

Remaking the Public Square

Eli Pariser, Lizzie O'Shea & Peter Lewis

Noah Schultz-Byard 0:01

'Morning, everybody. I'm Noah Schultz-Byard, the South Australian Director at the Australia Institute. Welcome to Remaking the Public Square, the latest in the Australia Institute's webinar series for 2021. I can see a whole stream of attendees coming through the digital door as I speak. Thank you for being with us today and welcome. But before we begin, I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet. I'm coming to you today from the land of the Kurna people on the Adelaide Plains. I acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded and pay my respects to elders past and present. Well, thank you so much for being with us today. I'm going to get us started with a little bit of housekeeping and the boring stuff. We'll get that out of the way as quickly as we can before moving on to what should be a great conversation. We are hosting these webinars each week. But the times and dates do vary. You can make sure you don't miss out on any of the webinars by signing up on our website at australiainstitute.org.au, where you can also find recordings of all of our previous webinars. Just a few Zoom tips before we begin to help things run smoothly. I assume you're all Zoom pros by now. But if you hover your mouse pointer over the bottom of your screen, you should be able to see a Q&A function where you can ask questions of our panellists. We invite you to jump in there and ask questions as the conversation's flowing. When you're in there you can also upvote questions from other users that have been submitted. You can also make comments in the chat. Speaking of the chat, we just ask that you keep things civil and on topic in there, or we'll have to boot you out. Hayden's on patrol today so he'll kick you out if anyone's too unruly. We don't often have that sort of problem, but just, you know, we like to keep things friendly and on topic in there. If you find the chat window popping up to be distracting, you should be able to click on it so that it pops out and then move that window to the side of the screen where it's less distracting. And finally, this session is being recorded. It will be posted on our website after things have wrapped up and an email will be sent to all of you with a recording of the session as always. So today, we are very pleased to host the discussion about the concept of public digital infrastructure and its importance in an era of disinformation, distortion and filter bubbles. This webinar coincides with the launch of the Centre for Responsible Technology's Public Square Project, a discussion paper which is available on our website now. Joining us today is Eli Pariser, Lizzie O'Shea and Peter Lewis. And by way of introduction, just briefly about each of our panellists... so, at just 23 years old, Eli was named Executive Director of MoveOn.org, where he led the organization's opposition to the Iraq War. He raised over \$120 million from small donors through that process and really helped to pioneer the practice of online engagement and online citizen activism. In 2006, he co-founded Avaaz, now the world's largest citizens organisation, with over 14 million members in 19 countries. But also in 2011, Eli anticipated the dangers of hyper-personalised content on the internet, and he introduced everybody to the concept of filter bubbles, which was also the subject of a best selling book of the same name. He is currently co-director of The Civic Signals Project at the National Conference on Citizenship. Welcome Eli. And Lizzie O'Shea is with us as well. Lizzie is the chair of Digital Rights Watch, a national organisation that defends digital rights here in Australia. Lizzie is a lawyer, writer and broadcaster. She is regularly featured on national television and radio to comment on law, digital technology, corporate responsibility and human rights and her writing has appeared in The New York Times, The Guardian, The Sydney Morning Herald and many other outlets. Also with us today we have Peter Lewis. Pete is the Director of the Australia Institute's Centre for Responsible Technology. He's one of Australia's leading public campaigners with more than two decades experience in media, politics and communications. Thank you to all of our guests

for being with us today. Peter, I'm going to hand over to you now for the first section of this webinar, we're in conversation with the panel, and then later in the webinar, we'll go to questions from the audience. So please keep those questions coming in in the Q&A. And Pete, over to you.

Peter Lewis 5:06

Thanks Noah and hi everyone. It is a really exciting day for the Centre for Responsible Technology, which is a satellite project of the Australian Institute that we set up about 18 months ago. And this is one of the first really major reports we've put out into the universe. We're hoping this will be a conversation starter about the idea of reimagining the way we connect online and start thinking through what public digital infrastructure in Australia could look like. For us this issue is really a necessary consequence of Facebook's hostile takeover of news and civic content in February, when Australian users became pawns in an effort to avoid regulation. But it's also part of a growing discussion globally about this idea of public digital infrastructure as opposed to surveillance capitalism. And we're really honoured to have one of the leading global thinkers Eli who's writing on advocacy has been really influential to our work. So Eli, thanks for zooming in from Maine. I assume you're almost bedtime but uh, hopefully we've got you for an hour.

Eli Pariser 6:12

Yeah, we're between my kids' bedtime and my bedtime. So it's a good magic hour for us.

Peter Lewis 6:18

Also Lizzie, who's my regular sparring partner with the Centre for Responsible Technology's fortnightly tech talks. So, hi, Lizzie.

Lizzie O'Shea 6:27

Hi, thanks so much for letting me come on in.

Peter Lewis 6:30

Love it. And I'm sorry, Eli, we thought we would run a bit of a pincer on you to squeeze as much insight in the hour out of you as we possibly can. So let's get into it. And Noah gave a really nice sort of journey that you've been on and I think a lot of us have been on from seeing technology as this transformative moment to challenge and harness grassroots power into something that's giving us a very different world. So I don't know if you just want to talk through that, that journey you've been on and particularly if you can recapture that sense of possibility when you started building movements online?

Eli Pariser 7:11

Sure, yeah. I mean, the the way I got into this work was almost by accident. After September 11, I was 20 years old, working in a nonprofit and sent an email that went viral and went all over the world. And all of a sudden I was in touch with half a million people. And it was just this incredible

experience of, you know, I had no money, no resources, no name, I was just this kid. And... but we were able to build this really amazing group of people together that then merged with MoveOn and formed kind of the backbone of our campaign against the Iraq war. And so I think I was very, you know, as I was a nerd, I was watching how technology was evolving, and I was, you know, fully on that "technology is going to decentralise power, is going to empower citizens and is going to naturally change everything". And it really wasn't until later in that decade, when I started to kind of look around and wonder whether we'd gotten it wrong, and whether, you know, there was less of an inherent, both, you know, the arc of technology maybe doesn't bend toward justice and that, in fact, you know, there are some really strong concentration and consolidation effects that will naturally accrue. And so that's really, trying to understand that is what led me to the filter bubble. And since then, I've really just been trying to figure out, well, how do we counter those trends? Because I've felt like, you know, the way that, the way that we're instantiating consumer technology and democracy are very uneasy bedfellows at the moment.

Peter Lewis 9:07

Yeah. Lizzie there really was that sense that the web was a progressive technology. I think retrospectively that radical libertarianism that's embedded on it has had consequences, though, hasn't it?

Lizzie O'Shea 9:19

Yeah, I'd agree with that. I think the probably key document for that period, or that epitomises it, is the Californian Ideology, which talks about their, the Silicon Valley being the point at which rampant capitalism runs headlong into a kind of hippie culture. And that takes form in technology. And it's, I feel like the moment was kind of 2016 and onwards where these companies started to examine their business model and couldn't realistically claim that they were just neutral participants or neutral creators of an infrastructure for others to use. So when people talk about technology and the regulation of technology being a recent debate, I think we can trace it back to there where we saw you know, Trump being elected in a way that many people found confounding, where the Brexit referendum happened, and people start to realise there's a whole different reality that other people are seeing online, that I might not be seeing, and how do we reconcile that with the idea that we need to have a common understanding of truth or politics? Or what is democracy?

Peter Lewis 10:16

Yeah, a lot of people have that sort of Trump/ Cambridge Analytica moment as their tipping point? I know Eli, you were writing about this at the beginning of that decade, the idea that micro targeting was creating different realities for different people and starting to question that at the same time, as you were running your own very savvy, micro targeting progressive platform Upworthy. So I was...I'm wondering about your reflections of both using that technology and then questioning at the same time?

Eli Pariser 10:48

Yeah, well, you know, after I wrote the book in 2011, I was really thinking about, you know, there was this one big project, which was like reform the algorithms and reform Facebook and try to get it,

you know, to behave and to be kind of conducive to democracy. And then I think there was, you know, I was thinking, Okay, if that doesn't work out, we need a plan B. And, you know, so Upworthy, was kind of this attempt to figure out, could we build media that was very algorithmically friendly. But that was doing some of the surfacing of important conversations, and civically valuable information, kind of on the terms of what's engaging. And I think, you know, the piece of that that I'm proud of is, you know, we did manage to reach a whole lot of people with content that I think was really valuable and informative. I think that, you know, I think, you know, the need for kind of some hope and some inspiration, I think that's a really important mix. And how you get people engaged in civic life. But I think the other piece of that is, you know, I think it really learned the limits of the VC [Venture Capital] backed startup model. You know, I experienced that myself. And we had pretty benign backers, and they were pretty long-term oriented. But even still, ultimately, I faced myself, you know, these considerations about, okay, there's this set of really important, you know, climate change stories that we want to do but also, we're looking at the budget for this quarter, and the revenue targets and have to make some prioritisation decisions. And, you know, just as I segued out of Upworthy, you know, it really got me thinking about, you know, why are we so attached to this one model for producing digital innovation, right? Like, there's so many other ways that we could house this, and why is the venture back startup kind of our epitome of what, of how to do innovation online?

Peter Lewis 13:09

Who would have thought that a transformative technology would be driven by people trying to win lotto? You know, like, the whole idea that that is going to be the way you plan a coherent future seems, you know, crazy. And then you've got the other side, Lizzie, which is you get state controlled webs now, as we see out of China, which uses the same technology in very different ways.

Lizzie O'Shea 13:34

Yeah, it's interesting listening to you guys talk, because the other kind of pivotal turning point was in our attitude to government or regulation. You know, it wasn't that long ago that Eric Schmidt, the former CEO of Google, very senior in Google, in any event, talked about how damaging regulation would be to the tech sector. But now we're in a moment where it becomes clear that regulation is necessary, because leaving it to the market does create these kinds of problems for public infrastructure. And I'm interested actually like, for you to talk a little bit about that, because, obviously, an antidote to the kind of VC backed model of startups, for the purposes of creating platforms, whether they're well intended or simply interested in becoming a profitable business. You know, there's the kind of realistic competitor to that force in terms of innovation and development is, arguably, the state, because it has the resources to be able to invest in these things, to be able to sustain losses, to be able to build infrastructure that can meaningfully compete with a VC business model. And, you know, that comes with a risk that then the state owns it, and I'll be curious to know how you grapple with that particular difficulty.

Peter Lewis 14:45

Yeah, that might be segue into this, the whole Civic Signals Project. So let's go to that vision.

Eli Pariser 14:51

Yeah, no, this is what I've been working on for the last couple years. And yeah, I started this research project with Talia Stroud, who's a brilliant Communications Professor, really trying to think about like, okay, if we were to take a news feed, and we're trying to rank content based on what was going to be the best for a pluralistic democracy, you know, how would you do that? And we quickly kind of dismissed that frame because we felt like it was too content-centric, and that a lot of the ways that we talk about and think about the internet right now, are as if you know, the content is the central character in the story, rather than the relationships between people. So we were looking for this other metaphor. And we got excited about what happens when you really think about social media and digital communities as spaces. And when you start to make that leap, you realise, okay, there's all this wisdom that we can bring into this conversation from urban planning, from other disciplines, that look at people in this very different way than kind of rational actors exchanging information, but they look at people in the way that we act out in the world, which is, you know, we communicate emotionally and non verbally, we gather in groups, we, you know, have trouble coordinating behaviour with strangers. And yet, we've found all of these templates and solutions for how to build public spaces and societies that actually do do some of the social trust building and familiarising us with each other that's necessary to hold the society together. So as we were talking to urban theorists, and kind of pulling on this thread, you know, one thing that comes into context very quickly, is that, you know, in physical communities, we have businesses, and they're great, and they serve a really important role. And we have, you know, kind of government infrastructures, sidewalks and you know, roads and other pieces of kind of critical infrastructure. And then, you know, we also have kind of the social sector, and we have libraries and schools and other kinds of institutions. And I think, when you start thinking about it, we're kind of trying to cram bits of all of those functions into these private companies. They're just totally not organised to serve those missions; there's no reason to think that they would. And in fact, I've had conversations with executives at a number of these companies, who would totally agree. They're like, we're way over our skis in terms of what we've kind of taken on. But there isn't a social sector or a lot of government role that has been built out to kind of do some of these social functions. So I know, we'll get to the report in due time but one of the things that I think is so exciting is that people are really starting to explore, you know, how do we build that out? Because we do have some templates for how to build institutions like this. It's just we haven't really applied them into digital life a whole lot.

Peter Lewis 18:06

Yeah. And it struck me reading your work, and the work of your project Eli, that because there isn't that strong tradition of public broadcasting - I know you've got community funded public broadcasting - that that ABC/BBC model of something that sits between the private sector and the government - it felt that we could contribute to it by just thinking out what we've got here at the moment. And I might indulge, and just throw in with a little bit of our straw man now and get you guys to bounce off it. So we're saying that the ABC was established in the 30s, when radio technology was just failing because business couldn't find a way of making it work. Spectrum was flowing all over, everyone was trying to grab the spectrum - that wasn't organised, the content was terrible. A conservative politician who later became a prime minister, Robert Menzies, convinced the government to set up ABC to create decent content so his mates could sell wirelasses. So it was really a response to the failure of the market to deal with disruption. And so we've got this great, trusted institution with a strong reach. Unfortunately at the moment also both a player, unwillingly, in the culture wars. So it's kind of in this difficult position, the ABC, where it's highly politicised as well. But our idea is, let's just throw all that out and do an "imagine if" you had something based on those same principles of somewhere between public and private that serves a public interest to build a public network off. And the crazy thing with the ABC at the moment is that they run all their community on Facebook. So they're actually... they've convinced themselves that the best way to

build audiences you know, the old thing of 'go where the fish are', but the consequence of that is, every time you're feeding the fish, you're also feeding Mark Zuckerberg and making that company stronger. So the straw man out there is can we rethink this and look at what they already do, build communities around content, think about user-generated content, and critically find ways of bringing interactions between citizen and government and between citizens but in a civic space. So I don't think this should be... it's not... and the short headline - and I wrote the headline because I was trying to get it out there - was 'ABC becomes Facebook', that's not it, is to say, you don't want to be ubiquitous, but you want to have a Civic Platform somewhere where civic rules apply. So there's a whole lot to unpack there. But Lizzie and I have been talking about this a bit. I think the big pushback is actually, and it was dissed on ABC TV this morning, because it would be too costly so it would never happen. But that whole idea of what does moderation look like? what does mission look like? I don't know, if you want to throw out your sort of moderation thesis of that being also a social purpose pursuit, though, Lizzie?

Lizzie O'Shea 21:01

Oh, sure. I mean, yeah, I've written about this in a couple of different ways. But I guess one of my arguments is that content moderation is like civil service, we're relying on people to do this work. And it's enormous how much they do without any payment. You know, I don't really spend much time, I have to tell you, on Facebook for obvious reasons. But the only places that I would ever spend time are actually in groups that are well-moderated. And there were rules, people are required to enforce them. There are disputes and discussions about how that will occur. And that takes time and resources and it can be really tiring. But it's actually the work that needs to happen to be able to build community infrastructure, like that's part of the job. And so my view is, we should aim to, you know, have as many kind of local content moderators as we can, give, elevate them, and that might be paying them, that might be electing them, there may be multiple ways in which you could remunerate them in money or in status or other things. But recognising that that work is so central to making these spaces function. You know, one of the big criticisms of Facebook is, of course, the dissemination of misinformation, you know, in places like Myanmar - they've been accused of contributing to genocide. And part of the problem, I think, is that they're a Californian company that's seeking to apply American values in all different parts of the world. They don't, that may not even have local content moderators who do that work. They outsource the content moderation. They do it largely to an extremely underpaid, exploited workforce. And there are so many context-specific moderation questions. Questions about content moderation are often questions about politics. And so while I think it's really critical that we get these structures right, and I think Eli's observation about building those structures, and there's...it can be complementary between the private and public sector and these things are really critical. When then the question comes about what are we doing about content, I think we have to have localised people who collaborate and communicate, but have a context-specific capacity to be able, to build community and that should be recognised and valued as important labour that builds our democratic strength, our, I guess, health as a democracy.

Peter Lewis 23:09

Yeah, Eli, you've spoken a bit about the norms on different platforms, you know, you've got...They're not all the same. LinkedIn people are their professional self, even though it's, you know, a bit icky. Twitter, everyone's doing their tweets on the toilet. Don't know what's going on in Facebook, but how do you actually build norms around a community?

Eli Pariser 23:28

Well, I think I mean, I just want to underscore a lot of what Lizzie just said. I think it was, it's a really important key to this whole equation, which is, you know, essentially, again, if we make reference to functional, like community institutions and the physical, offline world, you know, they do rely heavily on these kind of stewards, care workers, you know, teachers, librarians, social workers. There's a whole bunch of people who have a lot of expertise, not just in their domain, but in the people in their community. And that expertise is really important when things start to get a little tense. Because you can take someone aside and kind of, you have a pre existing relationship. A metaphor I've been thinking about a lot lately is, you know, the country of Rwanda, which has 12 million people has done really well in the pandemic. They've got about 8000 cases so far, and like 70 deaths. And the secret to that success has been that, instead of investing in a centralised health infrastructure, which they didn't have a huge budget to begin with, they invested in this community health infrastructure where there are community health workers in every single community. Some of them are trained nurses, some of them are actually just kind of like volunteers that have undergone some training. But they've built the community trust so that when the pandemic hit, there was a pre existing infrastructure that they could just very quickly, you know - people, these folks knew that communities they were in, they knew the characters, they knew who to go to, who is going to be influential - and they could just roll out, you know, masks and roll out social distancing really quickly. And so, I think, you know, living in the kind of late capitalist society that we do, it's easy to imagine that kind of centralised technocracy is the best solution to problems. And actually, there's a lot of countervailing evidence that for some problems, as Lizzie's pointing out, you know, really this like localised model is much more effective at doing these things. And I think we're seeing certainly that the Facebook Empire approach is failing in a whole bunch of places, and probably less so even in Australia or the United States than in Myanmar, or in a lot of other countries where there's really a political crisis. But I just think like investing in that infrastructure and finding ways to support that infrastructure is such a critical part of the puzzle here. So...

Peter Lewis 26:00

I love that idea of a digital caring economy, though, like, you know, we're only just getting our head around the industrial caring economy. And we, in our report, talk about community workers whose job is to go and build and nurture community in this public space. And also, the idea of technologists that are designing interactions, which I think is a bit like your public planners, but digital, where if your technologists are not driven by how do we squeeze money out of this for Silicon Valley, but how do we pursue a series of shared objectives, common good civility, engagement, nuance, friction, and building those into the way information is served? It will be very different. Yeah.

Eli Pariser 26:45

Yeah, I think so. And again, you know, this isn't theory, this is when you examine, you know, the whole host of like, pretty solid communities like this is one of the traits that you see across almost all of them. Like, it's very hard to have a community that's really working well, without this kind of like work and leadership. And part of the business model of these companies has been essentially to, like, abstract that out and claim that as margin. And Facebook, I just, I think, a couple hours ago announced that it made \$26 billion or something in the first quarter. Part of what that money is, is, you know, extracted from the institutions that were doing this work beforehand. And so I think it's not unreasonable to say, okay, we kind of need to rebalance this a little bit, because we have local

journalism, certainly in the United States anyway, just completely cratering. A bunch of these other institutions are falling apart and we don't really have a plan to like, reinvest digitally. And so that's where I see this work being so critical.

Peter Lewis 27:51

Hi, Lizzy, it was really interesting when Facebook did the news takedown in Australia. We called for a boycott of advertising while the news was down, and it was like crickets, like there was no progressive organisation apart from Digital Rights Watch, who put their values where.... their money where their values was, who said we'd go away, because they were all saying whether they were progressive politicians, whether they were Amnesty International, they were all saying to me, but that's our oxygen, and we can't cut it off. That reliance is a real thing, isn't it Lizzie?

Lizzie O'Shea 28:21

Yeah. Well, and they had their oxygen kind of for them. You know, we've had a long term debate between us, Peter, about the usefulness of the media code. And you know, one of my objections to the media code is that, really government had vacated the space for building the civic infrastructure that we're talking about. So even if we were in heated disagreement about that particular proposal, I think it's interesting, now, we're talking about what I think was missing and gave rise to this situation. But yeah, it was ironic, of course, because Digital Rights Watch advocated against the Media Bargaining code, because we think there's better things we can be doing to build a robust digital infrastructure for both reporting news, but also combating disinformation. But it was ironic, of course, that we were subject to the news ban and had our page stripped of all content, notwithstanding that we ended up on the same side as Facebook in that particular debate. I think it highlighted to us and to many people, something we already knew, which is building a dependency on these platforms is dangerous for civic organisations. And any civic organisation that's thinking of taking that path needs to look at it really carefully because they could lose access to their communities. So our view was that we had thought about this for a long time, but we decided this was the last straw, we were going to disengage from Facebook. We don't have a Facebook page anymore. And I think we need to live that example for others to follow. But there are other organisations that have done the same thing. There's a really interesting example in New Zealand of a media organisation that decided to disengage from Facebook, in the wake of their dealing with the Christchurch massacre and they document how they've managed to make their audience or find their audience notwithstanding that, and I think that it brings new opportunities as well. You don't become beholden to the rules that are set by, you know, Mark Zuckerberg and his friends about what kind of content will get prioritised. So you know, the tail stops wagging the dog, so to speak, for these media organisations. And I think that can open up bigger possibilities. So we certainly didn't ever feel beholden to Facebook in that way but we felt like it was the right time to make a move to disengage. And we'd encourage other organisations to do so. And even if it's not, necessarily in your immediate realm of possibility, I think we can start to move our dependence away, start to, you know, treat Facebook as perhaps a place where you might find people, but then you shift them off. And you start to build alternatives so that it's not so dangerous, and you're not so vulnerable to the whims of a billionaire who's trying to wring out concessions from a democratic government. And I think that's the lesson that we all need to learn from that experience.

Peter Lewis 30:47

And Eli, just before we go to questions, it does...I've got this nagging question in my mind that starts with: everyone thought Facebook was progressive because of Obama and because of the way he used it. And I think we've learned that it's not just a neutral platform, but I just... my thinking is that micro targeting pulls people apart and makes it really hard to build movements. And I don't know if we can share and like and micro target our way to movement. I'm interested in your thoughts on that.

Eli Pariser 31:22

I think that's a really..., I mean I made some arguments about that in the book. And I think that, you know, one of the challenges is, you know, it allows politicians, movements, everyone to kind of speak out of multiple sides of their mouths. We don't have to make arguments that are trying to enlist a broad swath of the public, we can pander, you know, micro pander, essentially. And that sort of produces dividends in the very short term, but in the longer term, you know, the muscles start to atrophy of like, how do we actually build broad coalitions and broad arguments? And so I do agree with that. I think when it comes to kind of the surveillance capitalism argument that, you know, targeted advertising as a business model is the source of all of this. There, I'm a little more sceptical just because I don't actually think it's as much targeted. I don't think that if Facebook moved to a payments based business model, that it would be all of a sudden be an extraordinarily healthy digital space. Because I just think, you know, there are qualities that successful public spaces have that are really hard to replicate inside of any VC backed startup. So...or it's not a startup anymore. But you know, so I think we need to be thoughtful about where we're diagnosing the challenges so that we can think more creatively about what the solutions look like.

Peter Lewis 33:15

Do you want to pull a few questions out Noah and then we'll sort of round it out with a bit more, you know, forward looking.

Noah Schultz-Byard 33:23

That sounds great. Great conversation so far, and the questions are coming in. Always welcome more questions from the audience. We've got quite a few here. And I thought I'd kick off with one from Deidre Stewart, and she asks, "What the panellists think about the Australian education system, which tacitly or explicitly endorses Google, through overuse of Google Docs and other services? Also, what are the panel, think about the shifts to everything online, in the education space with all of the associated advertising distractions and surveillance behind the scenes?" Lizzie, I thought we could go to you to talk about the Australian context first, and then on to Eli for his opinions, perhaps more looking at the American experience.

Lizzie O'Shea 34:11

Yeah, I think there's a couple of issues here. To start with the first one, I suppose. I mean, I think it is a problem that the Australian Government and various state governments vacate the space of this kind of infrastructure work to allow schools to be able to use a platform that they perhaps created. And I think that as in the government could create and invest in this kind of work to build tools for schools to be able to use and relying on the private sector is, you know, the next step in the decades-

long tradition of outsourcing some of this work to the private sector, without proper controls, but also in a way that it inhibits our ambition to be a builder of things in this field as well. So that's disappointing, and I think at the very least in terms of procurement, the state, the governments - both state and federal - should be throwing their weight around to perhaps require that private providers do certain things before their product is used in school environments. The second point about how we teach children around or whether the reliance of online learning, creates problems in terms of distraction. I mean, the thing I would say about this, this is a constant issue we have raised with us at Digital Rights Watch - you know, children's rights, I suppose, in online spaces. And I am reluctant to put all penal problems on the transition to online learning. I think actually, one of the skills we're going to have to teach children in the 21st century is coping and dealing with an online life that is unfortunately framed around keeping people engaged and online, keeping people distracted. I think we can also talk to them about why that needs to change, but insulating them off from that world isn't the answer either. And so I think it is really important that we have discussions about where we want the world to be, and what's wrong with it in its present, but also being able to build your capacity and your resilience to be able to manage those difficulties while they're still here.

Noah Schultz-Byard 36:03

Great. Eli, to you and then Pete, if you've got something to add as well.

Eli Pariser 36:07

I think I agree with what Lizzie just said. I'm not a purist when it comes to, you know, the the kinds of infrastructures that folks use to make things work online. But I do think actually there's, you know, if I were an educator, at the same time that I'd be introducing Google Docs, which is a tool that I think you could reasonably expect that a lot of kids will run into at some point... Anyway, it'd be interesting to talk about the business model behind that, to talk about lock in and how Google Docs as part of an effort to get people in this ecosystem where they're sharing more of their data, and why that's valuable to Google. And I think having that kind of critical understanding of what am I participating in, could be a really valuable, you know, learning experience. I also think, you know, that the.... and I think we've we've talked a bit about this, but to me, the ideal, you know, sort of state that we're looking for isn't a purely public solution, or a purely private one. It's one that melds you know, that draws on the skills that private enterprise can bring, and that public-spirited institutions can bring. And so I think we're really looking for, we're not looking to kind of replicate Facebook and a private in a public domain, but kind of augment in some of the places where the market is least likely to serve people's needs. And yeah, there are plenty of them. So I think that's where we should be looking.

Peter Lewis 37:39

We put out a paper last year called Tech-xit, when the Big Tech companies started threatening to withdraw services to Australia and really identified the reliance of both the health and education systems on the Google tech stack as a real risk to be mitigated against. And so there is a real piece, as he says, in government procurement in really thinking through what we want our Tech architecture to be. As a parent of teenagers, I have, I'm living the experience of online learning, kids being totally surrounded by noise. But my insight is that the real issue here is not the tech learning, it's the business model that shifted all the costs in Australia to the parents. So, bring your own devices, you buy the computer, they plug into the system, and then they've got the world's most

awesome library and toxic candy store in the one box, and they're being expected to self moderate. There's addiction by design built into games, there's a sense that there's, that you know, that there aren't the clear spaces and doors to go through from one place to another. And that doesn't even bring porn into the equation. So I just think there are a whole lot of issues and it's been... just the move has been so fast that this generation has almost been the guinea pigs and we're not quite sure what it's going to be like having a full life learnt online.

Noah Schultz-Byard 39:00

And, Pete, while I have you, there's a question here around the report that was launched today and the concept of public social media. Casey Tonkin asks, "Do you really think is it possible for the ABC to evolve at the cost of the taxpayer into something like a social media platform, given the severe opposition for ABC funding from the likes of News Corp? How could such a proposed change fit into political strategy in the current media landscape?"

Peter Lewis 39:29

Well, this is my cunning plan, guys. I actually think that you've got to start with the ABC, because it's got the reach, but you can't build it from scratch. But the idea is you build the network, and then it makes absolute sense at some point where that network is mature, to structurally separate the content from the platform once that platform is mature. At that point, we propose that accredited media organisations would have access to that platform, whether it's a hyperlocal publisher, a specialist publisher or, God forbid, an accredited media empire like News Limited. So I actually think there is, the resistance is more likely to come from within the ABC than from the other media players. And we briefed the other media companies about our thoughts and there's a receptiveness because if you talk to News Limited and ask them, what's the biggest threat to your worldview - ABC or Facebook? They'll say Facebook, and you have the same conversation with the ABC and the answer is exactly the same thing. After - and I know that Lizzie and I disagreed on the News Bargaining Code - but after that collegiate and albeit self-interested negotiation by media companies in Australia, to land that code, there is a sense of working together and thinking it through together. And so I'm really optimistic that this idea can, with goodwill and thinking, it's not just out there as a, you know, a brain fart, we've got a process set up where we're going to engage people through this process over the next little period, and put out regular discussion papers and engage around this.

Noah Schultz-Byard 41:02

That's great. And Eli, I thought I might ask you a question that's come in from Marianne. She says, "Algorithms are not based just around mathematical code. Developers employ neurobiology and psychological sciences in order to manipulate people's cognition and emotions, which has an effect on their mental health. We need to challenge our governments to appoint Chief Medical and Health Officers with expertise in the health arena to look at this. How might we start a campaign? How might we work towards that outcome?"

Eli Pariser 41:37

I think it's a great question. And I think, you know, this question of how algorithms shape people's well being, to what degree they're manipulative. You know, I think that the frustrating roadblock to a

lot of this work is that we simply just don't have the data from a Facebook to be able to, you know, make the very conclusive arguments as to what the wellbeing effects are, which is by design, obviously. This is what... they're not, they're not stupid. And so I kind of think, I mean, I think that having, you know, mental health professionals who can speak to these issues is really important. But we also really need to agitate for the kind of ability to study these platforms that would allow us to make a more compelling case about this and many other issues. And to me that's sort of like... I would actually start there. Also, because it just seems like a fairly reasonable premise, that when so much power is aggregated in one place, that's a complete black box to the public but with consequences for our politics and our health and so many other things that it would make sense to have an ability to peek inside. And so there are some policies that are being developed in the United States by me personally and other folks that are thinking about how do you do this in a way that doesn't expose everyone's data, but that does allow researchers to actually understand what's going on under the hood. And what the effects are.

Peter Lewis 43:28

It's really easy. Sorry...you go Lizzie.

Lizzie O'Shea 43:31

Well, I was gonna say, members of the audience might know about this social contagion experiment, this study that was done by Facebook where they sought to manipulate users' feeds and to see what effect that had on their emotional state. And that happened a number of years ago and of course, when they released this study, kind of in a nonchalant way, though I think they were probably a bit surprised at how appalled people were, that they'd done this. And the answer, I think, is that they still do that kind of experimentation on users. And they still do that analysis of users, but they don't make it public because they've learnt their lesson not to. And so, I agree, I think it's absolutely critical that researchers that aren't from internal to the company, get access to that data. And it should be mandated so that we can start to map the social effects. I did read an article the other day, actually, because we're talking about mental health issues here but it's also got political consequences as well, and I thought it was really interesting. They were profiling someone who worked with Far Right YouTubers, and I think it's Lauren Southern, but it might have been another Far Right YouTuber, who, incidentally, I think he's now got a slot on Sky News here in Australia and didn't, couldn't find a home anywhere else, but happy ensconced with Murdoch... But there was an off the cuff reference in the New York Times that indicated that a third of the traffic to her YouTube channel came because it was directed by the algorithm, which I think is astonishing, because these are people who are building a movement of fascism really, Far Right, Nationalist types and recruiting people into it. And a third of that work is done by the algorithm which I think is really telling. And so you know, the assumptions that we make about the state of politics and how it's fallen to the gutter, and we blame each other for it, I think we should be starting to talk about how the structures are in fact fueling this. And then if we want to tackle some of the political problems we face, we are also going to have to examine how these automated systems implicitly, sometimes directly, sometimes with the knowledge of the company, contributing to these immense divides.

Peter Lewis 45:25

And guys, our friends at the Public Health website Croakey, really, along with climate change, and other environmental factors really look at Technology through a public health frame and I think it's a

really useful way of going about it. And to Lizzie's point, if algorithms are seen through a public health frame, then there is an imperative to be transparent, because they are having an impact on health.

Eli Pariser 45:50

If I can, if I can push the social contagion experiment thing, one click further...you know, I mean, number one, in some ways, that is like, that's all the newsfeed is is a series of social experiments. And what's notable about the social contagion experiment, it was that it was intentionally designed, but actually, you know, most of how the newsfeed is working now is based on machine learning, where, you know, the AI is basically drawing inferences about what is getting people to engage, that no one at Facebook necessarily has even formed into like a hypothesis or a thought, is just that this is lighting up, you know, this group of people and so let's adjust this way. And so, to me, we're even, you know, it's creepy enough to have people having an idea and experimenting on another group of people. But actually, what we have is kind of like a self experimenting, self optimising system, that even the people who are at Facebook don't totally understand what the effects of are at any given time. And I think that just only militates even more toward the necessity of having some transparency and some ability to kind of like, understand what that system is doing, what are the outputs?

Noah Schultz-Byard 47:11

Interesting. Well, we have time for one or maybe two more questions before I hand back to Pete. Time is flying, when you have a cracking conversation, it really seems to just disappear. But thank you to the hundreds of people who've joined us in the audience today and for your questions. There was one more I thought I might start with you on this one, Eli. Stef Ray asks, "When social media is regulated and over moderated, people leave and end up on sites like 4chan and 8chan. These platforms have created the Q Anon conspiracy, and allegedly led to the storm on the Capitol in the USA. According to sociologists, moving them off mainstream platforms doesn't solve the issue, it intensifies it. What is the answer when we're looking at, you know, wanting to create a better space through regulation, but then having to balance the requirement to keep it lively enough to not force people off of it?"

Eli Pariser 48:06

So, I think I mean, so I'd say a couple things. One is, I don't think it's necessarily the worst thing to have if, you know, extremists have to find their own message boards or their own places. Obviously like, ideally, we deal with those problems at the root. But the second best thing is that they don't get to take advantage of and gain algorithmic amplification to reach millions and millions of people. And that's essentially what folks lose when they leave the platform. So I think it's important to call that out, because I think that's one of the main functions that Facebook offers is this kind of, like algorithmic introduction to a whole bunch of people who have never heard of you before, and never heard of your ideas before. But I guess for me, you know, this points to a broader restructuring that I think we'll see over the next five or 10 years and how we think about the internet, which is right now, you know, there's sort of like a few big empires and then these little, you know, you can almost think of like a 4chan as like, the, you know, ISIS, the, like, the little kind of state-in-the-making off on the side. And I think what we, what I hope we move toward is something that's kind of much more pluralistic in terms of being decentralised, but that also has a kind of federated structure so that

those, you know, those different networks, both have some amount of autonomy, but then can cross connect. And, you know, you can kind of think about it as - I mean, this is a move that nation states made at some point from being you know, 'it's a monarchy and there's one ruler' to 'we're actually going to figure out how to have all of these different localities'. I think we're on the verge of that on in the web. And I think there'll be pluses and minuses to those structures but I'm actually pretty optimistic that, because for all the reasons that we were talking about with kind of the community governance aspect, I think it's actually a more manageable task, when we federalize them, when we think about trying to tweak one algorithm that's supposed to meet the needs and values of, you know, 7 billion people.

Noah Schultz-Byard 50:40

Great. Lizzie, I'm going to give you an option. You can either add to that one or get a whole new question.

Lizzie O'Shea 50:47

I'm happy to squeeze in one more question. I don't want to, I don't want to touch on...Eli's very qualified to cover it.

Noah Schultz-Byard 50:56

Well, this question comes from Steph Ray and she says the Facebook situation is a case study for how privatisation and free market freedom can create serious problems for democracy. Is this a good argument for regulating media better, including monopolisation. Surely, if there was more competition and diversity in all areas of media, it would mitigate some of the Cambridge Analytica-style effects.

Lizzie O'Shea 51:22

I agree with you, I mean, I'm reluctant to get into the weeds on the Media Code, because members of the audience may know a lot about it and it is in place. But I did want to mention it because it's now a model that is potentially going to be used in other parts of the world. Obviously, it created a situation where the attempt was to level the playing field between tech companies and media organisations in order to facilitate payments for news content. And that was the design of the regime. There was forced arbitration in the event that agreement couldn't be reached. Now, I had a lot of objections to this. And one of the key ones was that you had to meet certain criteria in order to get access to that code. So you had to be of a certain size, you have to make content for a particular audience - the Australian audience, you had to have journalists who subscribe to various codes. And into my mind, it seems such a disappointment, because part of one of the great things of the digital age is that there's all sorts of different people doing different things that sort of look like news, maybe don't look like traditional journalists going out and then typesetting an article in a newspaper, but do contribute to the public debate, including, you know, satire and comedy, as well as investigative journalists who have their own YouTube channel, that might be very large, that might also cater to an international audience as well as a local one, that might fall out of this regime. And so what I really didn't want to see is the entrenched interests that exist with large media companies being further entrenched, whether it was in accessing money or ultimately appearing in

something like a showcase, whether it's on Facebook or Google, becoming the entrenched media organisations that you go to for authority news. There is some utility in that and that's what I thought sort of thing people use the ABC for, that kind of trusted news source that they know has come from a quality source. But I really think it's a disappointing, missed opportunity to have not kind of made sure that, if you are going to do that, create a regime where the spoils of the digital age and data economy start being redistributed to media organisations, I would have thought at least what you could have done is make sure that those media organisations, they're defined broadly, so that the diversity of the media can be, can flourish, rather than, you know, just large media organisations like Murdoch and others, benefiting so I think we could do work to fix that. And I'm hopeful that journalists will continue to do it. And that's one thing I wouldn't like to see replicated in other parts of the world.

Peter Lewis 53:43

Can I have my.... we're not gonna have a debate about the bargaining code. My one right of reply to that, on that, is that the thresholds are 150 grand turnover. And I totally get that there's lots of different roles for people to play in a civic network but maybe it's the old journo in me, but I still think that you need at least something to hang the centre of conversations around and there is an ethical framework, at least in the construction around journalism that is worth fighting for. But let's do that another time. We do it every second week anyway.

Lizzie O'Shea 54:16

We do it all the time. Anyone's welcome to come in...

Peter Lewis 54:18

Yeah, so just to round this off, I just thought we'd finish off on a positive note and talking about movements. And this is a great conversation. Every time we talk about these things, Lizzie and I, and I know you'd find this too Eli, it feels like there's more people ready to open their ears. But it also feels really difficult to take the conversation to the concrete. So big shout out to Digital Rights Watch which is building a movement but also to Lizzie's book "Future Histories", which sort of talks about what we can learn from the past in terms of building movements around the need to reimagine. So I just thought if you'd both want to sort of finish with a bit of a note of positivity of what we can do next to keep these conversations rolling. Start with you, Lizzie.

Lizzie O'Shea 55:04

I'm more excited than ever, I feel like we are building a movement where people start to recognise the inherent limitations of allowing private sector organisations to dominate digital infrastructure. And I am seeing it from the ground up you know, in terms of advocacy, people we work with, technologists which I think is really interesting often within some of these companies, as well as everyday people who might have shied away from technological debates, because they felt like they weren't qualified to comment. They start to realise that a lot of the debates we have about technology are debates about politics, and that they might have something to say then. And that I think, is a really exciting period that we're entering. That's the reason why I think we're really entering in this exciting period. So I'm more positive than ever, that we'll start to see real policy

reform and I don't think it's too late or anything like that. I think we've got the real potential to start building the infrastructure of a more democratic 21st century that can build on the great capacity that's been generated by the internet and networked computing, and recognises the potential limitations if we don't actively decide what those spaces look like.

Peter Lewis 56:09

Thanks, Lizzie. And Eli, your update to finish this off today?

Eli Pariser 56:14

Yeah, no, I share the optimism and, to take a page out of Lizzie's book, you know, I think we can look to the past to see how, over history, you know, citizens have actually come together a whole host of times, at times of social fragmentation and social pressure to invent new kinds of public institutions. And that's been libraries, and it's been public parks - it's all of this infrastructure that we now take for granted and think of as pretty quotidian. But people amended that. And they did it through feats of kind of imagination, through figuring out these replicable templates and then building them in lots of different communities. And I think that's a solution that is available to us. And that, the problem as much as anything, is just having the audacity and the boldness to imagine that if Elon Musk gets to imagine whatever crazy scheme to put, you know, robots on the moon, we can imagine better community infrastructure for, around communities that isn't dominated by a few big companies from the United States.

Peter Lewis 57:22

Yeah. And that's a great finishing note. It's almost... when we put this report out today, the pushback from journos is oh, but it's never going to happen or it's, oh it's going to be too expensive. There's almost this kind of learnt self loathing that we can't imagine big, so thank you both for being part of this discussion to think big today. And I'll hand back over to Noah to round it out.

Noah Schultz-Byard 57:44

Well, that's great and it's always so good to end on a positive note, but unfortunately, we are out of time today. So I would also just like to extend a huge thank you to all of our guests, Eli Pariser, Lizzie O'Shea, and Peter Lewis. Also, thank you to everyone who's logged in. We had more than 300 people join us for the conversation. Thank you for your great questions. As always, I'm sorry, we couldn't get to all of them, but your attendance and your participation is really appreciated. Please join us in the coming weeks for more exciting webinars. As I say, you can sign up via our website australiainstitute.org.au. On Wednesday of next week, we'll be talking to Labor's Deputy Leader in the Senate, Kristina Keneally, about why integrity, scrutiny and transparency are fundamental to democracy. Thank you again for joining us today everyone. Please look after one another out there and we look forward to seeing you again next week. Thanks all. Bye.

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