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akademie wien**
Vienna School of International Studies



Ambassador Milton A. Wolf Seminar on Media and Diplomacy 2025

Ouroboros: The Infinite Loop of Media, Democracy and Diplomacy

**Vienna, Austria
APRIL 8-10, 2025**

About The Milton Wolf Seminar Series

Launched in 2001, the Milton Wolf Seminar Series addresses developing issues in diplomacy and journalism – both broadly defined. The University of Pennsylvania Annenberg School for Communication, The American Austrian Foundation (AAF), and the Diplomatic Academy of Vienna (DA) have jointly organized this seminar since 2010. The Austrian Marshall Foundation has supported the Milton Wolf Seminar since 2017. Panelists include individuals working for state and multilateral organizations, journalists, civil society actors, representatives from media and internet companies, and academics. The Milton Wolf Seminar Series particularly emphasizes the contribution of young and mid-career scholars, and each year a select group of outstanding graduate students are invited to attend the seminar in Vienna as Emerging Scholar fellows.

The organizers envisage the Milton Wolf Seminar as a meeting place for all participants to share their perspectives, formulate new ideas, and identify areas for further research and discussion. While the seminar incorporates various speakers and panels, we design it as a two-day continuing conversation in which all participants are encouraged to openly engage in dialogue and explore potential synergies and future collaborations. To encourage an open exchange of ideas, seminar attendance is limited only to invited participants and students. We also ask that participants and panelists attend all sessions and events, whenever possible.

About the 2025 Seminar

Ouroboros: The infinite loop of Media, Democracy, and Diplomacy



The ouroboros, an ancient symbol of a serpent or dragon eating its own tail, represents a cycle of life, death, and rebirth. It is a useful heuristic for investigating the contemporary inter-relationships between technological change, media production and consumption trends, governance, and the implications for journalism and diplomacy. As we enter 2025, these societal foundations appear stuck in a sort of



dysfunctional symbiotic loop: hypercapitalism and technological overdrive propel dysfunctions in governance structures and global and local media systems, which in turn intensifies declines in public trust in national and transnational governance institutions around the world, leading to more governmental dysfunction, wider vacuums filled by corporate and tech companies, and so on and so forth.

The Milton Wolf Seminar focuses on media and diplomacy, both broadly defined. If the past decade has done nothing else, it has called into question how we, as a society, define both media and diplomacy, indicating a deeper malaise just beneath the surface in headline after headline. Media's relationship with diplomacy is inextricably linked with global evolutions in domestic governance structures.

Diplomats increasingly represent countries where democracy is under threat, elections are contested, voters are disenfranchised, and nationalist and fascist sentiments invigorate populist movements. The nation-states that diplomats represent are changing just as the media laws and the media actors that inhabit and surround these nation-states are changing. The promise of a relatively stable world order and global cosmopolitanism so prevalent at the end of the Cold War has receded at the same pace as public trust in the fourth estate's ability to narrate and make sense of this breakdown in the global social fabric. Contemporary media is similarly contested, fragmented, and mutating (metastasizing?). As AI software and tech platforms increasingly create, complicate, and fill the void there is debate about the very definition of media itself: what should and does constitute "the media"?

The 2025 seminar will focus on diagnostics and interventions. Where and how can these dystopic cycles be disrupted? What can we inject into the seemingly endless decay wrought by late-stage capitalism? What is the role of the nation-state and the private sector in mitigating and shaping the future of large language model AI applications in the global system? What can and should be the role of an increasingly cyborg media?

AGENDA

Tuesday, April 8, 2025

6:00 – 8:00 PM Welcome Reception and Registration (Diplomatic Academy)

Wednesday, April 9, 2025

9:00 – 10:00 AM Welcome Tea & Introduction

- **Katharine Eltz-Aulitzky**, Executive Director, The American Austrian Foundation
- **Emil Brix**, Director, Diplomatic Academy Vienna
- **Karin Emprechtinger**, Executive Director, Austrian Marshall Plan Foundation
- **Sarah J. Jackson**, Co-Director, Media, Inequality & Change Center, Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania

10:00 AM – 12:00 PM Session 1: Apocalypse Now? Politics, Platforms, Press in Contemporary Diplomacy

At the turn of the Century, scholars such as Francis Fukuyama predicted “the end of history” and the rise of a more prosocial world aided by the rise of a globally minded citizenry connected in real-time by new technological networks. Twenty-five years into the new millennia, pundits commonly liken the current geopolitical climate to dystopian fiction such as that written by Issac Asimov or Aldous Huxley. Information warfare proliferates, ranging from AI-aided bot networks to bombing supply chains, to exploding walkie-talkies, to financial and political capture of social and traditional media companies. Trust in the traditional institutions of governance, media, and politics has plummeted just as debates about what and who constitutes truth have proliferated. How can we and should we understand this pivotal moment in world history? What does it mean for the relationship between media and diplomacy? Panelists in this session will set the scene for two days of discussion, exploring how broader trends in technology, journalism, economics, great power competition, multilateralism, and diplomacy are ushering us into a brave new world.

- **Martina Schubert**, Deputy Director, Diplomatic Academy Vienna (Moderator)
- **Emil Brix**, Director, Diplomatic Academy Vienna
- **James Pamment**, Senior Lecturer, Researcher, and Associate Professor, Department of Strategic Communication, Lund University
- **Mira Milosevic**, Senior Fellow, Elcano Royal Institute, Adjunct Professor, IE University
- **Edward Wong**, Diplomatic Correspondent, *The New York Times*

12:00 – 1:30 PM Lunch

1:30 – 3:00 PM Session 2: Trust and the International System

Declining trust in public institutions has fueled the rise of populist and authoritarian leaders who exploit public dissatisfaction and skepticism, weakening democratic institutions and norms globally. Reduced confidence in diplomacy and governance has also translated into skepticism toward multilateral institutions like the UN, WTO, and WHO, weakening collective efforts to address shared global challenges, such as climate change, pandemics, and military conflict. In some countries, public skepticism provides cover for governments to suppress independent journalism, further eroding transparency and accountability. While declining trust in public institutions and polarizing debates about what constitutes truth have been on the rise since the 1970s, this erosion has become more pronounced in the last ten years. Panelists in this session will examine case studies about how these trends are affecting diplomacy, governance, journalism, and societal cohesion with an eye toward potential solutions.

- **Sarah Jackson**, Co-Director, Media, Inequality & Change Center, Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania (Moderator)
- **Ricardo Ribeiro Ferreira**, Guest Lecturer and Teaching Assistant, University of Edinburgh
- **Francesca Giannaccini**, Researcher, Democracy Reporting International

- **Maria Kiseleva**, Producer of Special Reports, *Current Time TV* for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty

3:00 – 3:15 PM Tea Break

3:15 – 5:00 PM Session 3: Disinformation on Steroids

Charles Spurgeon famously said, “A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes.” Inasmuch as there ever was a golden age for ‘truth,’ it is safe to say that the era of a shared sense of reality is dead. Whereas previous asymmetries gave legacy media a leg up, established media organizations are now mired in fact checking and fighting against a cascade of corrupted information enabled by nimble tech platforms and alternative journalisms. The Internet disrupted society’s ability to manage the tension between total information conformity and total misinformation chaos, with massive consequences for democracies - from elections and referendums to pandemics and wars. Case studies on this panel include recent interference in Moldova’s referendum, elections in Georgia, and information wars in the ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza.

- **James Pamment**, Senior Lecturer, Researcher, and Associate Professor, Department of Strategic Communication, Lund University (Moderator)
- **Chen-Ling Hung**, Director of the Graduate Institute of Journalism and Multimedia Center, National Taiwan University
- **Alice E. Marwick**, Director of Research, Data & Society
- **Khadija Patel**, Director/Journalist in Residence, International Fund for Public Interest Media

6:15 Bus departs – 9:00 PM Tour of Freud Museum and Dinner

Thursday, April 10, 2025

9:00 – 10:00 AM Coffee and Conversation with the Emerging Scholars

Supporting junior scholars is a key part of the Milton Wolf Seminar. Please join us for morning coffee and a lively roundtable discussion with our 2025 Emerging Scholar Fellows who will present their research and explain how it relates to the 2025 Seminar theme.

10:00 – 10:15 AM Tea Break

10:15 AM – 12:00 PM Session 4: The New Geopolitics of Information

Corporations are exacting unparalleled influence over domestic and international politics, particularly in the information space. From hostile takeovers of media companies in India to mobilizing social media networks in support of candidates in elections, corporate actors, though few in number, wield outsized influence across a wide array of institutions, with consequences for media, elections, tech policy, and the environment. Public media appears everywhere on the decline; corporations increasingly bend both the delivery and the production of information to their wills. It appears that we are moving to a future where a few corporations will preside over the ‘machinery of

reality.’ Is there a space for public and alternative media models? What checks on power are available to citizens and activists? Can these trends be reversed? Panelists in this session will discuss current case studies and potential solutions.

- **Sarah J. Jackson**, Co-Director, Media, Inequality & Change Center, Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania (Moderator)
- **Lina Dencik**, University Research Leader in AI Justice, Goldsmiths, University of London
- **Ben O’Loughlin**, Professor of International Relations, Royal Holloway, University of London
- **Srirupa Roy**, Professor and Chair of State and Democracy, the Centre for Modern Indian Studies, University of Göttingen

12:00 – 1:15 PM *Lunch*

1:15 – 3:00 PM Session 5: The Digital and Analog Ramifications of AI

Much attention has been given to the ways that AI threatens to supersede human intellectual processes and functions. AI, however, is driven by large language models *and* very real material resources. Almost every resource on the planet fuels the AI juggernaut, with consequences for the power grid, nuclear energy, political structures, the production, trade, and trash of physical devices, human labor, and financial systems. The fast pace of AI’s technological advancement appears not so much to be leaving the materially tied world behind but feasting upon it. Panelists in this session will discuss such questions as: What is the reality behind the rhetoric of AI? What are the current and potential political and economic solutions to ameliorating AI’s role in the global system? What is the role of the media, diplomats, corporations, and activists in these decisions?

- **Kevin Marc Blasiak**, Postdoctoral Researcher, Vienna University of Technology (Moderator)
- **Fieke Jansen**, Head of the Critical Infrastructure Lab, University of Amsterdam
- **Sandra Makumbirofa**, Senior Researcher, Digital ICT Africa
- **Viola Schiaffonati**, Associate Professor of Logic and Philosophy of Science at the Department of Electronics, Information and Bioengineering, Milano Politecnico
- **Thomas Schneider**, Director of International Affairs, Swiss Federal Office of Communications

3:00 – 3:15 PM *Group Photo and Tea Break*

3:15 – 5:00 PM Session 6: Infrastructures of Independence: New Media Models

Independent news outlets are an essential component of the health of liberal democracies. Declining revenue, and the loss of advertising profits to tech platforms, coupled with the corporatization and consolidation of news organizations have facilitated more news deserts across the globe - and left those that remain vulnerable to media capture. In the face of the ‘oligarchization’ of the media and algorithmic journalism production, what economic and organizational news production models can help

preserve journalistic integrity and quality? This panel examines new structures and financial mechanisms that may protect and nourish independent media across multiple national contexts.

- **Natalie Fenton**, Professor of Media and Communications and Co-Director of the Centre for the Study of Global Media, Goldsmiths, University of London (Moderator)
- **Jim Egan**, Independent Media Adviser
- **Inês De Matos Pinto**, Legal and Policy Officer, European Commission, Directorate-General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology (DG CNECT)
- **Zoltán Varga**, Chairman of the Board, Central Médiacsoport

6:30 Bus departs - 9:30 PM Heurigen Fuhrgassl Huber, Neustift