Tough questions at the intersections between social media and democracy

Tim Unwin

For INACH annual conference 2021

INACH
Bringing the Online In Line with Human Rights

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United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

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UNESCO Chair in ICT for Development
Royal Holloway, University of London

https://ict4d.org.uk   http://unwin.wordpress.com

Outline: in theory and in practice

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- Story-telling
- Conceptual beginnings:
  - Relativism/Universalism
  - Rights/Responsibilities
- The interests of neo-liberal democracy
- Implications for social media
- Practical challenges: a return to story-telling
  - Digital technologies and sexual harassment
  - Reducing online violence against women
- A reflection

How to resolve this story: what should I have done?

Conceptual beginnings

INACH unites organizations around the world, incorporating different cultural backgrounds and speaking many languages. It has a diverse perspective, allowing the network to counter and address all forms of online discrimination. INACH adds value to the Internet and brings the online in line with Human Rights.

1. Relativism/Universalism
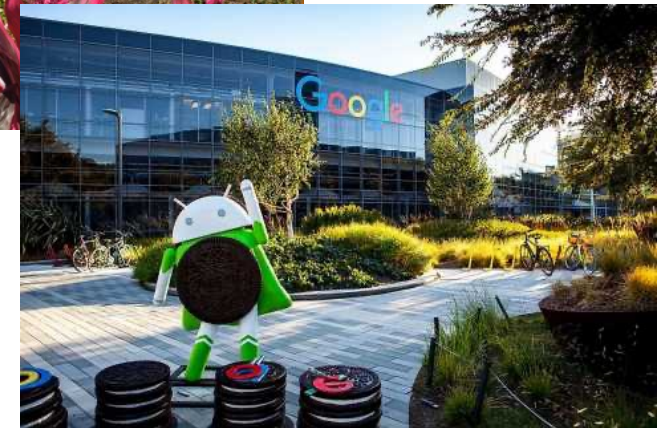2. Rights/Responsibilities

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Relativism/Universalism

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- Are there universal truths, or do you hold to a relativist perspective of the world?

- Do you value the richness of diversity?

- Are there best practices, or just many good practices to use and adapt in different contexts?

- Competing power relationships between relatives, and in advocating for universals
  - Those who believe in universals (and best practices) usually want to impose their beliefs as a universal (or best) on others

https://www.getyourguide.co.uk/silicon-valley-l91445/

Rights/Responsibilities

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- Notion of "human rights" is relatively new (c.mid-20th century), but built upon earlier notions of natural rights
  - Ultimately derived from Stoics' notion of "law of nature"
  - It is largely of "European" origin as a concept
- But if you don't believe I have any rights, what would stop you from enslaving me, or exploiting me, or killing me?
- Simply stating that people have rights says nothing about how or why these rights should be delivered
- So, any rights must be balanced by responsibilities
  - Communal responsibilities of individuals to each other
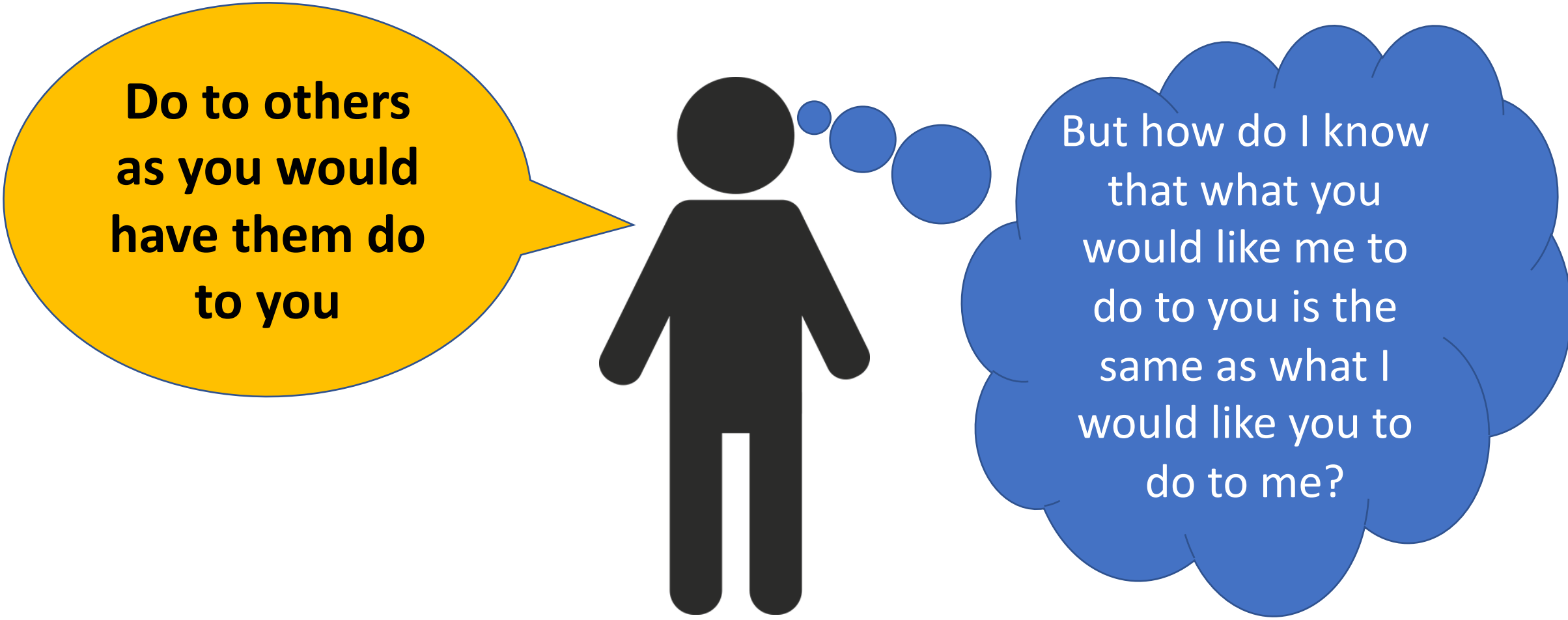 - Governments responsible for ensuring rights for citizens

Challenges with the notion of universal human rights

- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is rarely contested
  - It underlies most of the UN's work
  - Digital tech now often seen as a human right
    - Because it is "essential for education"
- But this has failed to save people from those who do not believe in such rights
- Is "universal" compatible with "relative" perspectives and diversity?
- Does the "freedom" of "rights" primarily serve the interests of global capital?
  - Individual freedom to labour
  - Individual freedom to purchase
- Should it be balanced by a recognition/declaration of "responsibilities" for individuals and states?
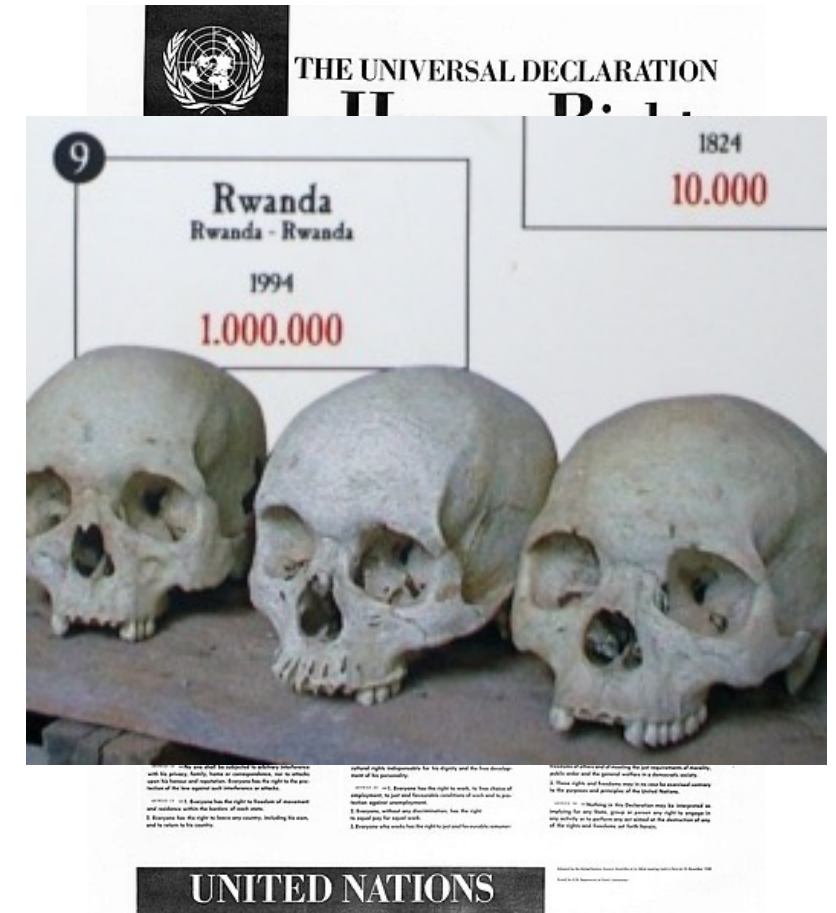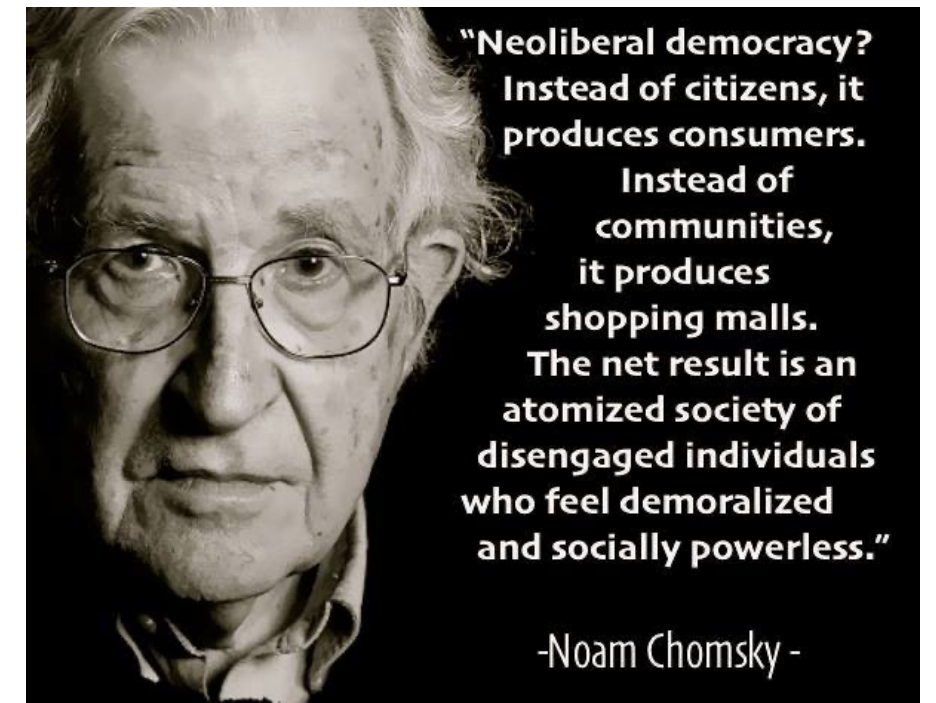
Problems even with the "Golden Rule"

Do to others as you would have them do to you

But how do I know that what you would like me to do to you is the same as what I would like you to do to me?

Whose interests does neo-liberal democracy serve?

"Neoliberal democracy? Instead of citizens, it produces consumers. Instead of communities, it produces shopping malls. The net result is an atomized society of disengaged individuals who feel demoralized and socially powerless."

-Noam Chomsky -

… And yet, many people believe it is not only right, but the only way in which it is possible to imagine the modern world

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The interests of neo-liberal democracy

- There is no single thing called "democracy"
  - David Held's (2006) multiple democracies
    - Corporate power curtails possibility of genuinely democratic power
    - Inequalities of gender and race curtail benefits of citizenship
  - So what kind of democracy is social media meant to support?
- Historically those in power have always used technologies to maintain their positions of power
- Neo-liberalism: still globally dominant (China an exception?)
  - Market oriented reform, privatisation, and reduction of state influence in economy
  - Has given unparalleled global power to major corporations
  - And co-opted the UN system
    - Focus on economic-growth at the expense of "equalities"
- A rich environment in which digital tech and social media can flourish

David Held, 1951-2019

Implications for our understanding of social media

- **Against technological determinism**

- **Accelerators of both good and bad**

- **Why have we become so addicted?**

- **Ultimately we must reclaim our responsibilities – and our "lives"**

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Technological determinism and the underlying interests

- Digital technologies (themselves) do not cause/determine anything
  - It is their use that can lead to differing outcomes
- It is the interests underlying their design, production and use that are the cause
  - People not technologies as the ultimate driver of change
- Social media have been designed in very particular ways
  - Primarily to gain as much data about us as possible to be monetised
  - The digital barons have little interest in changing this
- Just because it is possible to do something does not mean we should do it
  - We need social sciences and the humanities as a challenge to scientism (science's belief in itself)
- Neo-liberalism and rolling back the state create a perfect storm where "disruptive" social media can flourish

Twitter and the Facebook outage, 4 Oct 2021

Digital tech as an accelerator: of both good and bad

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- Fundamental tension between:
  - Minorities who choose to do harm, or inadvertently do so, and
  - Those trying to impose a particular view of society (and universal human rights)
- Social media is a forum where these tensions are played out in real time and very fast
- Social media is encouraged because it is seen as being "democratic"- giving everyone a voice
  - But that means we have to accept the existence of those voices with whom we disagree
    - Pornhub was as popular as Netflix and LinkedIn (2019); substantial use of social media for sexting amongst youth; extensive child sexual abuse through digital tech
  - What is safe for one is harmful for another
    - Who is to be the judge?
- How we respond to the relativism/universalism debate shapes our responses to how to deal with social media

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ARTICLES   CLOUD   DATA CENTRE   FRONT PAGE

Why Data Acceleration Is Essential to Cloud

https://www.comparethecloud.net/articles/data-acceleration-cloud-computing-growth/

Why have we become so addicted to social media?

- Increasing dopamine (a neurotransmitter) signals when signing on to social media lead to brain identifying it as pleasurable
  - Enhanced further by positive feedback
  - As dopamine effect wears off, we go back for more
- The digital barons deliberately seek to "enslave" as many people as possible
  - And have been encouraged and allowed to do so
- Owners of social media channels benefit from the bad as well as the good
  - Little incentive for them to change their business models
- We have recently launched #1in7offline (linked to http://DESC.global

"Social media platforms such as Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram produce the same neural circuitry that is caused by gambling and recreational drugs to keep consumers using their products as much as possible. Studies have shown that the constant stream of retweets, likes, and shares from these sites cause the brain's reward area to trigger the same kind of chemical reaction seen with drugs like Cocaine" (Addiction Center 2021)
https://www.addictioncenter.com/drugs/social-media-addiction/

Reclaiming our responsibilities

- What might a responsibilities- rather than rights- based agenda look like?
  - Individuals
    - Responsible for themselves
    - And for each other
  - Governments responsible for citizens
    - Who can overthrow them (Locke)
    - Key role in educating people how to use digital tech safely
- Regulatory environments crucial
  - Shift from benefitting private sector to benefitting citizens
- The Chinese example raises interesting issues
  - Especially in the face of a failed US model
- We don't *have* to use social media
  - Although very considerable pressures to do so
  - Breaking the shackles of digital enslavement

JOURNALIST FELLOWS' PAPERS

How does the Chinese government manage social media? The case of Weibo

Authors

Runfeng He
CORRESPONDENT AND REGION SUPERVISOR, CHINA CENTRAL TELEVISION (ASIA PACIFIC BUREAU, HONG KONG)

https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/our-research/how-does-chinese-government-manage-social-media-case-weibo

Sharing stories of practice: the importance of learning

- TEQtogether

- Violence against women and girls

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TEQtogether (https://TEQtogether.org)
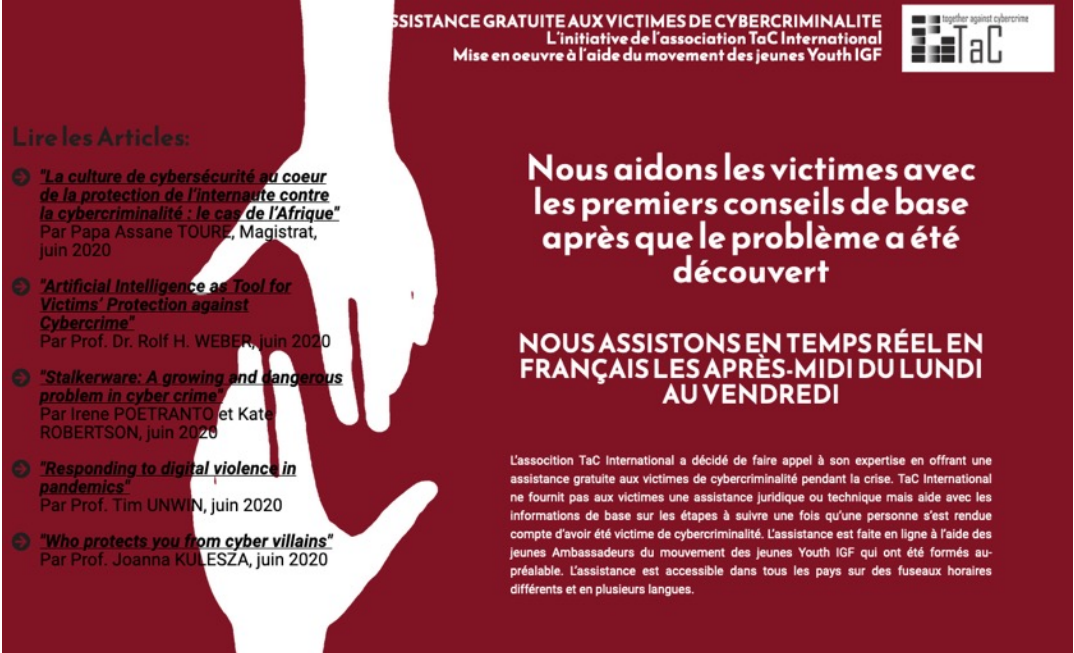
- Most initiatives to engage women safely in digital technologies have been developed by women
- But if men are part of the problem, they must also be part of the solution
- TEQtogether: changing men's attitudes towards women and technology
- Research: as with use of mobile devices and social media for sexual harassment of women
  - Hugely different experiences and moral issues globally
- Guidance notes for men
- Workshops

6 THINGS TO CHANGE BOYS' ATTITUDES TO GIRLS STUDYING STEM SUBJECTS
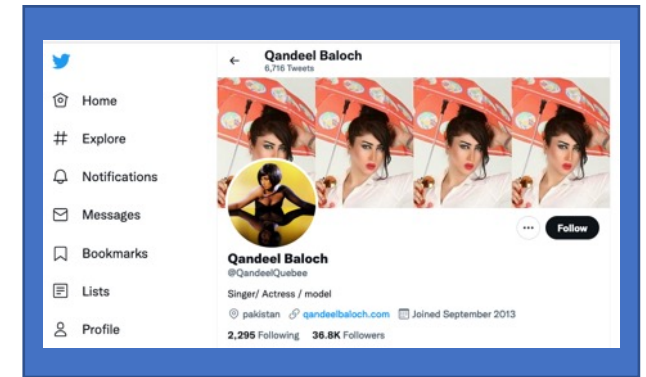
Social media and violence against women and girls

- Work of TAC (Together Against Cybercrime) https://againstcybercrime.org/
- The scale of online violence, especially against women and girls, is for me truly shocking
  - But not for those who do it
- The importance of education in enabling everyone to use social media safely
- Action focused
  - For individuals being responsible
  - For governments being responsible

https://cybervictime.help/

Conclusion and discussion

Conclusion: what I have tried to do in this keynote

Challenge	Explore	Highlight
Challenge some of our taken for granted assumptions about: • Human rights • Democracy and neo-liberalism	Explore some implications of such questioning for social media	Highlight ways in which I have personally tried to respond • TEQtogether • Online violence against women • #1in7offline and DESC

Discussion