

Digital Assembly Research Network (DARN)
Research to impact

Summary

The internet is “in everything”¹ - it now connects and undergirds physical and virtual spaces, links devices in private and public spaces, and permits the collection of digital data on our activities with and without our knowledge, but rarely under personal control. Just as scholars, advocates, and civil society have helped policy makers understand the relationships between the internet as a communications device and free expression, we now need to consider the relationships between the internet as an “on/off” switch and free assembly. We need to understand how digital systems, seen as industrial control switches, bound our opportunities for community, civic and political action online, offline, and in the liminal space between the two where we now live. We need new scholarship that can bring together research on digital systems as industrial controls, AI and digital governance, associational and assembly rights, and civil society. This scholarship needs to inform both public policy and corporate product design that protects our ability and rights to assembly.

Our physical systems depend on digital controls while our digital spaces shape our collective actions in ways that benefit their corporate owners. We need public policy, regulatory action, and civil society advocacy to protect our ability to come together to take action in physical, virtual, and the liminal spaces we now occupy. We call this digital assembly. Our hypothesis about the need for research specifically on digital assembly builds off the scholarship and policy advocacy well underway regarding online mis/dis-information. If, as we assume, online platforms are to mis/dis-information as physical and mobile sensors are to peaceful assembly, then the time to act is now.

We propose a Digital Assembly Research Network (DARN) to catalyze several types of impact. As a cross-sector, cross-disciplinary network the DARN intends to foster new relationships and new ideas. The network will facilitate “capillary connections” across scholarly domains and between scholars, policy bodies, and civil society advocates; enabling new research, evidence for policy makers, and opportunities for civil society and community expertise to inform the design of both rules and technologies.

Framing questions for the DARN include:

- What do we know about the impact of platforms and algorithms on the formation, function, and independence of voluntary collective action or voluntary associations?
- Is the digitization of our physical environments, independent of and in conjunction with data generated online, influencing where, how, and with whom we assemble in physical and virtual spaces?
- What opportunities and challenges for collective action and assembly do digital technologies bring about and which do they hamper?
- What are the policy safeguards, corporate regulations, and product features most crucially needed to protect and enhance people’s ability to gather, take collective action, and peacefully assemble in the digital age?

To get to work immediately we are beginning with a listserv open to scholars, advocates, journalists, civil society organizations and policy makers about these and other questions that will emerge. We will encourage participants to share materials, conference information, connections to adjacent networks, requests for collaboration, calls for papers, requests for comment and other opportunities for input or

¹ Laura DeNardis, *The Internet In Everything: Freedom and Security in a World with No Off Switch*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020

collaboration. Our intention over time is for this community to share research, spark new ideas and research alliances, and build connections across disciplines and between scholars, civil society and policy makers.

Why now?

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought our collective digital dependencies into sharp relief. The growth of contact-tracing apps, video-conferencing services, thermal cameras, and digital IDs reveal the physical/virtual reach of digital systems. Protest movements of the last few years reveal the many ways in which we generate digital data trails in physical spaces as well as online, trails that allow us to be “seen” by corporate and state actors in ways that individuals and policymakers are just beginning to understand. The digitization of physical spaces in which assembly often happens, combined with both the corporate control of data stores and state-led efforts to limit civic space, means that now – more than ever - we need policy, advocacy, and action to that protect our abilities to peacefully gather and participate in hybridized virtual and physical spaces.

COVID has increased our awareness of these issues, but their importance has been growing in parallel with the pervasive insertion of digital data collecting systems into our physical, built, and mobile environments, from surveillance cameras to building entry systems, Stingray devices to “smart” voice assistants. The excellent work done to-date on online disinformation/misinformation and its effects on political and civic discourse provide a model for our thinking. While that work has focused on online discourse and propaganda, the role of the internet as a control system for functions as diverse as voting, education, and public safety, requires a similar research commitment – tightly integrated with policy makers and civil society actors – to understand and address the ways our digital systems bound or prevent people’s ability to come together.

DARN task forces proposal

There are numerous, diverse concerns within the realm of digital assembly. Digital assembly covers questions such as “how do algorithms identify, cluster, and pre-sort us into digital associations?” and “Do digital sensors, geofencing, facial recognition and other technologies, managed by corporate enterprises, redefine physical spaces from public to private? What impact do they have on peaceful assembly?” Our vision for the network is to bring together diverse stakeholders in ways that can deepen their focused work while also informing overarching questions about assembly in the digital age.

The Digital Civil Society Lab at Stanford has been developing literature reviews, concept maps, and questions that we will share with all who are interested. We will host and staff the listserv, seeking to generate cross-cutting conversations, help participants identify relevant colleagues, scholarship, and organizational partners. We will share the resources (concept maps, literature, scholarship) we’ve developed and encourage participants to do the same. For example, based on a literature review we've done, we have identified three key technological domains, whose implications for assembly demand closer scrutiny:

- Geofencing and micro-targeting technologies.
- Physical sensors such as Stingrays, facial recognition systems, or thermal cameras.
- Internet shutdowns.

These topics are meant as examples; we encourage DARN participants to use it to share their work (finished and in progress) and questions, find collaborators, suggest new topics for exploration, propose e-seminar topics (hosted by the listserv or elsewhere), share journal or conference opportunities and connect to adjacent networks, relevant policy proposals, or civil society networks. In short, we will

start, host, and seek to catalyze connections with the hope that the many varied stakeholders researching, writing policy about, and building new technologies to enable peaceful assembly will come together to improve our collective understanding, experience, and right to peaceful assembly in the digital age.

For more information, feel free to reach out directly to Lucy Bernholz (bernholz@stanford.edu), and Toussaint Nothias (tnothias@stanford.edu).