

**"We create future –now!"**

# **“Digitalisation – restricting civil society and challenging youth agency”**

**Dr Lasse Siurala, Aalto University, Tallinn University**



**Optimistic faith in digitalisation from 1980s to Arab Spring in 2010:**

**Social media as a liberating medium promoting openness and democracy.**



**In 2013 Edward Snowden revealed that US and UK security services gathered data from citizens' emails.**

**The 2016 US presidential elections and the UK Brexit vote apparently were manipulated using Facebook data.**

**Oxford Dictionary defined "techlash" in 2018 as "a strong and widespread negative reaction to the growing power and influence of the large technology companies"**



**Oxford Dictionary 2018 runner-up for Word of the Year**

**Since Arab Spring and Snowden revelations there has been**

1. Increasing techlash,
2. Exponentially escalating growth of the big tech,
3. Increased control of Digital Technology over civil society and youth
4. Expanding action of govs and EU to regulate tech companies,





Arab spring: 10th anniversary

# 'The release of six decades of fear': Egypt's lost revolution

▲ Composite: EPA /  
Guardian Design Team



# Freedom House 2018 report: "THE RISE OF DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM"



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Freedom on the Net 2019

## The Crisis of Social Media

Share



*What was once a liberating technology has become a conduit for surveillance and electoral manipulation.*

**"Declines outnumber gains for the ninth consecutive year"**

**"40 out of 65 countries use automated technology and sophisticated programs to gather and analyse social media use of citizens"**

# Myanmar military blocks Facebook, social media as pressure grows

*Activists say at least three arrested in Myanmar's second city hours after military blocked Facebook and other social media in a bid to quell dissent.*





# Record 43-year sentence for insulting Thai monarchy sends a chilling message to activists



By **Helen Regan** and **Kocha Olarn**, CNN

🕒 Updated 0853 GMT (1653 HKT) January 20, 2021




PATIPAT JENITHONGTHAI NEWS/REUTERS

**Over 3.8 billion people have access to the internet and according to Freedom House (2021):**

**“71% live in countries where individuals were arrested or imprisoned for posting content on political, social, or religious issues”.**



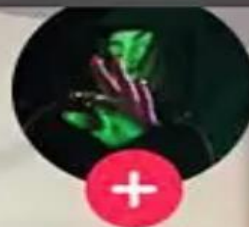
A large crowd of young people is gathered outdoors, likely at a protest. Many individuals are wearing face masks and holding up smartphones, possibly recording or taking photos. The crowd is dense, with people standing on a raised platform or ledge in the background. The scene is set in an urban environment with buildings and trees visible in the background.

**Kreml human rights Commissioner Valerij Fedejev:  
"Tiktok provoked young people to join Navalny protests"**

**25 Jan 2021**



 TikTok



474.8K



11K



5030

@almorozova

#навальний #свободунавальном  
у быть против власти - не значит б  
ыть против Родины

The Russian government communication watchdog Roskomnadzor ordered TikTok, Instagram and YouTube to delete their material related to Navalnyj protests. All of them seemed to comply, at least partially. (January 2021)









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# India to investigate protest 'toolkit' shared by Greta Thunberg

*Creators of a farmers' protest toolkit shared by teenage Swedish climate activist to be probed by the New Delhi police.*



# Greta Thunberg effigies burned in Delhi after tweets on farmers' protests

**Celebrity interventions inflame sentiments in India as police investigate pro-farmers toolkit**



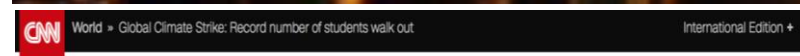
▲ Activists burn an effigy depicting Greta Thunberg in Delhi. Photograph: Danish Siddiqui/Reuters



# DEMOCRACY DEFICIT

- a widespread feeling of citizens that their voices are not heard

FFF created visibility, networked, boosted change in some countries and improved the image of youth, BUT were also dismissed and “brushed aside as immature”.



## Global Climate Strike: Record number of students walk out

By Isabelle Gerretsen, CNN

Updated 1029 GMT (1829 HKT) May 24, 2019



### MAY 2019:

1.6 MILLION PARTICIPANTS,  
1300 TOWNS,  
125 COUNTRIES

### SEPTEMBER 2019:

6-8 MILLION DEMONSTRATORS  
4500 LOCATIONS  
150 COUNTRIES

# **DIGITALISATION**

## **Resisting democracy deficit: creating awareness and understanding of digitalisation**

Too many young people are not aware of its effects, the negative in particular, youth work tends to recognize the positive elements only and youth work policies seldom cover digitalisation:

“the unrecognizability of the unprecedented” Shoshana Zuboff (2019)



# THE RHETORIC OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY HIDES ABUSES AND RISKS?

- ✓ Addictive gaming
- ✓ Ubiquitous social media
- ✓ Echo chambers, extremism and fakenews

# ADDICTIVE GAMING

**‘Gaming disorder’** – “impaired control over gaming, increasing priority given to gaming over other activities to the extent that gaming takes precedence over other interests and daily activities, and continuation or escalation of gaming despite the occurrence of negative consequences.”

WHO added it in 2018 in its International Classification of Diseases (1-5% of gamers)

**‘Problematic gaming’** – people at risk of developing gaming disorder (8-12% of gamers).

During the COVID-19 pandemic the game industry has made spectacular profits.



## **UBIQUITOUS SOCIAL MEDIA**

Very frequent use of social media is reported to be linked with stress, anxiety, lower self-esteem, inadequate sleep, bullying, grooming, FOMO (fear of missing out), nomophobia (fear of being without access to a smartphone), mental, physical, educational and social problems as well as dependency (equal to dependency on alcohol and drugs).

# THE POWER OF THE BIG TECH AND THE RISING PUBLIC INTEREST

Researchers like Shoshana Zuboff “The Age of Surveillance Capitalism” (2019) and Nick Couldry & Ulises Mejias “The Costs of Connection” (2019) argue that the dominant power of big technology corporations, their ‘*data colonialism*’, extraction of data, non-transparent analysis, questionable commercial and political uses of the data and ‘*digital surveillance*’ of govs and companies are “toxic for human life”. Following this, the 2020 EU digital strategies maintain, that we need digitalisation based on open data controlled by the users, respect for privacy of data, transparent methods of analysis which work for people and for the good in society.

For more details, see Lasse Siurala (2020) “Youth work and techlash – What are the new challenges of digitalisation for young people” at the EU & Council of Europe Partnership webpages.

# RIGIDITIES AND YOUTH AGENCY

“We don’t want these things done by 2050 or 2030 or even 2021. We want this done now.” Greta Thunberg at World Economic Forum in 2020

“The narrative highlights urgency and immediacy – not slow, conflicting and long political and administrative processes.” Heejin Han and Sang Wuk Ahn (2020): “Youth Mobilization to Stop Global Climate Change: Narratives and Impact”

After massive youth demonstrations in Australia, the May 2019 elections were to change climate policies, but “older, suburban economic conservatives, and the rural, coal-producing, sparsely populated voters defied expectations and made clear that the country remains deeply conservative and open to the far right on a variety of issues.” New York Times, May 19, 2019

Rigidity of technology industry to change



# Scenarios for civil society and youth agency in a digitalised society

Administrative and economic paradigm change

Rigid conflict society

Change of democracy paradigm

Democracy deficit

## 1. Shrinking civil society.

CSOs marginalize due to surveillance and censorship. Algorithms, privacy and security issues risk independence. Extremism and populism disintegrate civic space. Youth and youth movements become frustrated by slow political processes. Citizens lack awareness and understanding of technology. Neoliberalism intensifies. Big Tech dominates life.

## 2. Rising awareness.

CSOs and young people become aware of and criticise digital control and abuse. Public sector supports the agency of citizens and invests in critical digital literacy. References to civic space opinion become fashionable, but not necessarily implemented. Technology provides new dialogical forums between citizens and policy makers.

## 3. Technocratic harmony.

CSOs survive and become service providers rather than critical political actors. Youth participation is limited to tokenistic youth councils and established YNGOs. Tech companies increase transparency, monitor content, restrict surveillance and start to negotiate with stakeholders, but not with civic space and resist major changes.

## 4. Citizens matter.

Civil society become a driving force through a rich variety of agency in direct dialogue with political decision-making. Youth engage in new forms of local and global youth agency and in Big Tech criticism. Technology companies are regulated and change their opaque processes. Fakenews, misinformation, hate speech, aggressive marketing and surveillance are better controlled.

Dialogical politics

Collaborative contract society

## What should youth work do?

- 1) *Align its policies on international and national levels with the new research and strategies, like the EU digital strategies*, to combat the domination of the tech industry to support user privacy, open data use and promotion of digitalization for the ‘social good’.
- 2) Develop *a broader framework for youth work* to re-orient itself to digitalisation and tech industry repression.
- 3) Create a *practice based critical digital literacy curriculum*.
- 4) *Awareness-raising of young people*; sensitising them to their digital rights, encourage critical thinking of existing abusive practices and empower to imagine different ways of using data and to act - perhaps creating movements.

THANKS!







# Why is it so difficult for young people to unplug?

University of Maryland study. Researchers asked 200 students to abstain from using all media for 24 hours. Students reported following;

- (1) *dependency* with symptoms characteristic of clinically diagnosed addiction,
- (2) *isolation* as going without media, meant going without their friends and family,
- (3) *inability to keep track on relevant newsfeed*,
- (4) *boredom and distress* and
- (5) *difficulty to manage the day without music in the ears*.

The study concluded: “**most college students are not just unwilling, but *functionally unable* to be without their social media links to the world**”.

# **ECHO CHAMBERS, FAKE NEWS, VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND RADICALISM**

Internet is not as itself the cause of extremism, but it provides an opportunity for radical groups to communicate their message, to recruit new supporters and to strengthen their internal identity and motivation. Internet has been described as 'a catalyst', 'a facilitator' or a 'mobilisation frame' for radicalization processes. More important factors are poverty, uncertainty, individual inclination to authoritarianism and the emergence of extreme-right populism in Europe.

Echo chambers in which internet users decide to read only certain kind of information and news. Algorithms and trolls learn the preferences of these user groups and deliver respective news to their bubbles.

Social media and its architecture (the big platforms and their own ecosystem) provide a very fertile ground for accumulation of hate speech and radicalisation.