Independence: an introduction to the #AoIR2021 special issue

Aphra Kerr & Andrew Iliadis

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Check for updates

Independence: an introduction to the #AoIR2021 special issue

Aphra Kerr [a] and Andrew Iliadis [b]

aMaynooth University, Maynooth, Ireland; bTemple University, Philadelphia, PA, USA

ABSTRACT

This paper introduces the 'Independence' themed special issue which includes research presented at the 22nd annual Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) conference (2021). 'Independence' as a special issue theme could hardly be timelier, both in geopolitical and internet research terms. The call for the 2021 AoIR annual conference asked us to reflect on the ambivalence of the term, to look back on historical struggles for independence, the long waves of history, and prompted us to ask who benefits from independence (and who does not). Hosted online for a second year, this time by universities in Philadelphia (USA), the conference was bounded by the Black Lives Matter movement, the insurrectionist storming of Washington, D.C.'s Capitol Hill, and global struggles to control the COVID-19 pandemic. This special issue includes nine papers that showcase new research exploring the affordances offered by digital media platforms to people, users, and workers, while also identifying tendencies towards new forms of control and surveillance facilitated by platforms. Topics include geopolitical and biopolitical digital sovereignty, facial recognition technologies, data divides, new methods approaches and innovative data sourcing, mobile and social media, examinations of embodied local knowledge as well as patriarchal, racist, and gendered social structures, and a broad range of field sites from Asia, Africa, and South America.

Introduction

We are pleased to present this 'Independence' themed special issue of *Information, Communication & Society* which gathers together some of the latest research presented at the 22nd annual Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) conference (2021). For the second time in its history, the AoIR conference took place completely online, and across multiple time zones, due to the travel restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The conference was hosted by Temple University and the University of Pennsylvania (both located in Philadelphia, USA). The programme committee was chaired by Adrienne Shaw (Temple University) and included Andrew Iliadis (Temple University), Larisa Mann (Temple University), Jan Fernback (Temple University), and Jessa Lingel (University of Pennsylvania) as members. While the conference theme was 'Independence' the

conference also asked participants to reflect on the ambivalences of this term and critique how independence and the internet has developed around the world. The call for papers explicitly described how independence has 'galvanised anti-colonial movements across the world' yet the call also questioned who benefits from independence. Thus, the conference sought to acknowledge 'the internal contradictions and historic hypocrisy of independence' and ask: 'Independence for whom, from what, where, and under what constraints?'

The main AoIR conference was held from October 12–16, 2021, and included several formats through which attendees could participate. In total, there were 564 conference registrants (from 37 countries across 5 continents), 229 accepted papers, 26 accepted panels, 258 videos (the AoIR YouTube channel received over 13 K views), and 258 publications in AoIR's *Selected Papers of Internet Research* (SPIR) proceedings. AoIR's Keynote Speaker was André Brock, whose address, titled 'Race and Racism in Internet Studies,' was live-streamed. Other events included the Doctoral Colloquium, the Early Careers Scholars Workshop, and social events held online in 'AoIRTown.' The Nancy Baym Book Award was awarded to André Brock's *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures* (2020), the Best Dissertation Award was given to Niki Cheong (King's College London) for *Cybertrooping and the Online Manipulation of Political Communication in Malaysia: The Barisan Nasional Years*, and the Best Student Paper Award was won by Nomy Bitman (Hebrew University of Jerusalem) for 'Rethinking Visibility, Personalization and Representation: Disability Activism in Social Media.'

'Independence' has a lengthy historical and discursive lineage in internet, media, and communication scholarship. In production and industry studies, independence has been a political and aesthetic ideal for creative workers and cultural producers across established media such as music (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2010), television (Lotz, 2017), and games (Kerr, 2021). Creative and artistic autonomy has long been idealised as a goal for cultural and creative workers, and editorial independence has been elevated to an ideal in the training of professional journalists and community-centered journalism (Wenzel, 2020). In these contexts, workers sought independence from advertisers, publishers, governments, and regulators. Independence (and dependence) have also been core themes in cultural policy research. National or regional independence in cultural production and the promotion and protection of cultural diversity has been a goal in cultural policy in many regions of the world, especially after the UNESCO New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) debates from the 1970s and 1980s. UNESCO's MacBride report from the International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems (1980) highlighted imbalances in global and regional flows of media content and news, yet much has changed from today's vantage point (Rodríguez & Iliadis, 2019). There is no longer a need to call for a greater supply of paper, and the confident demarcation of developing and developed nations is gone. However, the critical focus on the costs of accessing information and communication, and the impacts of commercialism are still pertinent. Also relevant is a focus on the importance of fostering cultural diversity, supporting multilingualism, conducting technology impact assessments, and guarding against technology monopolies.

The emergence of the internet in the USA in the late 1960s was imbued with the ideal of independence from the beginning, with its heady mix of counter culture and libertarianism (Turner, 2006). As the emergence of the World Wide Web and social media began

to democratise content production through enabling modding, hacking, remixing, and sharing (Burgess & Green, 2009), and later platformisation and datafication reshaped access to distribution and circulation (Poell et al., 2021), it is timely to question the degree to which new creative tools, platforms, and infrastructures provide independence, and what exactly they are providing independence from (McDonald et al., 2021). Numerous internet studies have shown that 'openness' and 'access' are far from sufficient to provide independence when the terms of engagement are designed for a narrow demographic of society or are determined by a particular set of values; even when technologies and platforms are ostensibly 'open to all,' the online cultures that may emerge are not independent from wider cultures of misogyny, racism, ethnocentrism, classism, and ableism (Ging & Siapera, 2018; Shaw, 2014). Activist or civic technological movements can provide alternative paths to creative production but not all do so in the same critical manner (Lingel, 2017). Attempts to reclaim geographic, political, and infrastructural sovereignty are fraught as state, market, technological, and idealistic boundaries and goals conflict (Couture & Toupin, 2019). The spread of new forms of datafication, the automation of engagement with media interfaces, and the increase in surveillance points to the need to rethink some of our core concepts, theories, methods, and data sources when it comes to thinking independence.

Several common themes emerge from the papers presented here and provide a useful overview of emerging research in the field. Independence is investigated through domains such as: the sovereignty of states, corporations, and users in digital contexts; labour and the power of workers via platforms; and new struggles over biopower involving biometrics and facial recognition, surveillance, and infrastructure. These works draw upon a range of disciplinary fields and combinations of theories including from science and technology studies, critical data studies, cultural studies, feminist theory, and platform studies. There are papers focusing on facial recognition technology (from white gaze to seeing dark skin), social media use, (de)colonialism, empowerment and sovereignty of people and users, the Global South, the Global North, the Middle East, field sites such as India, Ghana, Australia, Russia, and China, and new sources of data such as job review sites, patents, and industry trade shows. Importantly this special issue includes two papers by PhD students as well as scholars at varying stages of their academic career.

The first paper in the collection, 'Middle Eastern women influencers' interdependent/independent subjectification on Tiktok: feminist postdigital transnational inquiry' by Zoe Hurley, explores how processes of subjectification are connected to social media platforms in specific cultural contexts. An important and timely one, the study undertaken by Hurley focuses on Middle Eastern women influencers' activities on TikTok and attempts to explain 'postdigital transnational subjectification' while suggesting that such practices are not restricted by 'regional, generational, traditional, fixed or essentialist terms.' The paper includes findings based on audio-visual components present in these influencer messages which, Hurley argues, have their own unique ontologies, and examines how subjectification through TikTok's affordances in the Global South requires new frameworks and interpretations. The paper shows how independent and local social media personalities depend on international social media platforms while at the same time leveraging contextual affordances to produce acts of postdigital transnational subjectification.

The second paper, 'The two faces of the child in facial recognition industry discourse: biometric capture between innocence and recalcitrance' by Christopher O'Neill, Neil Selwyn, Gavin Smith, Mark Andrejevic, and Xin Gu, insightfully describes how children are discursively treated in the context of the highly contentious facial recognition technology industry. Facial recognition technologies have become synonymous in recent years with research that has critiqued the technology's social harms. The authors present data that has been obtained through trade show ethnographies and interviews, and explore 'how the biometric monitoring of children has gained a prominent place' in the facial recognition industry 'as a mode of 'careful' surveillance.' The authors discuss some of the perceived technical challenges in the industry and argue that the industry discourses treat children 'as both innocent and recalcitrant, and that the facial recognition industry has productively exploited the tension between these two figurations to legitimate and expand its own enterprise.'

The third paper, 'Empowerment or warfare? dark skin, AI camera, and Transsion's patent narratives' by Miao Lu and Jack Qiu, presents novel research based on patent document analysis and interviews of 'Transsion, a Chinese company dominating Africa's smartphone market and a leading innovator in facial recognition technologies (FRTs) optimised for darker skins.' Lu and Qiu identify two major themes, including that Transsion positions itself externally as providing 'empowerment' while internally the company uses the language of 'warfare' in patent discussions. The company seeks to empower its users via its AI camera which it claims is optimised to see the beauty of dark skinned users. At the same time the company is facing intense market and patent competition from other Chinese phone makers and is seeking to protect their supremacy in African markets. The paper describes how Transsion considers FRT patents as 'weapons of competition' and makes a case for the usefulness of patents as a source of data and a way to interrogate algorithmic accountability, racial bias, (fair) visibility and the politics of decolonisation.

The fourth paper, '*Infrastructuring* digital sovereignty: a research agenda for an infrastructure-based sociology of digital self-determination practices' by Francesca Musiani, develops and expands on a needed agenda by focusing on international initiatives of the 'digital sovereignty' principle and 'the idea that states should 'reaffirm' their authority over the Internet and the broader digital ecosystem, to protect their citizens, institutions, and businesses from the multiple challenges to their nation's self-determination in the digital sphere.' Musiani explains how digital sovereignty is primarily a concept in legal and political discourse and that in light of this the concept is mainly studied by fields such as political science, international relations, and law. The paper argues that digital sovereignty should also be seen as infrastructure and socio-material practice, and examines various politico-economic projects that seek to create 'autonomous digital infrastructures in a hyperconnected world.' The paper presents an agenda for developing this area of scholarship, and features Russia as a pilot case study.

The fifth paper, 'People as data, data as oil: the digital sovereignty of the Indian state' by Revati Prasad, perceptively moves the discussion of sovereignty to India and examines India's 2019 draft e-commerce policy, emerging discourse around data sovereignty and how this discourse is reflected in India's biometric ID system, Aadhaar. The paper examines these discourses via the legal briefs, petitions and arguments put forward during the constitutional challenges brought against the Aadhaar system in the Indian Supreme

Court in 2018. Providing insights into public and private data use in a postcolonial country, Prasad argues that 'the thrust of India's emergent project of digital sovereignty is not merely geopolitical, but also biopolitical, a process through which the Indian state is engaged in altering what it is to be sovereign and its subject.' The paper concludes by reflecting on how these practices of enclosure and performance consolidate the power of the Indian state.

The sixth paper, 'Embedded reproduction in platform data work' by Julian Posada, researches Latin American data workers who specialise in manually annotating data through labour platforms. The paper carefully describes embedded reproduction as 'the relationship between embeddedness, the degree to which non-economic institutions and their social environment constrain socioeconomic activity, and social reproduction, or the activities that nurture, maintain, and regenerate the workforce.' Posada gathers the data through interviews with platform workers and finds they are positioned in a market that is in flux due to lack of regulation, and that this instability creates negative outcomes for employees. The article discusses alternative sources of support for these workers, including family, community, and online groups, and finds that these connections are mostly local while requiring trust. Posada finds that this work is unsustainable in that it places the risks of gig work on these networks of support, and he invites 'a dialogue between the embeddedness framework with social reproduction as well as a consideration of the importance of nature and natural resources in the study of social environments.'

The seventh paper, 'When a door becomes a window: using Glassdoor to examine game industry work cultures' by Kelly Bergstrom, is about the unjust labour conditions in the videogames industry and how access to information about topics such as pay may be restricted through various coercive, legal, and policy measures. Thus, Bergstrom astutely discusses 'an opportunity to look behind the curtain of the games industry via employee reviews left on Glassdoor, a popular job-seeking website.' The article discusses how such reviews provide a way to understand worker experiences in ways that will not harm or damage their reputations or employment. Glassdoor is treated as a data source from which Bergstrom tracks an investigation into the workplace culture of Riot Games, the developer of the Multiplayer Online Battle Arena game *League of Legends*. The material gathered offers a new look into the videogame industry, 'allowing observation of how problematic work cultures become normalised, and ultimately, how workers who do not come to internalise these norms may be pushed out.'

The eighth paper, 'Daughters, devices and doorkeeping: how gender and class shape adolescent mobile phone access in Mumbai, India' by Isha Bhallamudi, focuses on how gender and class work in patriarchal families to shape adolescent girls' unequal access to phones in Mumbai. In seeking to discover 'the everyday practices and cultural logics upon which these inequalities are built,' Bhallamudi uses an innovative and in-depth mixed-methods approach by conducting 59 group interviews and 278 surveys with adolescents aged 13–15 in Mumbai. The paper adopts an intersectional framework and discusses findings which show that gender and class do indeed create varying standards of 'respectable femininity and class distinction that families aspire to and cultivate in adolescent girls.' Bhallamudi thus articulates how the phone can be seen as 'both a threat and a necessity' to maintaining 'standards of respectability.'

The ninth and final paper, 'Critical factors of digital AgTech adoption on Australian farms: from digital to data divide' by Amber Marshall, Krystle Turner, Carol Richards, Marcus Foth, and Michael Dezuanni, explores the practice of how farmers are encouraged to adopt digital agricultural technologies (AgTech) like drones and sensors to assist with farming decisions and improve efficiency, safety, profitability and environmental outcomes. The paper includes a unique exploratory and qualitative study of a 'digital farming project on a cotton farm in South-East Queensland, Australia' and focuses on the various technosocial factors that influence AgTech adoption. Marshall and colleagues identify a 'data divide' and highlight 'a tension between farmers' independence as decision-makers on their properties and their local knowledge of optimal farming conditions, the introduction of expert digital technologies, and regional stakeholders promoting digital AgTech adoption.'

As we go to publication, the struggle for control over the discourses and information flows surrounding the war in Ukraine and the COVID-19 pandemic only emphasise the difficulties and pertinence of internet research. As this special issue demonstrates, the 'internet' as infrastructure continues to morph, to include and exclude, to divide and bring together. Internet, technology, and data inequalities persist and reemerge in new ways and places. Similarly, internet research as a field and community is also changing. It is important that we recognise and foreground new and emerging scholars and methods that allow us to document global imbalances and local injustices. In conclusion, as guest editors we would also like to recognise the considerable invisible work of the authors, the reviewers, and production staff of this journal who through natural disasters, pandemics, illness, marriages, bereavements and numerous other life challenges have come together to produce this special issue.

Acknowledgement

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Dr. Aphra Kerr is a Professor in Sociology at Maynooth University in Ireland and Director of their MA in Digital Societies. She is a Principal Investigator in the Science Foundation Ireland ADAPT Centre for Digital Content Technology and a collaborating PI on the Global Media and Internet Concentration Project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council in Canada. Her work focuses on the design and governance of digital content and digital content producers. Her books include *Global Games: Production, Circulation and Policy in the Networked Age* (Routledge, 2017) and she was associate editor of *The International Encyclopedia of Digital Communication and Society* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2015). Dr. Kerr was on the conference committee of the Association of Internet Researchers conferences in 2020 and 2022.

Dr. Andrew Iliadis is an Assistant Professor at Temple University in the Department of Media Studies and Production (within the Lew Klein College of Media and Communication) and serves on the faculties of the Media and Communication Doctoral Program, Cultural Analytics Graduate

Certificate Program, and Science, Technology, and Society Network. His work focuses on the social implications of data science with specific interests in semantic and embodied computing, and has been published in numerous journals. He is co-editor of Embodied Computing: Wearables, Implantables, Embeddables, Ingestibles (MIT Press, 2020) and author of Semantic Media: Mapping Meaning on the Internet (Polity, 2022). Dr. Iliadis was on the conference committee of the Association of Internet Researchers conference in 2021 and will serve again in 2023. [email: andrew.iliadis@temple.edu].

ORCID

Aphra Kerr ⓘ http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5445-7805
Andrew Iliadis ⓘ http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8345-6251

References

Brock, A. (2020). *Distributed Blackness: African American cybercultures*. New York University Press.

Burgess, J., & Green, J. (2009). *YouTube: Online video and participatory culture*. Polity.

Couture, S., & Toupin, S. (2019). What does the notion of "sovereignty" mean when referring to the digital? *New Media & Society*, *21*(10), 2305–2322. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819865984

Ging, D., & Siapera, E. (2018). Special issue on online misogyny. *Feminist Media Studies*, *18*(4), 515–524. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1447345

Hesmondhalgh, D., & Baker, S. (2010). 'A very complicated version of freedom': Conditions and experiences of creative labour in three cultural industries. *Poetics*, *38*(1), 4–20. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2009.10.001

International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems ('MacBride Report'). (1980). *Many voices, one world: Towards a new more just and more efficient world information and communication order*. UNESCO. http://www.un-documents.net/macbride-report.pdf

Kerr, A. (2021). Decoding and recoding game jams and independent game-making spaces for inclusion. In P. Ruffino (Ed.), *Independent videogames: Cultures, networks, techniques and politics* (pp. 29–42). Routledge.

Lingel, J. (2017). *Digital countercultures and the struggle for community*. MIT Press.

Lotz, A. D. (2017). *Portals: A treatise on internet-distributed television*. Michigan Publishing.

McDonald, P., Donoghue, C. B., & Havens, T. (2021). *Digital media distribution: Portals, platforms, pipelines*. New York University Press.

Poell, T., Nieborg, D. B., & Duffy, B. E. (2021). *Platforms and cultural production*. Polity.

Rodríguez, C., & Iliadis, A. (2019). The MacBride report legacy and media democracy today. *Media Development*, *65(3)*, 17–24. http://wacc-global.live.publishwithagility.com/articles/the-macbride-report-legacy-and-media-democracy-today

Shaw, A. (2014). *Gaming at the edge: Sexuality and gender at the margins of gamer culture*. University of Minnesota Press.

Turner, F. (2006). *From counterculture to cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the rise of digital utopianism*. University of Chicago Press.

Wenzel, A. (2020). *Community-centered journalism: Engaging people, exploring solutions, and building trust*. University of Illinois Press.