



Introduction

The Internet, Epistemological Crisis and the Realities of the Future: An Introduction to this Special Issue

José Ramos^{1,2,*}, Michael Nycyk³

¹University of the Sunshine Coast, 24 Adamson St., Malmsbury, Vic, 3446, Australia

²Journal of Futures Studies, Taiwan

³Department of Internet Studies, Curtin University of Technology Perth (Brisbane QLD based), Kent Street, Bentley, WA, 6102, Australia

As the Covid-19 pandemic unfolds with tragic consequences, it is a sad reality that many are using the opportunity to spread conspiracy theories, fake news, and dis-information. The crisis has an opportunity to bring the world together drawing upon shared understandings to drive common effort, but forces both political and grassroots are acting otherwise. Disruptive as it is, Covid-19 seems to be the tip of the iceberg. Today we also contend with a climate crisis, rising inequality, and a host of other issues that requires a higher level of being than what we express today.

This special edition of the *Journal of Futures Studies* addresses this crucial issue of how the internet drives or amplifies (depending on the viewpoint) an epistemological crisis, and the future realities being created by this phenomenon. The internet was initially envisioned as a place of sharing, collaboration, information finding and, to various degrees, a place of free speech. However, it now has (also) become a combative and mistrusted crowded space and an instrument of harm used by various actors to control and influence our lives. This edition examines the current crisis from several points-of-view using various futures methods. The key idea of this issue is to suggest alternative futures, sense-making and possible solutions to this crisis. The authors in this issue use foresight and innovative thinking to do this.

Today, our reliance on the internet is almost total. Access has reached into most parts of the world. Trolling, cyberbullying, hacking and scamming have long been an undesirable part of the internet landscape. Fake news, alternative facts and viral conspiracy theories, a conjunction between cynical demagoguery and cultural views and standpoints, have amplified existing fissures and conflicts, and the contradictions we face in creating a sane future. These new issues challenge notions of normalcy, tear at the societal fabric and undermine the public sphere.

Epistemology is the study of the nature of knowledge, especially how it relates to our worldview in respect to what we believe to be true (Steup, 2005). Shared realities have been fostered by the internet that are positive and encourage ways of solving major world problems. By contrast, these new forces (electoral manipulation, polarization, conspiracy peddling, etc.) create an “epistemological fracturing” where people inhabit mutually unintelligible life worlds. This change suggests a crisis is present as facts are discarded in favour of polarizing and radical views and our data is used, without permission, to further ideologies, political agendas and corporate profits.

As futurists and researchers examining this crisis, we need to recognise that the older “positive” or open internet has not totally disappeared. It still has the established values of being a global co-operative system that can help solve formidable human challenges. Two examples of this were: the Arab Spring uprising (Wolfsfeld, Segev & Sheaffer, 2013) and broadcasting organized action to the world as seen in past and 2019 protests in Hong Kong (Ting, 2019). Solidarity, co-operation and collaboration occur daily for the social good of all cultures, countering the new realities of misinformation, prejudice and negative influences that attempt to change societies for ill-gotten gains and power, and questions the disposable 24 hour news cycle culture that has emerged. We can challenge anti-

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: jose@actionforesight.net (J. Ramos), michael.nycyk@gmail.com (M. Nycyk).

vaxxers or flat earth conspiracies with rational, thoughtful and organized debate without resorting to tribalism or political leanings, abusive trolling or suppressing any side's views by shutting down their side of the debate.

This edition begins with the main premise that the internet is the central technological and cultural artefact that lies at the heart of this epistemological crisis of our time. It is the carrier, amplifier and repository of so many ideas that influence beliefs and truths. It is not neutral but rather co-generative, shaping our world in conjunction with human intentions. Secondly, it follows from this that this crisis is about the mediation of reality, and the stakes inherent in this. Our notions of reality are shaped by ideas, information and the worldviews that interpret them; although internet content is consumed quickly and discarded, it can shape and, critically, change our views to something that is not in alignment with our goals or values.

We asked ourselves as futurists and researchers if this was so, and what can be done about this? The task set for the authors in this edition was not only identifying the myriad of issues about the internet and this epistemological crisis, but how could these be addressed, and the alternative futures available to us. These authors have contributed thought-provoking writings to examine this crisis and are as follows:

- Jose Ramos in “Four Futures of Reality” examines the futures of the public sphere and shared reality, using Causal Layered Analysis and perspectives on the commons. He argues that our capitalist / neoliberal political economies have built-in perverse incentives that drive the crisis. And at a historical scale, we are experiencing a transition from a paradigm of colonization and exploitation to a generative ecology of knowledges. He provides four metaphors and alternative futures to frame this issue.
- Michael Nycyk in “From Data Serfdom to Data Ownership: An Alternative Futures View of Personal Data as Property Rights” uses Causal Layered Analysis to demonstrate Gaspard Koenig’s idea of personal data moving from a form of serfdom to ownership, analysing the factors behind Koenig’s ideas and offering an alternative future where more control over data may assist in solving the epistemological crisis.
- Marcus Anthony in “WWW: Web Wide Warfare” unpacks the sources of the online culture wars using Causal Layered Analysis to identify the factors causing these conflicts and argues for introspective psychology as one way to heal the fracturing; he argues we must move beyond simple good/bad dichotomies and explore this as a complex multi-layered problem that alternative and established psychology (e.g. Jungian) can contribute to.
- Mikko Dufva, with Tomi Slotte and Hannu-Pekka Ikäheimo, in “Grasping The Tensions Affecting The Futures Of Internet” offer an approach to addressing the crisis through anticipation studies, futures-orientated dialectics and cultural/societal studies to address the fracturing of the internet, offering a novel approach called digi-grasping that potentially raises possible alternative futures to remedy occurring tensions.
- Liam Mayo in “The Postnormal Condition: A Report on Knowledge and Digital Culture” views this epistemological crisis as a cultural crisis, stating it is humanity’s inability to imagine the alternatives of being and doing of acting online; post-normal times theory offers a framework to conceptualise and map changes to empower our navigation of new realities that the internet create.
- Lonnie Rowell and Meagan Call-Cummings in “Knowledge Democracy, Action Research, the Internet and the Epistemic Crisis” discuss this crisis and the role of action research as a response. They further develop the idea of knowledge democracy as a way to address this epistemological fracturing.
- Tim Morgan in “Solving the Wickedest Problem: Reconciling Differing Worldviews” argues that the conflicts we see on the internet will continue as wicked problems until new social organization tools, incorporating new values and forms, are adopted while preserving older worldviews and structures. He use the TIMN framework (Tribes, Institutions, Markets, Networks) of David Ronfeldt to provide the discourse and analysis.
- Neal Gorenflo in “How Can We Advert Our Society's Drift Toward Disaster by Charting a Different Course” provides a personal journey in a return to community. Cognitive dissonance with social media, increasingly polarization, uncritical othering and enemy making has inspired him to re-engage with the many people and worldviews in his community.
- Richard Slaughter’s essay and review “Confronting a High-Tech Nightmare: A Review of The Age of Surveillance Capitalism by Shoshana Zuboff”, concludes the issue. He highlights Zuboff’s views that the crisis is linked to negative values, such as power, money and greed, where the outcomes are pathological, but offers ways of controlling surveillance capitalism that may be a part of addressing the internet’s crisis.

As a body the special issue points to three critical themes that intersect and overlap across the various papers. First, we must confront capitalism's role in driving the crisis, the commodification of data, and the many perverse incentives that drive these problems. Secondly, the crisis is fundamentally about worldviews, those cognitive dispositions which already exist, embodied and in communities. So our challenge is not just technical or systemic, but fundamentally about culture, and how we can work in a world of cultural differences to create a deeper common ground and richer shared understanding. Thirdly, we live in Post Normal Times, which fundamentally upsets our ability to orient and sense-make our way through this crisis. We need new tools, methods and ways of thinking that can help us navigate our Post Normal era to address this crisis.

We want to thank the authors, peer reviewers and the *Journal of Futures Studies* for giving us the opportunity to run this special issue. Faced with a potentially dark and challenging task to address, this issue gives hopeful pathways for the reader to ponder how to address our epistemological crisis and how to positively shape future realities as the internet continues its spread and influence.

References

- Steup, M. (2005). Epistemology. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. E. Zalta (Ed.). Retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/epistemology/>
- Ting, T. (2019). Everyday networked activism in Hong Kong's umbrella movement: Expanding on contemporary practice theory to understand activist digital media usages. *International Journal of Communication, 13*, 3250-3269.
- Wolfsfeld, G., Segev, E., & Sheaffer, T. (2013). Social media and the Arab Spring: Politics comes first. *The International Journal of Press/Politics, 18*(2), 115-137. DOI: 10.1177/1940161212471716

