Panel 2: Conditions

Louisa Lincoln

Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome back from lunch. My name is Louisa Lincoln. I'm a doctoral candidate here at the Annenberg School and a doctoral fellow with the Center for Media at Risk. I'm delighted to moderate our second panel of the day entitled "Conditions." So, over the next hour and a half or so we will build on the discussions that emerged from this morning's panel on context, to consider how the media platforms we all engage with on a daily basis are shaped by specific political, economic, and legal conditions. We'll discuss how these conditions exacerbate or intensify the media's potential to put social justice at risk. And then think about how alternative conditions might enhance or improve the media's efforts to support social justice movements.

We have three brilliant panelists here that will guide us through this discussion, all of whom bring different areas of expertise and geographic orientations to their work and that will inform this session. First, we'll start with Natalie Fenton, a professor of Media and Communications and co-director of the Center for Global Media and Democracy at Goldsmiths, University of London. We've had the pleasure of having Natalie here with us at Annenberg this semester, where she has been a visiting scholar with the Center for Collaborative Communication. Along with Alison Hearn from this morning's panel, she

led a fantastic series of workshops on capitalism and critique. Along those lines, Natalie's research focuses on issues relating to civil society, radical politics, digital media, news, and journalism. She's particularly interested in issues of political transformation, radical media reform, and reimagining democracy.

Next up, we'll have Gholam Khiabany, also from Goldsmiths, University of London, where he teaches in the Department of Media, Communications, and Cultural Studies. His academic career has focused on the relationship between citizenship, political activism, and media and cultural practices, including alternative media. He's authored and edited numerous books, including *Iranian Media: The Paradox of Modernity* and *Blogistan: The Internet and Politics in Iran*. Most recently he co-edited *The Handbook of Media and Culture in the Middle East*, which came out earlier this year.

Third, and finally, we'll hear from Wazhmah Osman. Wazhmah is a filmmaker and an associate professor in the Kline College of Media and Communication at Temple University here in Philadelphia. Her book, *Television and the Afghan Culture Wars: Brought to You by Foreigners, Warlords, and Activists*, analyzes the impact of international funding and cross border media flows on the culture and politics of Afghanistan, the region, and beyond. She is also the co-director of *Postcards from Tora Bora* and co-author of the forthcoming book

Afghanistan: A Very Short Introduction. And we've also been very lucky to have Wazhmah on campus here at Annenberg this year as a visiting scholar with both the Center for Media at Risk and the Center for Advanced Research and Global Communication. So, without further ado, I will turn it over to our panelists for their prepared remarks and then we'll open up for what I hope will be a rich audience discussion afterwards.

Natalie Fenton

Wonderful, thank you so much. I want to extend my thanks to the Center for Collaborative Communication and the Center for Media Risk for putting on this great event, but particularly to the Center for Collaborative Communication for having me as a visiting scholar. It's been amazing and really a privileged period to spend it here with Alison, and with the incredible doctoral students and postdocs that I've been sitting with. I really do want to say a heartfelt thanks to all those students who have come along to the workshops, to all those people we've bumped into in our working spaces, and the chats, the really generative and wholesome chats that we've had. Those conversations have very much informed what I'm about to say and the work that I've been building. So, a huge thank you to those people.

This paper tackles the familiar and enduring argument that democracy and capitalism are incompatible. While the majority of media and systems of communication are based on capitalist principles, they cannot be democratic themselves, or serve democracy well. So where does that leave us for newly imagined theories of democratic media that might, in the words of the symposium brief, "enhance the media's efforts towards social justice." Now I want to argue that in order to recast and reclaim democratic media for the common good, we need to conceive of it anew by rooting it in social and communicative justice and in justificatory processes and outcomes Arguing that justice is a collective phenomenon and at the heart of what democracy must be, it should also then be at the heart of what a democratic media could become. So, I'm not merely talking about enhancing the media's efforts towards social justice, but rather arguing that a media operating for democracy be rooted in both social justice and also communicative justice, rather than being complicit in undermining both.

This also requires, I think, a reimagining of what this thing called democracy might be. I'm hoping that I'm kind of riffing off quite a lot of what's already been said over the past couple of days. But it's drawn from a new book that I'm pulling together at the moment. The book is called *Democratic Delusions* and it's out next year. It's also based very much on over 15 years of media reform, activism, and research. (I want to a shout out a thanks to all the media reform activists out there who helped me form these ideas.) The often anti-democratic, and I would argue, anti-social justice roles and practices of our media and communication systems have occurred alongside and been

entangled with the now commonly decried demise of democracy, while many organizations of media and communications also herald themselves as democracy's savior. I think those two things need to be very much disentangled and reset. In neoliberal democracies around the world, media and tech giants insist on peddling the belief that they are, in their current forms, one of democracy's vital organs, and that without them democracies in their current form will cease to function. But it's their current form that is part of the problem.

As Colin Crouch proclaims a condition of post-democracy, where politics has morphed into spectacle and decisions are made elsewhere, so our media thrives on sensationalism, feeds off clickbait, channeling our attention to celebrity politicians, and affirming soundbite culture. As authoritarian forms of government emerge and hold on to power and far-right parties gain in popularity around the world, so digital media fragment debate, foster extremism, and contributes to the loss of accountable knowledge. As burgeoning levels of inequality within and between nations distance ever greater numbers of people from the political systems that have overseen their immiseration, so mainstream media narratives extol the unworthiness of the poor. As political responses to climate catastrophe failed dismally in their reach and ambition, so our media focus on natural disasters that shock but rarely explain the complexities of Western imperialism or the enduring power of the fossil fuel industry and its command over governmental policies

around the world while techno-solutionism becomes the norm, captured by the very forces of capital accumulation that have caused the problems in the first place. Part of the issue is that so many of these claims—such as the news media as fourth estate, holding power to account, or social media as glorious temples of free speech, those claims that they are vital organs of democracy, are hinged on a liberal democratic hegemony that has become firmly located within neoliberalism. And as much as we as media and communication scholars may critique those positions, we very rarely contest the liberal democratic framework in which they reside.

Even as neoliberal democracy portrays the symptoms of chronic disease—from the spread of political corruption and parasitic infestation of unelected power mongers, in the form of PR gurus and corporate lobbyists, to the festering wounds of massive and increasing inequalities, embroiled in legal and bureaucratic mechanisms, that silence and exclude peoples through forms of expulsion and punishment—it is still to liberal democratic norms that many return as their ultimate social and political landing place. And our systems of media and communications are no exception. They are firmly aligned with a liberal capitalist economy. They promise economic freedoms that liberalism claimed to offer. Freedoms that in the last 40 years have morphed into a neoliberal economic mantra of deregulation, privatization, and marketization along with the de-publicization of everything. Liberal

democracy has become the dominant model of democracy precisely because it has proven to be so compatible with capitalism and poses little threat to coloniality. Yet, it is liberal democracy that our mainstream media and communication systems seek to uphold, through restricting and undoing regulation and redistribution, whilst extending market freedom and commercial ownership rights. Around the world, with very few exceptions, the concentration of media and tech ownership increases, and public media weakens, as social injustices proliferate.

The neoliberal democracy that has developed in a relationship of interdependence with these oligarchic media systems has evacuated all meanings of the common good once associated with democratic intent, to become no more than the racket for the powerful that far too often provides the cover for global capitalism's exploitative and expropriating ways. But if we disentangle ourselves from those drift nets of liberal democracy as practice and concept, then we can point to emergent forms of democracy across the world that seek to break with capitalism, to decolonize practices. To establish economies of solidarity and care, that eschew exploitation and expropriation, thus enabling different understandings of democracy to breathe and surface. And we can find here, I think, media practices that foreground the resistance of groups against the capitalist logics of expropriation of land and nature, and the exploitation of peoples, most of which align with racial oppression, and

point to practices of governance that can reveal democratic forms aligned with social, political, economic, and communicative justice.

Struggles and practices that seek to transform economic power structures and address this thing called democracy by way of the social and political practices of justice, are a call to combat oppression, exploitation, and discrimination, such that those who are subjected to systems of domination are able to participate as equals in co-determining the institutionalized social order to which they belong: democracy. Capitalism is a socio-historical driver of social injustices, of climate catastrophe, of financialization, of de-democratization. Capitalism is deeply and constitutively undemocratic because it creates and feeds off social inequality. In the capitalist workplace it is capital that has the last say. Our capitalist systems of media and communications not only sustain a capitalist economy, but also nourish a capitalist society and hegemony. To build a counter hegemony requires decision-making that's inclusive, where all those affected are entitled to participate on equal terms, to decide what media and communication systems are needed in any one place at any time. If it's to be genuinely democratic, it must also be just and address injustices. In other words, it needs to be transformative. A democratic media for democracy must then confront capitalist power.

So how can we begin to think about

democratic media and communication systems that work for a reconceived, transformative, and just democracy? How do we begin to reorient our thinking towards media systems premised on social and communicative justice? Now, in the book, I take seven key concepts that need to be rearticulated in their relations to media and democracy, to reimagine both in a social justice frame. But here I'm going to talk for a couple of minutes about one. The first one: power.

If we see power through the lens of social and communicative justice, then we have to address democratic media for democracy from the perspective of powerlessness. From a political economic perspective, we are very used to seeing mainstream media and big tech media as dominant power over. Alphabet, Meta, and Amazon are the most concentrated forms of media and communication we've ever seen. You all know this. The powers they possess are vast and immunize them from scrutiny. They control entire markets, setting the rules for the way people communicate and the way businesses trade. As intermediaries, they collect rent from users in the form of fees or data that reap vast profits and accumulate huge financial assets, enabling them to expand into a wide range of sectors, including education, health, food distribution, and finance. They are key to the contemporary condition of advanced capitalism.

Neither should we sideline the persistent power of legacy media in legitimating capitalism. One really obvious example that we can point to is all the great research that's been done on the reporting that led up to and followed on from the global financial crash, which comprehensively failed to interrogate the wrongdoings of the financial sector, ignored the experts, let the bank's off the hook, and legitimized austerity economic policy. Austerity policies that were rolled out in the UK as a result of some of that coverage being supportive of it, and that are still ongoing, have left vicious social scars, many of which will never heal. The gap between the rich and poor has widened hugely. Child poverty and the number of children in care have increased massively. The public realm has been devastated. Rebuilding schools and hospitals simply stopped. In 2022, in the UK, we had more food banks than McDonald's restaurants.

Social injustices all marked by race, class, gender, and disability. That pro-austerity argument was rolled out again by the media in response to the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, promoting the view that the government had reached the limit of public borrowing and simply run out of money. We're just undergoing a public inquiry into how the government handled COVID-19 in the UK. During that inquiry, it has come out, or its been *alleged* (I know this is being recorded), that there have been serious backhanders that were made to some of the Tory rags, as we call them, the conservative supporting newspapers of *The Daily Telegraph* and *The London Evening Standard*, which were very supportive of the

line that the government was taking during the COVID-19 pandemic. You will remember that Boris Johnson, our former Prime Minister, was a former columnist for *The Daily Telegraph* and that a former Tory Chancellor of the Exchequer became editor of *The London Evening Standard*. And since then, the owner of *The London Evening Standard*, the Russian oligarch Evgeny Lebedev, was given a peerage in the House of Lords by Boris Johnson.

So seen through the lens of power over, then, we would look to limit the power of those vested interests of politicians, wealthy owners, or powerful businesses. All well and good, except such measured measures, where they have been attempted, have been fragmentary, piecemeal, unable to keep up pace with technological innovation, and spectacularly unsuccessful in terms of serving the common good. For the most part, to different degrees around the world, we've seen the consolidation of corporate power, an increase in political interference, and the reduction in independent journalism, with global powers such as the World Bank, IMF, and the ITU aggressively pushing for privatization, deregulation, and commercialization of all of our media and information infrastructures.

But while I would always argue, and have done vociferously over time, that media and tech ownership matters, dismantling and limiting the concentration of media and tech ownership only takes us so far. It may relax the stranglehold of power that certain media

and tech corporations exert, but it doesn't necessarily alter the neoliberal nature of the system they work within. That's where I think understanding powerlessness becomes crucial. If we take account of the need not only to limit power over, but also to grow power to, then it becomes crucial to enable support and sustain forms of media and tech ownership that are not for profit, are fully independent of commercial pressures and government preferences, are organized democratically such that users and workers have power and control over how these organizations operate, what they produce, and for whom, in response to the needs of the communities they serve, and for social, political, economic, ecological, and communicative justice, rather than the behest of the market.

Democracy cannot work for some and not for others. So, while much theory on conceptions of social justice pivot around socio-cultural and structural dimensions of exclusion, pivoting around economic resources, and of course, Iris Marian Young focuses on communicative justices. But I am suggesting that we need to bring both social and communicative justice together to encourage a view of democracy that is far more than free and equal participation in our media systems, but rather to understand democracy as an entire way of life. That encourages us to see social and communicative injustices as systemic and structural. Systemic and structural change in our media and tech worlds means moving towards forms of communicative egalitarianism, a rejection of the

concentrated power of ownership over media and data, to a people's media and communications infrastructure built on the principles of socio-economic and communicative parity, and social and communicative justice. The creation of what I start to talk about in the book, as a critical media commons that confronts inequalities and exclusions and seeks out transformational shifts in power relations across our institutionalized social order. Media and tech are shared information and communication resources necessary for a reimagined democracy that is co-owned and co-governed by its users and workers. In other words, democratic media and communication systems oriented to social and communicative justice must address powerlessness rather than simply holding power to account.

So, what might this look like? Any theory of communication is, as Raymond Williams noted, a theory of community. And the act of communing involves multiple inequalities that have to be taken into account. A media commons then speaks to the sharing of resources and services stewarded for the collective good, rather than for private gain, in a manner that's necessarily different from commercial media and offers, importantly, a different value system to capitalism. A commons does not common alone. It sees commoning as a site of resistance and collective struggle, and a place of democratic imaginaries. A media commons is a wholly different way of conceiving of our media and communication systems. One that would promote an array of alternative

media tech ownership models at different levels, from the hyperlocal to the international. I'm trying to think of the entire media landscape here. A critical media commons is thus engaged in social and communicative justice that requires understanding, exposing, and challenging historical and systemic injustices that ideologically, institutionally, and operationally reproduce the harms of capitalism, heteropatriarchy, and settler-colonialism. Rather, media commoning sees social and communicative justice as a process that can enhance collective lives among heterogeneous publics. And of course, the problem then becomes of how you put that into practice. But maybe we can come back to that in the questions. Thank you.

Gholam Khiabany

It's really, really great to be here seeing some old friends that I haven't seen for ages. I am genuinely grateful to Annenberg. I wanted to apologize in the first place for the raw, the grand title of the paper, which I wanted to do, "the rise and the fall of the self on social media." I can assure you that what I'm about to say is neither grand nor unique. I was just effectively thinking for myself, perhaps rather loudly, about a couple of related points when it comes to one of the most enduring and crucial points about the impact of the internet and the rise of the individual and the self and all of that.

I haven't been to the United States for a good few years. As an Iranian, I certainly

didn't want to take the risk of traveling to America during the Trump presidency, and all of you know the reason for it. But this time, as I was applying for authorization to travel here, I noticed that in addition to the amusing old questions about whether I had been a prostitute, drug dealer, communist or terrorist—of course in my case, all of the above—there was a question about my profile on platforms such as X, Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn. And I thought that this is rather an interesting addition on many levels. In particular, that the very platforms that are hailed for connecting the local (I, a Middle Eastern man) to the global (i.e. the United States) could actually prevent me from being with you today. Such forms of state intervention are, of course, nothing new. The ruling class have always wanted a weaker state in relation to capital and a stronger state in relation to labor. And this can also be observed, and has been observed by many, when it comes to the state's differential treatments of the platform, on the one hand, and the users, on the other hand. This morning, we had that amazing point that was made about this type of cop watching. They are allowed to watch us constantly, but we certainly cannot watch them.

This also raises an interesting question about the well-known claim that social media gives a voice to individuals, seeming to allow everyone to be the media, free from all constraints. Each isolated individual, thanks to the Internet, has access to the knowledge and free expression of individuality on a global stage. These claims are connected to the ideology of an abstract individual that has long been at the center of what has been called modernity. In addition, and on top of that—and again, this point has come up quite a lot this morning—there is a rise of the far-right on the internet, which leads to serious questions about some of the writers who celebrate the internet as a space whose technological affordances predominantly allow for the production of valuable and progressive autonomy and individuation. This is a particularly pertinent point to consider, since many individuals appear to have surrendered individual critical capacity to the causes of Trump, Modi, Bolsonaro, Erdoğan, and many more. The role of social media in mobilizing such forces cannot be denied.

What does this—that was the question that was bothering me—spectacular renunciation of personal freedom of the very self, in favor of particular in-groups against outsiders, tell us about the role that platform media plays? Why and how is it that the most conservative longing for the past, yearning for the good old days, is finding a voice on futuristic platforms? Why does the self appear at odds with a long-idealized notion of the individual in bourgeois society? And I'm thinking that one of the reasons for raising these questions is to go back and revisit Manuel Castells much celebrated idea in *Communication Power* that Web 2.0 technology has produced a new form of communication, that is mass self-communication, which has given rise to an unprecedented autonomy for the communicative subject. We know that

throughout modern history, the democratic potential of communication technologies for the expansion of the public square has been trumpeted. What is new, of course, varies in different historical epochs. The printing press revolutionized European intellectual life within 15 years of its inception and remains still to this date an epoch-defining technology. Walter Benjamin clearly saw the revolutionary potential of photography, film, and mechanical reproductions of works of art to produce new ways of seeing that decentered dominant traditions of perspectives. Bertolt Brecht equally argued for the possibility of making radio into something really democratic, that could be turned into a two-way communication. One that was capable, as he put it, not only our transmitting, but of receiving. Of making listeners not only hear, but also speak, of not isolating him, but connecting him. And one can go so on about the other technologies that have followed.

But in each of these cases, the authors were positing the potential of these new technologies rather than describing their contemporary usage. Castells's point goes beyond those. And three years later, in the final chapter of *Networks of Outrage and Hope*, he argued that the role of the internet goes beyond instrumentality. The deeper connection between the internet and network social movements is part of the cultural transformation which highlights, as he puts it, the emergence of a new set of values, defined as individuation and autonomy. He pointed out that individuation is not individualism, but the cultural trends that

emphasize the project of the individual as the paramount principle orienting his and her behavior. For him, the internet makes it possible for the individual to build autonomy with like-minded people because, again as he puts it, the internet embodies the culture of freedom that allows the network to withstand control from any command center. That has been one of the significant points that has always been made about the decentrality of the internet.

This idea of withstanding control from any command center surely must come as a surprise to those people who have been on the receiving end of Trump supporters organizing themselves online. As Natalie Fenton has highlighted, Castells invests a great deal of faith in the capacity of social media to bring into existence multiple and diverse voices with an apparently unprecedented autonomy in the mode of communication. The reality is that autonomy, even if it's vaguely defined, is never outside of material and political realities. In fact, as the American philosopher John Dewey reminds us, and here I am I quoting, "Liberty in the concrete signifies release from the impact of particular oppressive forces; emancipation from something once taken as a normal part of human life but now experienced as bondage." He goes on about what this has meant historically and continues to say, "Today, it signifies liberation from material insecurity and from the coercions and repressions that prevent multitudes from participation in the vast cultural resources that are at hand. The direct impact of liberty

always has to do with some class or group that is suffering in a special way from some form of constraint exercised by the distribution of powers that exists in contemporary society." By celebrating the new organization of the style of social movements and insisting that they could not exist without the internet, Castells appears to measure the autonomy of agents of social change only in relation to, and I quote, "the obsolete political institutions inherited from a historically superseded social structure." As such, autonomy is not really defined in his work in relation to capital, but to all the forms of political institutions, such as political parties and trade unions.

Empirically we know that, contrary to what Castells suggested, frequent networking on the internet and through social media doesn't bring about what he said, as empowerment, autonomy, and enhanced sociability. We also know that internet use doesn't bring about an increase in what he refers to as feelings of security, personal freedom, influence for people with lower income and less qualifications, for people in the developing world, and for women. In fact, we have seen just the opposite. What has also become rather obvious is that the far-right gathered around the culture of digitally organized networks has been behind the proliferation of racist, sexist, and transphobic ideologies. Such presence and activity also tend to embolden the mainstream right and so extreme voices have spilled over to the mainstream media. In such a political conjuncture—and this is also at a time when the precarious workers of tech companies,

including Amazon, Ubers, and so on, are fighting for the right to unionize themselves—how can one begin to talk about autonomy and celebrate the demise of obsolete political institutions?

Theoretically, though, Castells appears to be borrowing from Karl Marx vague remarks about a future society that would promote human self-realization. Effectively, he's trying to reject that notion of autonomy based on that concept of self-realization. Except, as someone who no longer believes in changing the world, but rather in interpreting it, the future is not socialism, but the internet itself. Marx famously argued that in contrast to capitalism in which material conditions dominate individuals, in the future the original and free developments of individual will ceases to be a mere phrase, since this development is determined precisely by the connection of individuals. A connection which consists partly in economic prerequisites, and partly in the necessary solidarity of free developments of all. I have no intention here and neither is there time for revisiting these aspects of the future. Suffice to say that I personally do believe that no one should thrive at the expense of others. And that the self-realization of each individual has to be the precondition for the self-realization of all. I take that for granted. But surely Castells must know that this is not what social media platforms are offering. To just give you one example, the cleaners of Facebook offices in Dubai, Sao Paulo, Mexico City, Seoul, Hyderabad, Buenos Aries, as well as in Paris and New York, cannot be said to enjoying

equal access to autonomy, individuation, and the same class relations as celebrity or corporate users, let alone as those of the owner of the platform itself.

In the light of the current political climate, particularly the growth of the far-right, with the increasing racism and the explosion of misogyny that accompanies it , I'm also curious about the point that was raised by Roger Hancock in 1971. And here is a quote from him, "If a criticism can be made of Marx's theories of justice, it is perhaps this: he uncritically assumed that the full realization of man's potentiality is good in all cases." What if that is not the case? And this is, of course, not an entirely new concern. That of refusing the rights and freedom of others. One can go back to the history of slavery, colonialism, and all of that, but also one's own personal freedom has been the subject of attention for so many writers whose different perspectives are worth exploring a little bit. In my view, it would absolutely be a big mistake to try to understand the mainstream of the far-right by looking at the so-called authoritarian character of the individuals or at specific nations. I don't think there is such a thing. But this is precisely the particular questions that Theodor Adorno attempted to uncover in *The Authoritarian Personality* and also what Hannah Arendt explored in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Wilhelm Reich, another critical theorist, was also particularly good at recognizing the impact of the broader social context and environment on some characteristic traits of those who participated in the fascist movements in the 1930s and 40s. He lists them as such: an uncritical relationship to the self, an uncritical relationship to the particular groups that this self belongs to, their categorization of society along insiders and outsiders, yearning for a past when things were better, and finally, that they all come to life when there is a collapse in authority.

In contrast to these writers, CLR James, a Trinidadian intellectual and activist, examined totalitarianism by offering a fascinating interpretation— it is really such an adoring book—of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. In a book called *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways*, written while he was on Ellis Island fighting deportation from the United States, and he was finally deported, James suggested that the madness of the world in which we live, the appearance of a new personality that is impotent, embittered, overwhelmed by rage and hatred, and ready to destroy the world, had been captured by Melville for James, because Melville had warned us about this nihilistic and obsessive figure in the shape of the central character of *Moby Dick*: Ahab. James was not interested in in the banality of evil, the totalitarian or authoritarian personality, but in the actual structure that paved the way for this apocalyptic society. For James, capitalism tended towards irrationality and is much like Ahab, the central character who is intent on destroying his crew and their social order. The sanity that is required to intervene, to stop the annihilation of Pequod (the famous boat in the novel), cannot come from the self that is expressing itself on social media.

The irrationality and disruptive impulse of global capitalism cannot be challenged by a mere expression of the autonomous self on social media platforms. Platforms do not exist outside the historical and political contexts, and existing world-system that we live within. Their main function is to extract values and generate profit; not by connecting autonomous individuals to social movements, but to corporate users. This arena of advertising and promotion, even in the human presentation of the self, in its actually-existing structure, is more suited to the rise of influencers instead of that of intellectuals. And as Nicholas Garnham suggested ages ago, the project of the democratic generalization of the public sphere is a project to make everyone an intellectual. Furthermore, as Srnicek points out, the power asymmetries between the platforms and individual users arise because of the platforms' position within platform economy, and this in turn significantly reduces the individual user's choices to either take it or leave it. Either accept the terms dictated or reject all of the services provided by the platforms. Even in the most apolitical reading of this existing reality, the self appears not to be able to communicate with a mass without undermining its own individuality. Thank you.

Wazhmah Osman

Hi, everyone. So, my talk will shift a little bit. I'll be talking about some of my ethnographic research in Afghanistan, as well as some more recent articles. Before

my departure for my longest stretch of fieldwork in Afghanistan, this was in 2009-2010, my dissertation advisor, who's the prominent anthropologist Fay Ginsburg, said, "Make sure you take especially good field notes in the first few months before everything normalizes." In my first week back in Kabul—which is both a place that's familiar to me, but also strange—I remember having dinner with my uncle Abib and other family with the TV on in the background. I had to put down my naan bread, because I was shocked by the images of violence that the news was showing. They were showing the aftermath of an explosion at a busy bazaar in detail, complete with body parts shown and people sobbing. But everybody else at the dinner table was unfazed by this. Soon it became normal to me to see these types of images on TV and also to feel the shockwaves of explosions around Kabul. Including, in one case, when a nearby popular mall with a hotel that's built above it was bombed and it shattered our apartment windows. So, in this talk, I will analyze the politics of the contrasting regimes of representational violence with a focus on their political-economic infrastructures.

In the West, due to the stratified nature of capitalism, both television stations and the government censor news-based televisual violence in a variety of ways. For example, the broadcasting of uncensored violence during dinner and many other times, as is commonly done on Afghan television stations, would not happen in the US in the same capacity, for ideological reasons and

also because it would not be conducive to putting viewers/consumers into a buying mood or mode. Ideologically speaking, what violence is aired or disseminated depends on who is carrying out the violence and who the victims are. The corporate US media tends to censor violence, particularly when it highlights US government militarism abroad and at home, be it with civilian casualties or the deaths of marginalized communities by the police. During the Iraq invasion, then Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld tried to ban Al Jazeera as coverage and called it, "vicious, inaccurate, and inexcusable." Al Jazeera defended its frontline reporting as desperately needed coverage of civilian casualties. Al Jazeera offices were also targeted and hit both in Kabul and in Baghdad during the post-9/11 era. And with the situation in Israel and Palestine, not surprisingly, Arab media is showing considerably more footage and visuals of the bombing of Gaza and its aftermath, and conversely, mainstream US and Israeli media is focusing more on the Hamas attacks.

During the global war on terror, former President Obama briefly lifted the almost two-decade long ban on showing the caskets of killed American soldiers on US television stations and reinstated it presumably due to Pentagon pressure. Global structural disparities and hierarchies which favor international correspondents and embedded journalists, also place frontline journalists and fixers (who play a vital role in the international news production chain) in peril, thereby creating an over-reliance on

prepackaged and managed wartime news. Before American television began catering to corporate and government interests, television played a critical role in mobilizing the anti-Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movements. Furthermore, Hollywood films and many video games, including FPS or first-person shooter games, also present violence in a variety of ways, ranging from glamorizing violence to stylized and gory. But they all hide the true effects of violence behind a dazzling veneer of special effects that sanitize violence. New technologies of violence, such as weaponized drones, which were used for the first time in Afghanistan, were portrayed as precise, clean, and even sexy; right out of the James Bond movie. These depictions differ starkly from the realism and realistic violence that was displayed on Afghan television channels in the news and in anti-war public information campaigns.

So how is this possible when many Afghan media organizations received funding from the US government? Having poured billions of dollars into TV and radio in the Middle East, the US government certainly wants to generate pro-US content and ideology. Indeed, according to Afghan producers who spoke off the record, funding is contingent to a degree on portraying the international forces favorably, including refraining from broadcasting what commonly people in Afghanistan and the international community call CIVCAS, which is short for civilian casualties. And speaking with American officials, who also spoke off the record, they fear CIVCAS being used as

propaganda by insurgents, namely the Taliban and ISIS, to turn public opinion against the international military and even the non-military development aid community. The Taliban did and still do have a powerful media infrastructure and distributed CIVCAS compilations throughout the bazaar networks. Yet, despite the constraints and pressures, Afghan television producers managed to show a variety of violence on most stations—and a lot of it—which I have argued is a testament to media development and development aid taking shape into a public service media model. When some media organizations succumb to pressure, other media organizations would step in and will report on war and violence uncensored. In a competitive media market, in order to remain relevant, all stations had to remain truthful to a degree.

Based on my interviews and programming, most media producers do not support or condemn one group or another. Rather, as Afghans or Afghans in the diaspora, most of us have been impacted in a variety of ways by almost a half century of war. By strategically condemning all war-related violence, they hope to achieve its opposite: peace, unity, and a lost humanity. As seasoned anti-war activists know, showing the realities of war can coalesce public opinion against war, if not actually achieve peace. And my conversations with personnel from UNAMA, which is the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, they also mentioned that they similarly prepared yearly civilian casualty reports, "as part of

an advocacy-oriented approach to reduce casualties." UNAMA shared its data, which I and many other people relied upon (it is quite accurate), with the assailant parties, "so that they may address the harm they cause and implement measures to better protect civilians." Fearful of the powerful effects and unintended consequences, dominant groups and elites try to curb mediated violence instead of their own real violence. They, like the weapons industry, have multibillion-dollar lobbies and PR campaigns, yet scholars, activists, journalists, media makers, and artists are trying to challenge the myth of the new glossy, aseptic war by showing the realities of warfare, demanding accountability, and putting people back into the equation and the picture, quite literally. Thank you.

Louisa Lincoln

Thank you to our panelists for your very thought-provoking presentations and for grounding our discussion this afternoon. I'm sure our audience is eager to jump in with questions, but I want to go ahead and start with a question from a student. Assil?

Assil Frayha

Thank you so much. I think my question is broad. Maybe not necessarily to the panelists, and I don't want to like sidetrack the conversation. But I was thinking of the title, and I was like, well this is a pertinent title at this moment in time, at the moment that we're living in our world, knowing that there's a war out there, knowing that there's

a genocide out there. And then I did feel a bit eerie about being here with no mention of what's happening in the world, given that we are communication scholars in a communication school. So, I think I started thinking also about the title, the same words, I just flipped them, and I said, "when social justice puts media at risk." That being, for example, so far there are 55 dead journalists in Gaza, 4 in Israel, 3 in Lebanon. And that's why I think as a media school we should be talking about the media workers who are being killed for doing their job, are being killed for covering a genocide. And that's why I thought maybe also having another title for this event, being when social justice puts media at risk, should be highlighted. And thank you Wazhmah for mentioning the bombing of Gaza, as well. And sorry, again, I don't mean to sidetrack the conversation. I just felt it's important to bring this to this room, seeing that we are all scholars of media and that this should not be not spoken about or not discussed. Thank you so much.

Wazhmah Osman

I'll just start by saying, you know, you're absolutely right. I think what's happening right now is very relevant to what we're talking about. And that's why my newer research is making comparisons between violence abroad and showing how it's linked with violence in the States in a variety of ways and in particular, in Afghanistan and the US. But, you know, as I was writing my talk for today, I was thinking with everything going on, in Israel/Palestine, that there's so much so much overlap in terms of, as you mentioned, the unprecedented deaths

of journalists, as well as the use of embedded journalists, which is something I've looked at in the case of Afghanistan and I've talked about before as a big problem in many respects. And other people have written extensively about it, too. So, thank you, Assil, for raising that, that would be my comments. I think this space is one where we can talk about these things.

Natalie Fenton

Yeah, and I think actually, when we're talking about mainstream media and its coverage of conflict and war, there are some interesting analyses coming out now that won't surprise anybody in this room, I'm looking at the ones in the UK in particular. But the ways in which the conflict is being reported now is heavily inflected in one direction through some newspapers and not in others, as Wazhmah said, if you look at Al Jazeera or the Arab media, you'll get a very different take. And that comes back to, why is that happening? I think a lot of what Wazhmah was saying was referencing that. I'm on the board of an organization, an investigative journalist organization called Declassified UK. And they are trying to do some of the things that I think are relevant when we're talking about a media for social justice. And they're only able to do that in a space which is external to those kinds of mainstream pressures because those mainstream pressures come with a very clear political-economic interdependence. So, they are working, not just under capitalist conditions, but also in their relationship to neoliberal governments alongside that. And that causes or gives this structural

framework for a particular type of reporting. And what Declassified UK have been able to do, operating outside of that, is to offer a completely different understanding and interpretation, with a much deeper analysis of the history and context that's going on. And also, I would say, in a context of an understanding of peace that is quite different. They do that through using ex-military personnel, as part of the journalist infrastructure, by kind of referring back to communities on the ground, by working with people in whichever ways they can, to try and deeply understand what's going on. So, when we come back to the question of conditions, they're operating under very different conditions. And I think shifting that framework, both economically, politically, and socially to those different conditions is where we need to look if we're going to think about how, as you put it, when social justice put media at risk. Those two things, you can switch around those phrases, but though the conditionalities remain the same.

Gholam Khiabany

Thank you so much. Really, really important, crucial points. The only thing I wanted to add in addition to what colleagues have raised is that there are at the moment, good, brilliantly empirically rich investigations, which are beginning to emerge. There are a couple of really good articles on the Declassified UK website. Al Jazeera has produced and some of the platforms have produced some interesting commentaries, but I think the two pieces on Declassified are very, very rich in terms of the details. Some brilliant commentaries

from Mondoweiss, which, if I'm not mistaken, is being run from New York with a fantastically large number of Jewish activists, pro-Palestinian activists.

In terms of the actual coverage itself, I mean, to be perfectly honest, I don't think actually there is anything particularly new. You look at the way that the Palestinians are portrayed, you look at the sources they used, you look at the images and the discourses, what is made visible, what is made invisible and sort of irrelevant. We have been here before so many times. This is not the first time in the entire history of the Middle East in particular, this I can talk a little bit with some kind of authority, this is not new to us. You just kind of look up and read descriptions, the stuff that we teach on a regular basis, it is quite common, about the West and the Rest, the East and the West, the Orient and the Occident. I mean, the kind of images put together, the descriptions and the images, it is again, coming back with a vengeance, and something that would have definitely caused Edward Said to turn in his grave again, and again, and again, and again. It's depressing, it's awful. But one of the reasons also that is coming up is not so much because of the media coverage, the media coverage will continue to be this awful and this bad, but because of a significant presence of anti-war and peace movements. I don't think anybody was expecting that to be perfectly honest. I didn't think anybody would have imagined that 1 million people will be marching in the streets of London and hundreds of thousands of activists in New York and various other

places. That's where it matters. Because, you will get the stories about Google, for example, deleting some stuff, X not allowing certain materials for publication, and all of that. That's a battle. We have to democratize the media. But I think the battles come on the street, not on social media. That's where the actual points of a struggle, I think, remain to be seen where it goes.

Louisa Lincoln

Thank you all for your comments. And thank you for your question. We'll go in the back there.

Hilde Van den Bulck

Yes. Hi, Hilde Van den Bulck, Drexel University. I think it's a very important conversation. And thank you for three very thought-provoking presentations. I'll need way more time to think about it. I have a question maybe for Natalie, but by extension, anybody who would like to answer. I think I was struck by how in your PowerPoint, you have the "neo" between brackets. But your conversation, I think, is very much that maybe neoliberal democracy is part of the problem. That when it comes to media and social and communicative justice the market doesn't work, in a way. I don't know if you would fully agree with that, but that was maybe my take on that. So, my question is, I think one alternative that we're discussing here is certainly activism and we've heard already fantastic examples of that. There are also examples, I think, where

slightly longer-term activism gets recuperated by capitalism, gets commodified. There are many examples in the slightly longer term. So, my question, as a policy scholar, maybe is, do you think is there any role for, maybe we call it the state or just sort of more a more visible hand of government, in trying to get to that solution that focuses social justice? Maybe for policy more than sort of public interest, which has become such an empty signifier. So that's my question for you. And for anyone who would like to answer. Thank you very much.

Natalie Fenton

Good question. Since I've been here there's a new media bill coming forward in the UK. I am very engaged in leading a group of activists around trying to get in key amendments to that fucking bill. I'm sorry, but it's a terrible bill. The bill is a terrible bill and it's going to be rushed through Parliament. And it's being seen as being uncontentious. Yet, it's deeply problematic and it's trying to shift the whole remit, actually, of public service broadcasting, but it's doing it in a very neoliberal way. So, it's being seen as all very appealing and appropriate. I spend a lot—I mean some of the time I feel like I'm more in Parliament than I am in Goldsmiths—I spend a lot of time trying to finesse bits of policy to get small nuggets of change that have literally no impact whatsoever.

I do that stuff endlessly, because I feel it's one bit that you can't let that go. You just have to keep on with that. Erik Olin Wright

talks about the ruptural, the interstitial, and the symbiotic. It's that symbiotic bit where you're working within the system to try and do reforms. And sometimes you make many steps forward. And you think you've had great revelation, and then actually power and capital come back into flood that space and you realize you've not made as much progress as you think. So, I think that those interstitial things become really important when it's the bits in civil society, where you then are actually doing the stuff that you're trying to persuade the mainstream and policy world to regulate for. And that becomes then emblematic of the possibilities for change and transformation that are really key.

But I also think—and I do both of those things constantly, and I think they're both crucial, and I wouldn't want to let go of either of them. But I think the ruptural is also vital. So that moment of envisioning a utopian future of possibility, of how could this be otherwise? When might it be that actually we could think of a democracy that might function for all in particular ways? What would that look like? And what would it mean for media and communications? Because in a lot of those battles that I'm engaged with, unless you've got that vision, you don't make any progress. That's as important for the politicians, actually, as it is for civil society activists. And what I see missing is that rupture or vision, and it's kind of do we have to talk about it? People don't want to talk about socialism, so what do we call it? How do we progress that vision? That's why I'm working around the

critical media commons idea, because I feel it brings all of those social, political, economic, ecological issues to the fore, and gives it a big picture analysis, whilst not terrifying people by using the word socialism all the time. And actually, saying it is for social justice is a great way of doing that. It's bringing that in and focusing again on powerlessness. If we come back to the previous question, I wonder what war coverage would look like if we were focusing on powerlessness rather than power and holding power to account. It would have a different inflection.

Audience Member

Thank you. I like the reframing you've all done so far on social justice putting media at risk and other questions. And I wanted to ask Gholam in particular, but certainly open to everyone, a question about histories of media technologies and theories of the self at moments of crisis, change, turning points, or call it what you will. And I'm asking this, because I've been thinking in particular, listening to you Gholam, about cassette culture and Annabelle Sreberny's work on small media and cassettes in moments of revolutionary change, or the possibility of counter revolutions, and so on. Because cassette culture was as much a crucial space for self-expression as it was about public culture, but also in hybrid spaces, like taxis and that sort of thing. And I guess, if you were to think in that timeframe of say post-World War Two, media technologies, and stuff, where would you locate breaks? Is it about changes in the nature of state power? Is it about fundamental, global political,

economic transformations of the sort that Natalie had identified? Is there a way you can maybe give us that arc? And help think about how your critique of the self, as it's come out Castells and so on, can be given a very different direction if we start with, let's say, late-70s Iran, or some other parts of the world?

Gholam Khiabany

That is a really good question, but also a very, very big question. I mean, you're right, in most cases one of the significant important issues in the history of the radical media and radical social movements, for example, is always built around the connectivity of the individual with the empowerment not being distinct, not being separate, not being seen in isolation. And we have experienced that in some way. I'm assuming a great deal of work has been done already around Black Lives Matter and on so many other different, fantastic campaigns. There was a moment in which people would gather. I think the sources of the funding, or being an activist, or being community founded always did a great deal in terms of bringing people together rather than being a motivation for profits.

But on the other hand, and parallel to that, we've always had the mainstream media in a way that was organized. And much of the significant regulation, and supposedly democratization and professionalization, of the media that came, certainly in Europe, towards the end of the 19th century and early-20th century, was precisely to suppress

those radical voices, those radical forms of the media. My own colleague, James Curran, for example, has recorded that at a certain point in the mid-19th century you had 150 illegal newspapers, understand *newspapers*, and all of them vanished within a few years with the emergence of the commercial newspaper industry.

That pattern has been kind of repeated quite a lot. But I would suggest that actually the watershed moment, probably mid-1970s, certainly for Europe, with the coming of neoliberalism and the significant emphasis on the withdrawal of the state from subsidizing or investing in certain areas. I know that people will refer to the idea of the new liberalism, new liberal democracy. I think that's a really, really contradictory term, that there cannot be such a thing, because "new liberalism" is effectively based on, not just in terms of the economic policy, but hollowing out any notion of an idea of democracy or democratic possibility. So, in terms of what has happened, I would suggest actually the 1970s has been a significant factor for Europe and the United States.

In the rest of the world, I think that's a different matter. I mean, sometimes people can talk about various things, and all of us can be, to some extent, a little bit provincial in considering certain areas as being so important. So, people, for example, refer to Paris 1968 as *the* moment. For other people, who come from the rest of the globe and can perhaps point to their own existence, that

their life was always full of events. If you're an Indian, if you were Ghanaian, if you were from Jamaica, we haven't been short of events and all of that. And also, one could point out that after 1968, we had the revolution in Mozambique and Angola and so many other places. So, things don't stop or start in Paris, or London, or New York. It's much broader. But generally, I think speaking in the case of Europe, I would suggest the 1970s.

Mary Ebeling

Hi, everyone. My name is Mary Ebeling. I'm a professor of sociology at Drexel. And I really appreciate this panel. Thank you so much. Very thought provoking. I think I have a question that will be applicable to everyone's presentation. A few years ago, I had a student in one of my classes who had served two tours in Afghanistan. He also successfully sued, as part of a class action suit, the US government for stop-loss. So, there was a crisis during the Iraq and Afghan wars on the American side of not having enough soldiers, like in terms of recruitment. I also know that at the time of the Iraq and Afghan wars, on the American side, the US Army hired McCann Worldgroup, which is one of the most powerful marketing firms in the world, to basically sell the wars to two groups: the American public and potential recruits to the army. And they did this in part by creating a video game, a networked video game. I think it was called American Army or America's Army. Teenagers would play the game in the United States and at the same time soldiers in Afghanistan and Iraq would also be playing these games with

these kids. And they created army experiences in shopping malls where kids would go—they were recruitment centers, but these immersive marketing experiences. So, the student that I had a few years ago, said he witnessed before meetings the circulation of CDs of violent images, headshots from during the war, that were circulating among officers, among soldiers, and then they would watch them before having meetings in the field.

So I guess what I'm trying to pull all together for a big question for the panel is about the use of aestheticized violence, on the one hand, it is sanitized for certain groups, and then it circulates in very visceral ways for other groups, and the role of marketing and these infrastructures of late capital to kind of push and mobilize groups to basically suppress any sort of resistance against war. So, I'm wondering, to what ends are both kind of aestheticized depictions of violence, as well as visceral depictions of violence, served by various groups?

Wazhmah Osman

Thank you, Mary, for that. Great question. I can just start by saying that there's a large literature about how wars are packaged and marketed. The example you gave is a great example and there are a number of other ones just like it. I think, ultimately, though, no matter how much money is put into marketing wars, they're not necessarily that successful. Meaning that if you look at the war in Iraq, that was extremely unpopular as soon as we learned about the weapons of

mass destruction and the falsified information and all of that. So, no amount of marketing was going to save how unpopular it was. I think with the war in Afghanistan, they were more successful in marketing it as a good war. And it took the second half of the 2010s, in 2017, 2018, and 2019 when some really great journalistic pieces, and also books and articles, came out that shed light on it. Like *The Afghanistan Papers* that the Washington Post put out, which showed what a mess it was, the level of atrocities and bombing, and all of that. So yeah, I think it's gonna continue to be a big industry and I think that many of the students in comm and media programs also might get jobs. Whether it's in war propaganda, or these war video games, or other things. So, yeah, the economy is tanking, but it's always a big industry.

But I don't think they're always as successful as they want to be, because there is counter-media, alternative media that can shed some light. Including, to touch on Assil's first question, with what's happening in Israel/Palestine in terms of the amount of money that's being spent, and yet you have massive worldwide protests.

Natalie Fenton

This is not my area of expertise, at all. But I do think that there's a broader question, a broader kind of global geopolitics really, surrounding all of that production of imagery around who gets to be human and who doesn't. It pertains over all of it. So very much following what Wazhmah says,

we also know, or some of the things we know, is the ways in which violence and hate also travels online, in social media spaces in particular forms and ways, and where that lands. Then I was thinking, as you were talking about what Allissa was saying with the future of AI, and imagery, and aestheticization as well around this, and thinking, "Shit, where's that headed?" So, there are kind of alarmist bells around the whole process of how this is mediatized in very many ways.

But again, it comes back to some of those very similar, same conditions and conditionalities of the politics and the economics of it, in particular. But also, what does it mean then if we think about those who have no power, who are powerless? And where do we position that in relation to it? But propaganda has been with us forever, and different layers of propaganda have been with us forever, and it's allowed to thrive and flourish because of geopolitics.

Gholam Khiabany

A really, really important point. And, as Wazhmah has already suggested, a good literature about those topics exists. But in my view, the most significant change came after the Vietnam War. The assumption was, rather wrongly, that the media was a factor in the United States failure to win that war. The war that was of course un-winnable, as we know. And since then, if the question was about the role of the media, then they thought they had to decide to do something about the media. So, both the Pentagon in

the United States and the Ministry of Defense in the UK really did quite a lot of significant policy exploration. That ended up, on the one hand, rearranging and organizing media units within the Army, hence the idea of the so-called embedded journalist to make sure there is a wider control. But also, in the aspects that you highlighted, for PR marketing companies and in particular Hollywood to come in, as one of the main advisors during the 1990-91 war with Iraq was one of the main producers of *Top Gun*. So, Hollywood has been employed. The whole shenanigan and PR campaign resulted in such a way that one French intellectual even claimed that "the Gulf War did not happen." So that's one element that I think has been with us, but pretty much the success or the failure of it has depended on the anti-war movement. To what extent the feeling and objection to it has been raised.

But also, when it comes to different nations, you rightly suggested that the case of Afghanistan was a little bit different. Actually, I think in the case of the countries that are being attacked, there is also a little bit of a hierarchy in terms of visibility. Afghanistan mattered a lot less than Iraq, I'm sorry to say this. And in particular, the way that they mobilized the liberation of individual. In the case of Afghanistan, i.e. Afghan women suddenly became the cause and the reason for crushing the community. So sometimes a particular, single-issue subject can be used and mobilized. And I think the, in the case of Afghanistan, that was quite a significant factor. I don't think

just Afghanistan, though. We can surely remember and point to certain wars that came and went without people even making such a fuss over it. So, it depends on the context, depends on the country, and depends on the cause of the war, I would suggest.

Louisa Lincoln

Thank you for that question. And thank you for your comments. I'd like to thank Natalie, Gholam, and Wazhmah for their comments here. I would also like to thank my colleagues behind the scenes, Emilie Grybos and Anjali DasSarma. They helped put this panel together and I'm very grateful for their assistance. Thank you.