

Defending Democracy from Cyber Warfare

Foreign meddling in democratic elections, fake news and national security threats by the 'weaponisation of social media' tackled by a new research Centre.

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“

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Ambassador Jeff Bleich

Australia: 26 June 2019 Foreign meddling in democratic elections, the proliferation of fake news and threats to national security through the 'weaponisation of social media' will be tackled by a new research Centre at Flinders University.

The Jeff Bleich Centre for the US Alliance in Digital Technology, Security, and Governance will be the first research centre in Australia to adopt a multidisciplinary approach to social science by bringing together the three key areas of technology, security, governance.

Based in the Flinders University College of Business, Government and Law, it will undertake research in areas of mutual concern to Australia and the United States to improve the capacity of governments and industry to respond to these cyber challenges and threats.

This includes digital media manipulation in fostering divisions in civil society, challenging national security and contesting democratic governance.

The Centre's launch coincides with the release of the latest [Lowy](#) Institute Annual Poll ranking cyber security as the most significant threat to Australia's vital interests after climate change.

The Jeff Bleich Centre is named in honour of Ambassador Jeff Bleich, Special Counsel to President Barack Obama and a diplomat who served as Ambassador to Australia from 2009 to 2013.

Ambassador Bleich, a long-time friend of Flinders University, is tonight being named a Flinders Professorial Fellow, becoming Professor Jeff Bleich in addition to his other titles.

Vice-Chancellor Professor Colin Stirling says the Centre will create opportunities for industry, particularly defence, government and NGOs to work with Flinders University to address current and emerging issues in cybersecurity.

“It will consolidate Flinders University's research expertise and strengths in digital technologies, security and governance, and build upon Flinders existing strengths in US policy studies and the university's strong US alliance”, Professor Stirling says.

“The Centre aligns with the South Australian and Federal Governments' cyber security plans and will further strengthen South Australia's position as Australia's Defence State.

“The Jeff Bleich Centre will undertake research to identify reforms, including regulatory models, that preserve the gains of the digital revolution, but enhance the protection of democratic freedoms, and restore trust in the institutions of democratic societies,” he says.

The digital revolution has initiated societal change on a scale comparable to the invention of the printing press and the arrival of the industrial revolution, but while the cyber revolution offers incalculable benefit, there have also been high costs.

The disruptive costs of the digital revolution on democracy have been high, largely unanticipated and only recently addressed as some have escalated into crises.

Ambassador Bleich says these have included deliberate efforts to impair individual, corporate and government decision-making through corrupt, distorted, or false information campaigns.

“We know that the advent of digital technology has fundamentally changed the way we each work, eat, shop, and live. But it has also changed our societies and how we defend ourselves.

“Our nations — both separately and together—must operate in new ways to preserve our values and protect our people and allies in new battle spaces.

“This is the mission of the Jeff Bleich Centre for the US Alliance in Digital Technology, Security, and Governance.

“Flinders is the ideal home for the Centre with its long-term track record in American studies, its focus on disruptive technologies, and its successful bi-national programs,” Ambassador Bleich says.

The Jeff Bleich Centre has been established by Flinders University with additional funding from private sector donors and will be seeking to grow through philanthropic support, additional external fundraising, and research contracts.

A five-member Advisory Board will be appointed to provide strategic guidance and direction for the Centre.

Note: The Lowy Institute has today released its 2019 Annual Poll revealing 62% of Australians regard cyber security is regarded as a critical threat to Australia’s interests. The Poll also examines attitudes to the Australia-US alliance.

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