

GLOBAL DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP LAB

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The Global Digital Citizenship Lab (GDCL) at York University uses the conceptual, methodological, and theoretical tools of critical social science to research the cultural and socio-political effects of nascent forms of digital citizenship in global civil society. While much media and scholarly attention is devoted to technologically-driven phenomena in the digital age—such as the popularity of social media platforms, the advent of ‘disruptive’ sectorial entrants, the promises of Big Data, and the spread of crowdsourcing—, little consideration is given to the ways in which such phenomena are reconfiguring public discourse and knowledge of crucial socio-political debates and problems. In particular, what needs to be better understood is how the digital informalization and decentralization of processes of creating, evaluating, and disseminating information and artifacts are leading to a questioning of established or conventional principles, rituals, experts, and institutions through which knowledge is produced, truth claims are adjudicated, and social activities are regulated.

Therefore, the GDCL is interested in analyzing the emerging public contest between rival digital cultures and actors. Most prominently amongst these is what we term ‘digital libertarianism,’ which contains overlapping epistemological, cultural, and socio-political dimensions. Epistemologically, digital libertarianism consists of a rejection or circumvention of consecrated organizations and institutionalized rules conventionally responsible for the assessment of evidentiary claims and the evaluation of the credibility or qualifications of sources of such claims. Instead, a digitally libertarian epistemology lets the invisible hand of viral popularity freely operate in the social media-fuelled marketplace of ideas, resulting in facts and reality itself being presented as matters of individual choice amongst equivalent options to be determined by one’s personal opinions and beliefs. Culturally, digital libertarianism manifests itself through offensive or irreverent online practices and modes of discourse (such as ‘trolling’) that intentionally seek to violate social norms of online civility by earnestly or ironically championing morally abhorrent and hateful belief-systems (racism, misogyny, homophobia, etc.) to puncture ‘political correctness’ and provoke debate amidst a so-called ‘social justice’ consensus in the name, and under the guise, of absolutist notions of free speech. Socio-culturally, digital libertarianism aims to undermine the legitimacy and authority of established or formal sources of expertise, as well as governmental regulation of economic actors, in order to promote *laissez-faire* capitalism and technologically-driven ‘free market’ solutions to humankind’s problems. Grounded in a logic of sectorial self-regulation, radical individualism, and Darwinian zero-sum competition, the model of society thereby taking shape is one of a simple online aggregation of monadic and self-interested consumers’ opinions and choices. Hence, key to digital libertarianism’s current caché and influence is its self-portrayal as a rebellious and innovative worldview opposed to existing social conventions and regulatory regimes, which are depicted as stifling individual freedoms, creativity, and entrepreneurship.

Conversely, the GDCL studies alternative digital cultures countering libertarianism through various iterations of global citizenship. At the epistemological level, certain projects and organizations are harnessing technologically mediated practices of knowledge production and

evaluation to cultivate forms of collective intelligence and discover collaborative modes of distributed expertise through which problems can be solved, or digitally created artifacts and disseminated information can be verified via algorithmic filtering or human judgment and curation. Culturally, these alternatives involve initiatives on the part of online forums and social media platforms to develop an ethos of digital engagement amongst participants and users, which protects or advances values of freedom of information, accuracy, transparency, diversity of views, and social inclusiveness. Amongst these initiatives are forum- or platform-specific ‘community standards,’ which specify evolving criteria for textual and visual content and include mechanisms to protect participants from hate speech and online abuse. The socio-political aspects of global citizenship entail progressive or radical notions of the digital commons and the invention of corresponding regulatory regimes at different scales, as well as experiments to harness digital technologies in egalitarian ways by combating structural inequalities and relations of domination affecting socio-economically and culturally subordinate or marginalized groups.

To observe the clash between these digital cultures ‘in the wild,’ the GDCL hones in on public controversies amplified or mediated through new technologies and platforms. We approach controversies in electronically mediated public spaces as symbolically and politically dense nodes of discourse and social action that can reveal points of tension and contestation, organizational structures, patterns of meaning, moral and political repertoires, and systems of evaluation that persons and groups invoke or to which they appeal when explaining or defending their stances. Unpacking and identifying the epistemic, cultural, and socio-political effects of these underlying principles, rituals, customs, and practices is paramount because, despite their growing impact on social life and public opinion today, digital cultures remain poorly understood given their informal, implicit, ambiguous, or blackboxed status.

In light of the above concerns, five themes guide the GDCL’s research about digital cultures:

1. Does the digitally-driven democratization of knowledge compromise its quality?

Digital technologies and practices widen the circles of those participating in the creation and evaluation of knowledge and artifacts, but what kinds of procedures of validation of claims and verification of findings are these forms of collective intelligence and networked expertise adopting?

2. What constitutes evidentiary reliability in the digital age?

Our epoch is characterized by two paradoxical trends: the public’s increasing reliance on visual and textual material to interpret an event or phenomenon, and the unprecedented ease with which images can be manipulated and facts can be manufactured. Therefore, according to what criteria and through what mechanisms can the reliability of visual and factual evidence be established?

3. How can online abuse and hate speech be curbed?

Keen to advocate in favour of the unrestricted exchange of ideas and expression of opinions, several social media platforms and online forums also have become incubators of digital forms of abuse and havens for hate speech disproportionately targeting marginalized groups. What standards and techniques are social media corporations and governmental or legal bodies implementing to address these problems, by what organizational processes are such mechanisms being proposed and enforced, and how is their arbitrary, selective, or opaque application being avoided?

4. What alternative models of open access culture are possible?

Digital reproduction and distribution technologies have eroded restrictive copyright and intellectual property regimes as well as conventional monetization strategies in several cultural and knowledge-

based industries, effectively converting the material from these industries free and widely available online. However, is it possible to preserve the ethos of anti-commercialism and resistance to commodification embodied in the open access culture movement while ensuring fair compensation for content creators, fair use of their material, and organizational sustainability for the networks and organizations supporting them?

5. How can public oversight of the digitally-based 'sharing' economy be realized?

Utilizing online platforms and mobile applications, multinational corporations have invented a deregulatory movement labelled the 'sharing' economy, which embodies libertarian ideals by framing the supply and demand of services as technologically-enabled free market transactions connecting individual consumers to supposedly independent private service providers—thereby skirting or largely operating outside of local and national regulatory regimes. Thus, what progressive discourses conceptually re-embed these corporations and the economic activities that they generate within the domain of the social and the political, in order to protect public interests and advance robust collective oversight of the 'sharing' economy?