

## Workshop Summary | Patricia Ciccone

On February 23<sup>rd</sup>, as part of the special issues seminar “Trump, Clinton, and Role of (Dis)Information in Politics” in the Information Studies department at UCLA, [Dr. Mél Hogan](#) gave a talk about her work on data centers. Hogan’s presentation, entitled Data: Center to Surplus to Complex, presented a materialized perspective on the often immaterial discourses that surround data and provided information about the environmental impact and social repercussions of the physical organization of data storage. Hogan’s enlightening talk introduced a new sense of place and an environmental consciousness to our imagination of digital networks.

### Out of Sight, Out of Mind

In the context of the seminar, Hogan’s panel helped us reexamine some of the (our) erroneous assumptions about the immateriality of digital media. Her research, part of the ecological turn in media studies, extends the practices of ethnography to the realm of digital media and systematically studies data centers as the embodiment of data. As Nicole Starosielski argues in the introduction to her book, *The Undersea Network* (Duke, 2015), “analyses of 21<sup>st</sup> century media culture have been characterized by a cultural imagination of dematerialization: immaterial information flows appear to make the environments they extend through fluid and matter less”. Certainly, Hogan’s focus on the data centers allows us to reconsider how these data flows are much less fluid, less intangible and much more terrestrial than we might think.



Data centers, Hogan argues, are often made visible and material at moments of vulnerability. When large servers crash, for example, we are not only confronted by the precarity of these systems, but also by their physicality. But the material impact of data doesn't stop with the failure to provide us with a certain service. Rather, Hogan's critique is one about the neoliberal and capitalist endeavors that are reflected in the construction of these massive data centers infrastructures. Made possible by large corporate investments, data centers often leave heavy financial and ecological marks in many reclusive, and not so reclusive, locales across the globe.

One example is the case of [Prineville, a small town in rural Oregon](#), whose leaders struck a deal with Facebook to open a large scale data center. While the company promised good financial and social returns for the town's investments, earnings and revenue quickly ended after the initial construction phase. Moreover, the town has seen its rather modest use of energy go through the roof, as the center uses as much energy in one day as the whole town typically did. The same goes for the town's use of drinking water, now being vastly and quickly depleted by the need to cool the data center.

If Prineville seemed like quite an exceptional case, Hogan reminds us that it is far from an isolated example, and that many rural communities all over the globe have been invaded by large data centers from large tech conglomerates. In the discussion following her talk, many audience members brought up the many tax exemptions stories with which we were familiar. In one such case, lawmakers at the state level voted not to subject data centers to a tax on the value of their corporate brands. This prompted many questions about our ability to actually create legal reforms against these server farms, if we can't even frame them as commercial and corporate enterprises.

Moreover, we were all distraught by the statistics Hogan offered in relation to [the amount of energy and natural resources that each of these data nodes required](#). One student who had majored in computer engineering said that the water used to cool down computer parts has to be cleaner than what comes out of our tap. We came to the conclusion that the data centers were probably using the public water resources the towns in which they are located, purifying the water privately for their own uses and then emptying out the contaminated water into the nearby basins – all of this on the backs of one of the worst droughts in California history, and the fight for clean and safe drinking water among the residents of Flint, Michigan, to name just two examples of recent, ongoing water shortages.

### **The Data Center Industrial Complex**

Under these circumstances, Hogan's proposition that we should understand these data centers, as unwritten coalitions between the corporate and the state apparatuses seems fair. In her final intervention, Hogan asks us to extend ourselves one step forward and to consider these data centers in a similar fashion to the Prison Industrial Complex. As conceptual byproducts of neoliberal and capitalist politics, both prisons and data centers rely on a complex network of state-sanctioned efforts: they both present a menace to equal access of public resources and they both propose a reorganization of social systems.

Dr. Safiya Noble, a critical race and critical information scholar, and one of the two instructors

(along with Dr. Sarah T. Roberts) of the course, welcomed this comparison and opened the discussion by asking what the implications of the data center industrial complex ultimately means for citizens. This question quickly led to a conversation about surveillance, both in terms of privacy and in terms of public safety. In the first place, audience members were concerned about what that collaboration meant for personal information. As information studies students, practitioners and scholars, we know all too well about the way the state engages with our personal data. However, if we look at data centers in the same way we do prisons, we wondered what that meant for our rights as citizens? The prison industrial complex has found many ways to circumvent basic civil rights and has even created a whole industry by bypassing them. If data centers are organizing in a similar matter, what sort of intervention will they do to us to make us second class citizens?

Another student wondered how the invisibility of these centers, and their often unmarked nature, further complicated our understanding of them. A couple of years ago, the student was violently pushed aside, in the middle of the city, by a group of soldiers. Before turning back, he took a look at the building that all the soldiers were rushing to: an unremarkable building in the middle of a commercial district. He later found out that the building accommodates a rather large server farm and that it had received threats. What made this particular center so important that the army is deployed to ensure its safety? We might never know. But what we know is that this courtesy is often not extended to communities at risk and that the government is often quite slow to react to make sure communities and citizenships feel safe in their own country. The rapid turn of our conversation made it quite clear that Hogan's concept of the Data Center Industrial Complex wasn't such a far-fetched one.

Mél Hogan's talk gave us a valuable ecological perspective, a better understanding of digital media infrastructures and much needed examples to critique the narratives of politics. By situating disinformation as the obscuring force that allows tech conglomerates to continue their aggressive and invasive incursion into our daily lives, Hogan's talk was a much appreciated wake up call for many of us.