

Call for papers

Media and the Illiberal Turn:

Challenges to democracy and public communication in light of the COVID-19 pandemic

28-29 April 2021, Loughborough University

We are inviting abstracts for a conference that will mark the closure of the project “The Illiberal Turn: News Consumption, Polarization and Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe”, conducted at the Centre for Research in Communication and Culture, Loughborough University since 2019.

Recent years have seen worrying political developments across both old and new democracies, ranging from the rise of populist leaders and dwindling support for democratic rule to deepening ideological cleavages and growing polarization of public opinion. Many of these trends have been linked to parallel changes in the information environment, and specifically to the growth of social media and digital platforms. These changes have been blamed for the growing societal polarization around key issues of public concern, ranging from immigration policies, abortion and LGBTQ+ rights to the climate change and public health measures. However, traditional media have often been central to these processes as well, whether through amplifying populist and illiberal narratives, or through serving as propaganda channels for governments and other actors.

This conference will provide an opportunity to widen the discussion of media and illiberalism beyond the geographical scope of “The Illiberal Turn” project. Although Central and Eastern Europe has been at the forefront of the illiberal turn, similar trends have been documented in an increasing number of countries across the world, including Brazil, India, the Philippines, as well as Western democracies such as the US or the UK. A key aim of the conference is to map the role of the media in diverse trajectories of illiberalism around the world.

In addition, we are also interested in understanding the interactions between illiberalism, the media, and the COVID-19 pandemic. In several countries, governments abused the crisis to push through illiberal policies, impose further restrictions on free speech, and tighten their grip over the media. At the same time, concerns about the role of the media in spreading misinformation and fuelling vaccine hesitancy added a sense of urgency to debates about digital platform regulation. What do these tendencies mean for the mid- and long-term impact of the pandemic on the global advance of illiberalism?

We welcome both theoretically-focused and empirically-informed papers exploring, from a broad range of methodological perspectives, topics such as (but not limited to):

- the impact of political/media polarization on democracy and the public sphere;
- the role of the Internet and social media as channels fostering/opposing illiberalism and authoritarian politics;
- the relationship between media consumption and the nurturing of (il)liberal attitudes;
- the proliferation and exploitation of mis/disinformation in contemporary “cultural wars”;
- the determinants and changing nature of public trust in media and democratic institutions;
- the impact of the pandemic on news media use, trust and independence;
- instrumentalization of media and challenges for editorial autonomy;

- the role of popular culture, fiction and entertainment genres in the rise of illiberalism;
- the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the relationship between illiberalism and media.

Abstracts of c. 250-300 words should be sent to illiberal-turn@lboro.ac.uk by **15 December 2021**.

Attendance is free. The conference will be organized in a hybrid format, allowing for on-site and online participation. There will be limited financial support available to cover the travel expenses of early career scholars. Opportunities for publishing selected conference papers as a journal special issue or an edited volume will be explored after the conference.

Dr Václav Štětka and Professor Sabina Mihelj,

The Illiberal Turn project, Loughborough University