to data capture and academic practices. Across much of their analysis, Udupa and Dattatreyan make the case that digital networks blur the distinction between “home” and “field” – complicating fundamental concepts of distance, borders, and even the boundaries between researcher and subject. *Digital Unsettling* offers a detailed look into the impacts of modern interconnectivity on global power hierarchies.

Title: [Digital Empires: The Global Battle to Regulate Technology](#)

Author: Anu Bradford

Published: September 2023, Oxford University Press

SSRC Summary:

In *Digital Empires*, Anu Bradford examines the escalating global competition among the United States, China, and the European Union in regulating tech companies, each promoting their vision for the digital economy and expanding their influence. With concerns rising about concentrated economic power, political influence, and data privacy, world leaders are grappling with how to rein in dominant tech companies. Bradford explores the collisions between the American market-driven, Chinese state-driven, and European rights-driven regulatory approaches, highlighting how governments, tech firms, and digital

citizens will face pivotal choices that determine the trajectory of digital societies.

Title: [The Women of the Far Right: Social Media Influencers and Online Radicalization](#)

Author: Eviane Leidig

Published: September 2023, Columbia University Press

SSRC Summary:

In a comprehensive exploration of far-right women influencers on mainstream social media platforms, Eviane Leidig delves into the tactics employed by influencers to make extremism relatable. Far-right women influencers cultivate an audience through their range of content which span from posting about organic foods to behind-the-scenes selfies at anti-vaccination rallies, blending elements of personal branding with the promotion of radical ideologies. Leidig argues that these influencers, in adopting a feminine lifestyle, effectively market themselves as authentic and accessible propagandists for white nationalism. By discussing issues such as dating, marriage, and family life, they advocate for traditional gender roles and champion conspiracy theories like the Great Replacement. Leidig contends that the strategy of these far-right women takes advantage of social media structures, reaching mainstream audiences and contributing to the spread of a hateful ideology. Her book not only provides insights into the digital lives of these influencers but also explores strategies for countering extremism both online and offline.

Title: [The Internet Con: How to Seize the Means of Computation](#)

Author: Cory Doctorow

Published: September 2023, Verso Books

SSRC Summary:

In *The Internet Con*, Cory Doctorow argues that major tech platforms like Twitter and Facebook deliberately trap users within their systems, making it challenging to disconnect by design. He contends that the difficulty in leaving these platforms is a deliberate business strategy to commodify personal lives and relationships. Dismantling these platforms is achievable through interoperability, which would break down barriers between technologies, enabling users to leave platforms, customize media, and reconfigure devices without corporate constraints. The book serves as a guide to reclaiming the internet and providing a blueprint for empowering users to seize the means of computation and reshape the digital landscape.

Title: [Own This!: How Platform Cooperatives Help Workers Build a Democratic Internet](#)

Author: R. Trebor Scholz

Published: September 2023, Verso Books

SSRC Summary:

In *Own This!*, Trebor Scholz imagines a transformative world where platform cooperatives

empower workers to own and control the platforms they use. The book explores real-world examples of collective ownership, suggesting that platforms like Twitch, Twitter, and Roblox could be owned by their streamers, users, and creators. Scholz advocates for a shift in business ownership and control through technology-driven collectives, offering a practical solution to create a more equitable economy where decisions are made collectively. "Own This!" presents a program for change that aims to reshape how people live, work, and organize, emphasizing the potential of peer-driven principles in shaping a fairer economic landscape.

Title: [We, the Data: Human Rights in the Digital Age](#)

Author: Wendy H. Wong

Published: October 2023, MIT Press

SSRC Summary:

In a compelling call to extend human rights into the realm of our data-intensive world, Wendy H. Wong emphasizes the need to reassess autonomy, community, dignity, and equality in the face of pervasive data collection and tracking. . Wong contends that individuals are often excluded from crucial discussions surrounding technology, ethics, and policy, despite being stakeholders in the digital landscape. The book highlights the transformative impact of data on human experiences, challenging the notion of individuals as mere "subjects" or "sources" of data by-products. Through the exploration of key aspects such as data rights, facial recognition technology, posthumous rights, and the necessity for a right to data literacy, readers are urged to recognize their role as stakeholders and hold data collectors accountable. Drawing parallels to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, *We, the Data* lays the groundwork for claiming human rights in the age of data, asserting that our evolving digital selves deserve protection and acknowledgment in the broader discourse on ethics and policy.

Title: [Techlash: Who Makes the Rules in the Digital Gilded Age?](#)

Author: Tom Wheeler

Published: October 2023, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers / Brookings Institution Press

SSRC Summary:

In *Techlash*, Tom Wheeler draws parallels between the industrial Gilded Age of the late 19th century and the contemporary digital Gilded Age of the 21st century, highlighting how both eras saw technological innovation and resulting wealth clash with public interests and rights. He highlights the lack of supervision in both historical eras, pointing out the impact of new digital technology on commerce and culture which generates considerable wealth with minimal oversight. Wheeler cautions against the notion of the present being a utopian "Fourth Industrial Revolution" and advocates for a new approach to public interest oversight. Departing from outdated industrial-era regulations, he proposes an agile,

supervised, and enforced code-setting process to protect consumers and competition while fostering ongoing innovation. Drawing on his extensive experience in business and government, Wheeler underscores the importance of balancing innovation and the public good.

Title: [Critical Data Literacies: Rethinking Data and Everyday Life](#)

Authors: Luci Pangrazio and Neil Selwyn

Published: November 2023, MIT Press

SSRC Summary:

Luci Pangrazio and Neil Selwyn present a comprehensive guide to navigating a world dominated by data. By addressing the pervasive influence of data in shaping our daily lives through digital technologies, the authors challenge the notion that datafication is an inevitable condition. They draw on emerging areas of scholarship like data justice and feminism to explore how individuals and communities can empower themselves to engage with data critically and creatively. The book, spanning eight chapters, covers fundamental concepts of identifying and understanding data, delving into more complex aspects of combating data tactics. It explores critical data literacies, linking them to broader issues of data justice, privacy, algorithmic bias, dataveillance, and disinformation. By integrating cutting-edge perspectives from multidisciplinary studies, *Critical Data Literacies* advocates for a collective reevaluation of the role of data in our lives, emphasizing the need to restore agency, free will, and democratic values in the face of data-centric challenges.