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How Libraries (and Other Social Infrastructure Spaces) Will Save Us: The Critical Role of Social Infrastructure in Democratic Resilience

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I am very pleased to present the work conducted by Professor Daniel P. Aldrich as part of Flinders University's commitment to hosting the Fulbright University Distinguished Chair in Applied Public Policy (Democratic Resilience) in 2023.
The Distinguished Chair enhances Flinders strong international links with universities and research institutes in the United States, especially through the activities of the Jeff Bleich Centre for Democracy and Disruptive Technologies. In an era characterized by misinformation and division, Professor Aldrich's research sheds light on a path forward. His thoughtful exploration of the ways in which libraries and other social infrastructure spaces can act as bastions of trust and connectivity is both insightful and timely, with implications for our university's mission to foster knowledge, inclusivity, and democratic values.

A/Professor Rodrigo Praino
Director, Jeff Bleich Centre (JBC)
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Professor Daniel P. Aldrich's exploration of social infrastructure's role in democratic resilience is a beacon of hope in a world increasingly marred by misinformation and polarization. As the Director of the Jeff Bleich Centre for Democracy and Disruptive Technologies, I applaud Professor Aldrich's work, which resonates with our Centre's mission to foster innovation and understanding in the face of complex challenges. His research on the impact of social ties, trust, and social infrastructure in navigating disinformation is both timely and impactful. We are honoured to have been a part of Professor Aldrich's academic journey and anticipate that his work will inspire further research at the intersection of democracy and disruptive technologies.

Dr Varuni Kulasekera
Executive Director
Australian-American
Fulbright Commission

The Australian-American Fulbright Commission is proud to support Professor Daniel Aldrich's research through one of our most prestigious awards, the Distinguished Chair Program. His work adds to a growing body of work, fostered through Flinders University's Fulbright Distinguished Chair in American Political Science, examining the key factors shaping policy, laws and political behaviours that influence democracy and democratic governance.

In this eighth iteration of the Fulbright-Flinders University lecture series, Aldrich provides a compelling and timely exploration of the challenges posed by misinformation and disinformation in contemporary society, while highlighting the pivotal role that social ties play in shaping our beliefs and actions. His emphasis on the significance of bonding, bridging, and linking social capital provides a nuanced understanding of how communities can combat misinformation by fostering diverse connections and empowering individuals with accurate information. An invaluable addition to a burgeoning catalogue of insights facilitated via the Fulbright-Flinders University partnership

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An award winning author, Aldrich has published five books including Building Resilience and Black Wave, more than 90 peer-reviewed articles, and written op-eds for the New York Times, CNN, HuffPost, and many other media outlets. He has spent more than 5 years in India, Japan, and Africa carrying out fieldwork and his work has been funded by the Fulbright Foundation, the National Science Foundation, the Abe Foundation, the Rasmussen Foundation, and the Japan Foundation, among other institutions.

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Introduction: Troubled Times

False information can have horrific consequences.

On 4 December 2016, a father of two from North Carolina drove from his home with an assault rifle and a handgun to undertake what he thought to be a rescue mission (Kang and Goldman 2016). Fueled by hours of radio broadcasts from conspiracy-based right-wing media channels like Alex Jones' Infowars, he believed that the basement of the Comet Ping Pong pizza store in northwest Washington DC served as the holding site for kidnapped and abused children (Robb 2017).

Although he fired a shot from his gun in his search for the store's basement (which did not exist), terrifying diners and the store's management and staff, no one was hurt, and his arrest set off the investigations into the event that eventually became known as Pizzagate.

Well before Pizzagate, societies saw tragic consequences from people spreading lies and conspiracies. In Tokyo, Japan, after the massive 1 September 1923 earthquake and resulting fires which destroyed half of that nation's capital, false rumors spread against the Koreans living in the city, claiming that they were poisoning the wells. Most Japanese authorities did nothing to counteract these rumors while others supported these falsehoods. The resulting pogrom ended up taking perhaps as many as 4000 lives (Aldrich 2012).

In Rwanda, radio hosts regularly railed against Tutsis, calling them cockroaches, and preparing Hutus for what would become a genocide in April 1994 (Aldrich 2014). Australia saw a variety of recent forms of mis- and dis-information during the bushfires and the 2019 election (Kruger and Chan 2022).

The distrust in authorities, a willingness to believe what appear to be fantastic and improbable claims, and the doubt in science seen during 2016's Pizzagate became more apparent during the COVID19 pandemic. Then many people in the United States, Australia, and around the world refused to heed health authorities, listening instead to public figures who assured them that the disease would be no more bothersome than the flu, and ignoring masking, physical distancing, and other advice (Page-Tan et al 2022). People who were highly polarized - that is, who identified with extreme positions on a political scale - were less likely to get a COVID19 vaccine when they became available (Dolman et al 2023). Therefore, many people around the world remained unvaccinated, and death rates in North America due to COVID19 were and remain measurably higher for respondents who identified as Republicans (Wallace et al 2023).

The consequences of misinformation and disinformation may be more subtle than armed conspiracy believers raiding casual dining establishments, people refusing to put on masks in enclosed spaces, or anti-vaxxers dying in greater proportion. In Australia, false claims about a Labor-party created "death tax" showed how weaponized, online fake news can create potential electoral advantage (Carson, Gibbons, and Phillips 2021). People who see themselves as not fitting into their local political environment - picture a Democrat in a highly Republican County, or a Liberal Party member in a Labor district - have more mental health and sleep disorders (Nayak et al 2021; Fraser et al 2022).

But we may have a way forward. We rarely see all of the information and options that are available, whether on cable TV, social media platforms, or radio channels. Instead, our geographic and virtual social networks filter the information that we receive and how we act on that information. Our horizontal connections to others (bonding and bridging social capital) and our vertical connections to decision makers (linking social capital) deeply influence our behavior (Coleman 1988), pushing us to adopt (or refute) extreme social and political positions, accept (or ignore) critical health advice, and evacuate (or stay) in vulnerable situations (Fraser and Aldrich 2021). These often-invisible networks help us extend trust to individuals we barely know or withhold it from those whom our network has found untrustworthy (Fukuyama 1995). Given ongoing and highly visible challenges to our democracies from extremist ideologies and disinformation campaigns, our networks nudge us during important moments such as claimed threats to our electoral systems and the availability of new vaccinations against a brand-new coronavirus (Neblo, Esterling, and Lazer 2018).

Theories of Information

Scholars of disinformation - that is, deliberately misleading claims - and misinformation - unknowingly false claims - often approach the field from top down or bottom-up perspectives.

The top-down argument focuses on elites and opinion leaders, that is, political figures and gatekeepers who not only promote messages but begin their own disinformation and misinformation campaigns (Farris et al 2020). One recent study identified roughly twelve people - the Disinformation Dozen – responsible for roughly three-quarters of all lies about vaccines on the very popular platforms of Facebook and Twitter (Center for Countering Digital Hate 2021). Many observers point to powerful figures in the media and in politics - such as Donald Trump and Rupert Murdoch - who have many followers and command the media cycle (Reston 2021; Shafer 2021). When such people put out false or misleading information via their platform of choice, many people automatically repost it and others accept the statements uncritically, even if they are verifiably false. These leaders may undermine ongoing court investigations, smear the names of civil servants, or seek to direct their followers towards violence.

In contrast, others have argued that individual choices - often driven by media platform algorithms on sites such as popular blogs, Twitter, Facebook, 4Chan, or Telegram - create a bottom-up push where end users influence whether messages ramp up or down (Donovan 2020).

Scholars using this angle have often focused on the emotional composition of specific messages, especially for disgust, anger, and awe, all of which generate more attention (Berger and Milkman 2013); users of social media platforms often reshare posts with emotionally resonant messages such as shame and fear (Garske et al 2021). Hence a post claiming a political figure violated social norms (nepotism, bribery, sexual impropriety) receives more attention than attempts to push more complicated and nuanced findings (well respected leaders often have messy personal lives).

Rather than focusing on elites (top down) or the choices of individual users (bottom up), my research suggests that our horizontal bonding, bridging, and linking social ties strongly condition our views of the world and how we interact with it whether online or in person (Hanifan 1916). Bonding social ties connect people who are quite similar, while bridging ties - often labeled weak or thin ties - connect us to people beyond our immediate circle of kin, family, and close friends (Granovetter 1983). Where bonding and bridging social ties are horizontal, linking ties are vertical, connecting us with decision makers who have power and authority (Aldrich 2012). While social ties and trust may be invisible or seem challenging to measure, we can both capture their strength and also their impact, which can be quite deep even when scholars have too often turned to other factors to explain outcomes of interest. Our connections can mitigate a variety of global problems such as violent extremism (Aldrich 2012b; Aldrich 2014) and environmental shocks (Aldrich 2012, Aldrich 2019). Trust (and its absence) impact civil society - state relations (Aldrich 2008, Aldrich 2016) and social capital alters health behaviors and disease related outcomes (Fraser, Aldrich and Page-Tan 2021).

For example, my team and I have carried out research on the topic of evacuation from vulnerable areas before extreme weather events such as hurricanes and tsunami (Aldrich 2018; Aldrich 2019). Standard arguments focus on issues like demographics (education, age, race, wealth, family size, and so forth) to explain why people do (or do not) leave dangerous spots. Our team used network data to show instead that individuals with broader, more diverse networks were more likely to evacuate from locations about to be struck by natural hazards (Metaxa-Kakavouli, Maas, and Aldrich 2018).
That is, by receiving information about a threat not just from a single, close source - such as a parent, childhood friend, or member of the extended family - residents took the threat more seriously. Through reinforcement of the message and also multiple sources, evacuees better understood the real nature of the hurricane and acted on that data.

In the field of disinformation, our bonding, bridging, and linking social capital can impact whether we receive a message and then what we do with it.

Our social ties channel the types of media that we consume and then whether we move to act on that information (Aldrich 2012c). In a high trust community in North America, for example, sharing information about new ways to protect against a pandemic activated new health behaviors such as wearing personal protective equipment, staying home where possible, and wearing a mask (Fraser, Aldrich, and Page-Tan 2021).

But in low trust communities where residents saw health officials as politically biased, few residents took on physical distancing or wearing personal protective equipment (PPE) such as masks; in fact, for a few, the opposite was true: they protested these suggestions and health guidance. In an important way, while health professionals, emergency managers, and others who seek to keep us from harm often believe that the most important aspect of crisis communication is providing sufficient information, those messages are unlikely to reach people unless their trusted network members see them and share them.

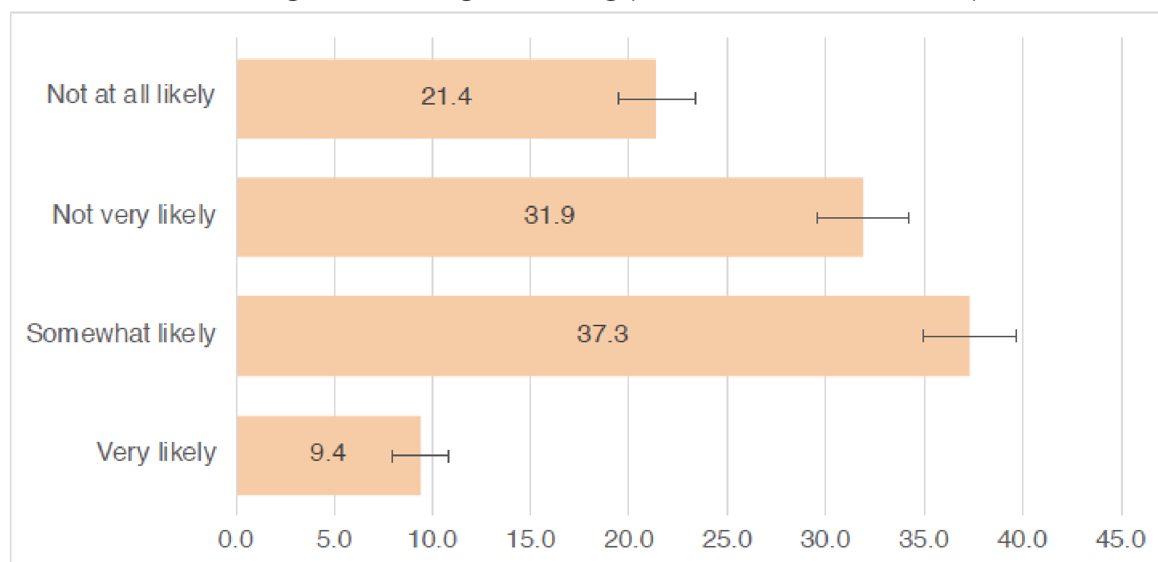
Why this Matters

This kind of research is critical because the cornerstones of democracy - an active, engaged, and trusting body politic - are under threat (Neblo, Esterling, and Lazer 2018). While issues of trust, networks, and disinformation may feel distant from most our daily lives, the tragic events of January 6, 2021, at the United States Capitol showed how social networks - online and in real life - can amplify a set of false claims into an insurrection which killed five people, injured 140, and resulted in the arrest and prosecutions of over 400. It is not just the US facing a divided and often non-collaborating civil society.

Australia faces some major challenges in the field of trust, social connectedness, and volunteering as it moves into the 21st century. Australians seem to be "bowling alone," as my mentor Bob Putnam has argued, dropping out of clubs, groups, and volunteer hotlines (Putnam 2000).

As one study recently underscored, "the number of Australian associations per person has fallen by four-fifths, and the share of people involved in social, civic, and political groups has declined" (Leigh and Terrell 2020: 49).

Intentions of commencing/recommencing volunteering, per cent of Australian adults, April 2022



Note: The "whiskers" on the bars indicate the 95 per cent confidence intervals for the estimate.
Source: ANUpoll, April 2022.

COVID19 hit Australian civic engagement and volunteering especially hard, with volunteer rates down by 37% compared to pre-COVID times (Davies 2023). According to one study, barely half of those who stopped volunteering during the pandemic returned to their community activities despite the lifting of physical distancing and border closures (Volunteering Australia 2022).

The United States, Australia, and most industrialized democracies are facing a shortfall in trust between civil society and the state alongside increasingly visible fractures in our bodies politic.

This research - especially focused on how disinformation is being spread, and therefore how it can be mitigated - can help our societies rebuild these connections and trust.

We should not only be concerned about ensuring that people can cooperate during crises or engage with each other politically. Our physical and mental health are strongly influenced not just by our physical environment but also by our social environment. For example, our research showed that political polarization - where people hold extreme positions about political issues that are quite far from their neighbors and others with whom they interact - measurably damages mental and physical health (Nayak et al 2021). People feeling uncomfortable and out of place have more sleepless nights, more anxiety, and more depression. The good news: social capital - especially bridging and linking social ties - can intervene to improve the mental and physical health of individuals in polarized communities (Panagopoulos, Fraser, Aldrich, Kim and Hummel 2021).

As a scholar and proponent of social capital, this research is critical for healthy democracies because social networks serve as both a critical gatekeeper for information and behavioral motivator, then those social networks can be strengthened, deepened, and broadened. Past research demonstrated that social ties can be deliberately created (Pronyk et al 2008; Brune and Bossert 2009) and our own teams have done so through policy interventions even in post-shock environments (Aldrich and Kiyota 2017). Rather than seeking to more tightly regulate media platforms, as Australian decision makers are considering (Carson 2023) or pushing disinformation-spreading opinion leaders off such platforms (a proposal being considered against United States-based social media platforms), this project suggests that the best way to control disinformation might be by building and strengthening diverse, “thin” bridging social capital. Instead of seeking to police speech or deplatform political leaders pushing disinformation, societies should instead invest in social and civic infrastructure to make society more resilient to these kinds of stressors (Aldrich and Homsey 2017).

The Way Forward: Social Infrastructure

A growing body of evidence points to a modest and often overlooked kind of framework in our societies: social infrastructure. Social infrastructure captures the spaces and places in our societies where we meet, build trust, and interact (Joshi and Aldrich 2022). Scholars categorize social infrastructure into four main types: parks (including linear reserves, dog walks, community gardens, and arboretums), social businesses (such as cafes, restaurants, arcades, bowling alleys, and karaoke bars), community spaces (such as town halls, neighborhood houses, and meeting spaces), and places of worship (including mosques, synagogues, churches, gurdwaras, temples, and shrines) (Fraser et al 2022b).

We often ignore the power of these gathering spots because they are mundane, seem ubiquitous, and have subtle benefits that only become apparent over time. But research has shown that communities with more of these spaces mitigate the impact of severe natural hazards like tsunamis (Aldrich 2023). And these are precisely the spots where we interact with people that aren't necessarily close friends or family - the kinds of connections we label bridging social capital (Fraser et al 2022b).

These are the ties that are hardest to find in our relationships precisely because they connect us to people different from us, people with whom we don't live, and to people who may share only a single interest.

[Image: Social infrastructure in Boston, Massachusetts. Photograph by Yaakov Aldrich on Kodak 400 film]

Heading to the park with a child, for example, gives parents the chance to interact with other parents, also escorting their kids to a jungle gym, climbing wall, or trampoline. Heading to a dog park with our four-legged companions gives us the chance to say hi to other canine owners whom we may have little in common beyond our pets.

During these times we spend in social infrastructure – such as Adelaide's linear park or Melbourne's Fitzroy Gardens - we are far more likely to build up diverse networks, meet people whom we wouldn't run into at home or the office, and to also build up a chance to build our trust in society.

During my months as a Fulbrighter in cities and towns across Australia, when I saw people around us interacting with their children and their pets, or drinking flat whites and chatting about rugby, or praying at the same service in the Great Synagogue in Sydney, I felt- at least briefly - connected to something larger than my screens, my job, and my private life. Social infrastructure cannot solve all our challenges - and we have many - but it can help us tackle both crises and polarization simultaneously. This is because many social infrastructure facilities - libraries, parks, and community halls among them - bring multiple layers of benefits. Libraries, for example, do far more than just provide books and magazines. They run English as a Second Language (ESL) courses for new migrants, provide cooling shelter during extreme heat waves, help people file taxes and job applications in their communities, give stability to children with chaotic or dangerous home lives, and in many cases offer access to tools and mental health counseling as well. Libraries also bring people together from across the political spectrum and help us build trust in our societies and our government officials.

Parks also provide more than just a place for walks. Communities with more green space are cooler than those with fewer trees, meaning that they help mitigate the impact of global warming. They also improve the mental and physical health of residents while providing a gathering spot for meetings. Neighborhoods with higher density of these kinds of gathering spaces build the collective action necessary to save lives during shocks (Aldrich 2023).

While libraries, parks, restaurants, and other social infrastructure may not have been enough to stop Pizzagate or even deliberate falsehoods about the bushfires, in an era of disinformation and misinformation these spaces may be the few places left where people from across the political spectrum can meet to build trust. Those with the broader and more diverse networks that social infrastructure brings listen to authorities and ignore lies and exaggerations. We need to support the creation, maintenance, and both private and public sector investment in social infrastructure. To face the challenges that are coming, we must come together and work collectively. It may be our libraries - and our social infrastructure - that can help save us.

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