Preface

The internet has many faces. It is many things to many people. Today, it is a platform which situates a multitude of activities, performing to and for a large range of actors and interlocutors spanning and entwining the virtual with vast geographical physical terrains where it is intrinsically moulded by indigenous politics and social norms and behaviour on the ground. The internet is a space of culture and cultural manifestations as we incorporate it into our daily lives, inscribing expectations and our social and political agendas into it. It is an entity completely disrupted by humans and their offline environments while being malleable to its own technical architecture; amenable to different the forms of control, regulation and power which cross it invariably making it a contested and ambivalent entity. With the age of technical and technological convergence, the internet speaks to static and mobile platforms making uploads and downloads, and our ability to join in conversations seamless and to be part of worlds beyond us. Its appropriation as a social, political or artistic tool presents human civilizations and societies with a range of opportunities for empowering our lives but equally for presenting us with distinct and disparate challenges (Ibrahim, 2010) from the use of drones as part of state warfare, robots which can augment human labour force to the cumulative transgressions of what we may deem as our private spaces. Technology remains far from neutral constantly entering realms of work and leisure and spaces in between. It invites us into new possibilities, to connect and imagine our worlds where the screen as part of wearable technologies mediates our sense of sociality and social reality ubiquitously. The self and our surrounds, the familiar and the dissonant are reframed through these mediated platforms and in the process we become implicated with these technologies implicitly in our everyday lives and the formation of the self. The internet is about the everyday while expanding into our immediate and distant futures through trajectories of innovation and corporeal embedding which make these technologies intimate and part of our sensory worlds.

This diverse collection of essays explores a range of possibilities presented by new media technologies and their convergence in enabling social and political agency. They reflect the ways in which we use interactive and mobile platforms as social and political tools from political campaigning, storytelling, elearning to its use as aesthetic platforms to thwart mainstream and hegemonic representations ranging from poverty to consumer culture. Ubiquitous computing and imaging can be lodged in the everyday and can be intimately implicated in our notions of self and self-identity (Ibrahim, 2015). Equally they can disrupt the ways in which we make connections between images as referential objects, invoking a critical gaze into political and social issues. Both the political and social are bound within the spaces of internet through human interactions and communication patterns where our values systems and norms can be reiterated by the virtual environment and equally thwarted. The internet as a social and political tool presents us with innumerable ways to engage with our political and social environments. The
architecture of immediacy, interactivity and ubiquity seek to conjoint individual with collective agency and to re-engage with distant political and social environments with the ‘reach’ new media technologies offer. As such the internet is imagined through ideals of democracy and agora, imbuing it with our fertile expectations and hopes. On the other hand, it is imagined as corroding our public spheres with the trivial and inane and depleting conversations and political deliberations, collapsing them into images and emoticons. The polarizing of the internet in our fervent imagination between humanistic ideals and through its deep dark abyss of the sinister cannot negate the domains of grey where cultural, social and the political of human agency interplay with the webbed interactivity of the internet and its global reach. The essays here capture this in-between spaces while at times sustaining the normative values we continually underpin to the internet as a formidable social and political force.

The collection acknowledges the internet as a multifaceted site in enacting the political and social. In *Self and the Relationship with the Screen*, the performance of the self through its daily interactions as well as extraordinary events, are explored. It acknowledges that the banality of the everyday constitutes an integral part of our communication on digital platforms. It argues that new media technologies are implicated in the production of self-identity. In the process it reveals our ongoing relationship with the screen as an orifice for the production of self and the construction of a social reality beyond our immediate domesticity. The notion of identity and the internet is also explored through dietary habits and food preferences. Christian Holmberg in his article, *Using the Blogosphere to Promote Disputed Diets*, argues the digital revolution has permanently reformed the way we approach food, and our food culture has become digitized. As such the level of public discourse about diets and health is more sophisticated than it was years ago. Food is a realm of political contestations and means to enact our value systems and beliefs about how we treat our environment and our recurrent worries about its depletion.

In this vein, Gambarato and Medvedev in *Transmedia Storytelling Impact on Government Policy Change*, examine the notion of storytelling as a potent form of activism to lobby policy changes in the fishing sector. Their in-depth transmedia analysis of the ‘Fish Fight’ campaign demonstrates how transmedia storytelling contributed to raising public awareness of the wasteful discarding of healthy fish at sea under the EU fishing quotas, and in reviewing and amending EU fishing policies. From transmedia storytelling as a positive force, Dalisay, Kushin and Yamamoto in *The Demobilizing Potential of Conflict for Web and Mobile Political Participation* review the notion of conflict avoidance and how this can impact and inhibit online political participation. They test this link through a survey of young adult college student in the US Midwest within the context of the 2012 US presidential election. Their findings reveal a causal link between conflict avoidance and political participation and political expression online.

Similarly, the sustained interest in new media technologies particularly social networking sites and their increased use in political campaigns becomes the core emphasis for Rodrigo Sandoval-Almazán in *Political Messaging in Digital Spaces*. The challenges of using messaging technologies are explored through the case study of the presidential candidate Enrique Peña Nieto (PRI) in Mexico who won the presidency with a large participation but without the support of Twitter users. The study underscores the ambiguity of these new digital spaces as political platforms for campaigning. The question of the democratic nature of the internet remains a much debated issue. This libertarian and idealized notion of the internet as a platform to realize and enact democracy is explored by Kerill Dunne in *ICTs as Ancillary Tools for Indirect Democracy?* Using Michel Foucault’s concepts of power and domination, the chapter explores whether online platforms are used for political participation or to maintain the existing status quo. The dialectical interplay of power and political participation becomes the main thrust in this analysis. This leads to the exploration of the internet as a learning platform where active political strategies are
relevant to enable successful outcomes. Romm-Livermore, Rippa, and Raisinghani explore this terrain in *Towards a Political Theory of eLearning* with their Elearning Political Strategies paradigm or the ELPOS model to discern how the outcomes can be influenced through top-down or bottom-up interventions and/or whether these are initiated in collective or individual modes. Their model is augmented by four mini case studies to illuminate the distinct characteristics of their proposed model.

Reframing the official representations of poverty is explored by Anita Howarth in *Challenging the Repoliticization of Food Poverty* through her case study of austerity food blogs. Blogs as archives of people’s narratives to humanise poverty while presenting a counter site to government’s representation of hungry bodies as failed entities are offered as cogent political tools in this chapter. Food as a site of the social imaginary is also extended in the next chapter. Food images as a form of constant connection as well as a form of leaving our cultural imagination online is explored in *Ubiquitous Food Imaging: Food images as Digital Spectacle*. Food images in many ways celebrate the notion of the exhibit and the spectacle inviting gaze through everyday objects and rituals. The chapter argues that food imagery as a form of transacted materiality online offers familiarity, comfort, co-presence but above all a common elemental literacy where food transcends cultural barriers, offering a universal pull towards a commodity which is ephemeral yet preserved through the click economy.

From the multitude of phenomena which bring communion online, Jonathan Bishop probes a more dark and insidious activity in *Dealing with Internet Trolling in Political Online Communities*. Bishop contends that political discussion groups are prone to trolling as these are often open platforms where anyone can join in. An innovative scale is developed and proposed to better understand the phenomenon of trolling in the chapter. The negative side of Twitter in political advertising is explored by Marija Bekafigo and Allison Clark Pingley in *Do Campaigns “Go Negative” on Twitter?* In their content analysis of tweets from four different gubernatorial elections in 2011, they argue that while tweets are overwhelmingly positive, candidates ‘go negative’ by tweeting about policy and that twitter may be a conducive social media forum for policy-based messages due to its highly partisan characteristic.

Sustaining the thrust and relationship between social media and campaigning, Wairagala Wakabi probes the use of Facebook in authoritarian countries in his chapter, *When Citizens in Authoritarian States Use Facebook for Social Ties but not Political Participation*. The chapter examines how Facebook affects the participative behaviours of Ugandans. E-participation in repressive environments is seen to be curtailed through a detachment from politics, low belief in citizens’ online actions influencing change and fear of reprisals. From Big Brother watching to the dominance of corporations controlling the internet, Joanna Kulesza covers the pressing issues of *Online Free Expression and its Gatekeepers*. In examining free expression online she argues what once was the domain of the state has become the prerogative of private global companies. She contends it is their terms of service and sense of social responsibility that have replaced local perceptions of morality and set limits to individual personal rights. From freedom of expression to voting, Jonathon Bishop and Mark Beech test the concept of the Delegated Transferable Voting or DTV in practice and determine its workability through an auto-ethnographic approach in local and national level elections.

Again the limits of morality are explored by Bruner, Valine and Ceja in *Women Can’t Win: Gender Irony and the E-Politics of The Biggest Loser* through notion of body shaming in the disembodied environment of the internet. They interrogate what they term as ‘the structural food oppression linked to the weight and shape of the female body’, arguing that the female body becomes an incarnation of the e-politics of food and one of the most vigorously contested entities online. Its entrapment between fat-shaming and skinny-shaming online reveal the ways in which it is narrated through discourses of
deviance and acceptability in society. In congruence with the contentiousness of the female form and her denigration online, Aimée Vega Montiel discusses the difficult issue of the status of women’s human rights in the digital age in *Critical Issues on Gender Equality and ICTs in Latin America*. She questions the ethical strands of the online environment by asking to what extent does the new media environment promote women’s human and communication rights or contribute to sustaining the oppression of women in society. By employing feminist political economy perspectives she analyses the critical issues of ICTs and gender issues in Latin America.

Aileen Blaney in *Food Photography, Pixelated Produce and Cameraless Images* confronts contemporary screen-saturated culture filled with images and the aesthetic and political roles these can enact as interlopers. Through the case study of a photographic artwork, Blaney shows the disruptions between food and hyper-reality and the dissonance produced between what we consume in the supermarket and in advertising dreamscapes. The last chapter in this book, *eLearning Political Strategies-A Four Act Play*, further expands on the eLearning political Strategies (ELPOS) model discussed in chapter 7 through one case study divided into four parts to test the four strategies which are conceived in the eLearning model to outline the rules that govern the application of political strategies in the context of eLearning, and to list some of the theoretical and practical implications for a better understanding and mediation of the internet as a learning environment.

*Yasmin Ibrahim*

*Queen Mary, University of London, UK*

**REFERENCES**
