SOCIAL CYBER INSIGHTS

WHY WE ARE ALL RESPONSIBLE FOR DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES

We must learn to read the narrative and take back control of our lives.

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Technology today is all-pervasive, and it takes a real effort to avoid using at least some data-hungry digital service in the course of a day.

"We are all always making a bargain of convenience," says Professor Tania Leiman, Dean of Law at Flinders University, and a research affiliate at the Jeff Bleich Centre for the US Alliance in Digital Technology, Security and Governance (JBC).

"It's easy to pay with my phone or pay with my card or access an app ... and so I'm making choices about what I do with my data – without realising I'm making those choices – all the time."

She sees the conundrum as placed on a spectrum of benefits-to-danger.

With technology so routine, and data collection so automatic, it is easy for ordinary citizens to wonder what, if anything, they can do to fight back. Or even if it is worth it.

But JBC Director Professor Don DeBats says fighting back is crucial.

He notes that digital technologies have brought great benefits, such as the democratisation of informational flows through the internet, but great dangers too, such as posting and sending information known to be false (aka disinformation) and the indiscriminate use and misuse of our data.

"And that's the big dilemma here," he says.

"What is vital is that people have a narrative with which they can make sense of and understand the digital transformation as a disruptive technological change. If you have that clearly in your mind, you can judge how to respond – and that's what we do at JBC."

Jeff Bleich, the former US ambassador to Australia for which the Centre is named (and an Honorary Professor at Flinders), and DeBats, worked a long time to get the title of the Centre right.

The Jeff Bleich Center defines itself as "for the US Alliance in Digital Technology, Security and Governance." "And you can attach digital to those last two words as well, digital security and digital governance.

It is important to realise that cyber threats come in different forms: not only from hostile governments trying to bring down our communication systems and websites. It's much, much more than that," he says, pointing to disinformation from domestic sources as one of the major threats to Western democracies.

"I think that this is very difficult to respond to at a societal level without losing the benefits of the digital transformation. What we discover is that opponents of democracy and democratic order can use this new technology very effectively to disrupt our societies."

Despite that he is an optimist.

"This is not just the dystopian world full of threats. It's also full of opportunities. I think there's a chance here to really add to the value of everybody's life. We can engage in this digital revolution in a way that empowers people."

He sees particular opportunities for leaders, such as public servants, who are involved with governance, to make a difference and to pave the way for that empowerment.

"Understanding the narrative is of vital importance to public servants. They are in charge of governance, after all. They are creating it, and they need to understand the stakes here."

Melissa de Zwart, Professor in Digital Technology, Security and Governance at JBC, is less of an optimist.

"The most troubling thing, I think, is that you have multinational corporations which have larger economies than small nation-states. So are they in any event, even accountable still to US law?" she asks.

"How do you regulate a Google? How do you regulate a Facebook and how in fact, do you even avoid using those platforms? It's pretty much impossible. It's no longer much of a choice," she says.

De Zwart agrees with DeBats on the importance of people, particularly those working in policy and administration, engaging with the problem, to understand the narrative, but worries that few are.

"I was in the US when the Mueller Report, into whether the Russians had interfered in the US election, was handed down and I was horrified about what I was watching on the TV screen," she says.

"Most people, though, were unconcerned and unaware. I wanted to say, 'this is your democracy, which has been threatened. This must surely be the most existentially terrifying thing that has happened to you'. So what does it take to make people worry? I think we are very complacent because, you know, we don't know what it's like to have our democracy undermined by propaganda."

DeBats says that lay people still need to "read" the narrative of the digital age.

"That's what we at the JBC are doing: learning to read this technology, to construct a narrative, and the only way we will do this is through multiple inputs. That's why the social sciences are really important and why the JBC is multidisciplinary."

He likens the process to another threat-meets-blessing of the digital age, the driverless car.

"The driverless car raises all sorts of issues of who actually is in control and is responsible. In some ways this is a bit like who is in control of digital technologies and who is responsible.

"Well, we're responsible in the end. Maintaining control over this is difficult, but it is important that we have people in governance roles who are aware of the challenges – the narrative – who believe they can control this, not that they are controlled by it.

"That's something that we should really get right if we are going to enhance democracy by enabling people to take control of the digital revolution."