ANNUAL REPORT 2022-2023

CENTER FOR INFORMATION, TECHNOLOGY, AND PUBLIC LIFE

Introduction

ABOUT CITAP

The Center for Information, Technology, and Public Life (CITAP) is a thriving, interdisciplinary community with an intellectual commitment to communication for a stronger democracy.

Our theoretically informed and public-facing research answers emerging questions about how social differences shape the politics, institutions, information systems, and platforms that govern our lives. We invest in research and relationships that empower stakeholders to move towards a democratic digital future rooted in equality and justice.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Introduction

The Center for Information, Technology, and Public Life (CITAP) is an interdisciplinary research center founded in 2018 at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill dedicated to scholarly and public-facing analysis of technology and democracy. CITAP has an approximately $2 million annual budget and has raised $7.5 million in foundation funding to date.

Our six core faculty members, three postdoctoral researchers, and twelve research assistants conduct original empirical research that upholds the values of multi-racial, multi-ethnic, and pluralist democracy in the face of technology-enabled challenges. CITAP is the only center in the United States that foregrounds racial, historical, and social power in the study of communication, politics, and technology. Likewise, CITAP is the most racially and ethnically diverse group of faculty, post-doctoral scholars, and graduate student researchers in the field.

In 2022-2023, CITAP's researchers:

- Published two major academic books and 11 peer-reviewed journal articles in leading venues such as the *Journal of Communication*, *New Media & Society*, *Political Communication*, *PNAS Nexus*, *Information, Communication, & Society*, *Big Data & Society*, and *Communication Theory*
- Published 14 public-facing pieces in outlets including: *The New York Times*, *Wired*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Tech Policy Press*
- Gave 40+ conference presentations at leading scholarly venues (including the American Political Science Association, American Sociological Association, Association of Internet Researchers, and the International Communication Association) and public talks (including at Columbia, Harvard, MIT, New York University, and the University of Michigan)
- Made more than 60 press appearances in local, national, and international media (including *The New York Times, NPR, Washington Post, the Daily Show, MSNBC, Time, NBC News,* and the *Wall Street Journal*).

Our research on technology and democracy is wide-ranging. This year we investigated how Google search is manipulated politically, Wikipedia's bias towards white male subjects, and networked privacy's impact on marginalized communities. We led important conversations on false equivalency and racial inequality across academic fields. We translated our work for stakeholders including the Facebook Oversight Board, the White House, Google, Microsoft, and other legislators, regulators, and platforms. All this work was made possible by a high-trust and collaborative research culture that supports our faculty, graduate students, postdoctoral researchers, and affiliates, who are an essential part of our broader community.

Research

At CITAP, we recognize that effective analysis of technology platforms and information systems requires:

- A **holistic approach** grounded in history, society, culture, and politics;
- Analyzing how **social differences**—including race, ethnicity, gender, class, and sexual identity—shapes unequal information ecosystem dynamics;
- Prioritizing **questions of power**, institutions, and economic, social, cultural, and technological structures; and
- Making clear foundational commitments to **equality and justice.**

These commitments anchor our research, collaborations, affiliate community, public engagement, and partnerships. This year, our work included two books that critically examine the relationship between technology and social power, and a series of papers pushing technology platforms and social scientists to confront biases and inequalities.

Research Highlights
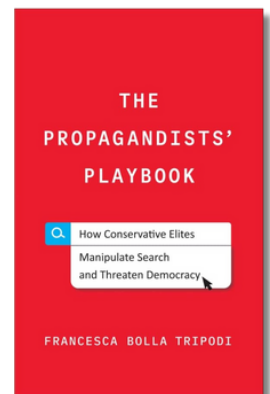
The Propagandists' Playbook

In a new book, ***The Propagandists' Playbook: How Conservative Elites Manipulate Search and Threaten Democracy (Yale University Press),*** principal researcher Francesca Tripodi shows that as search engines shift from providing links to providing direct answers to search queries, they become more susceptible to manipulation. Malicious actors harness the power of "keyword curation" and "strategic signaling" to manipulate search engine results around phrases that contain limited or unreliable information. This process exploits the public's trust in search engines' reliability as sources of information and play on what business scholars dub the "IKEA effect," by providing a tangible do-it-yourself quality to the process of information seeking, this "IKEA Effect of misinformation" empowers audiences with a faux autonomy, making them feel like they are drawing their own conclusions.

In a WIRED article released alongside the book, Tripodi summarizes how this process works and how it undermines trust in search and damages our democracy. For her public-facing work and scholarship, Dr. Tripodi received the **Award for Impact and Excellence** by the University of Washington Center for an Informed Public. The Propagandists' Playbook also received a Best Book Honorable Mention from the Communication, Information Technologies, and Media Sociology division of the American Sociological Association.

The Private is Political

In her book ***The Private is Political: Networked Privacy and Social Media (Yale University Press),*** principal researcher Alice Marwick introduces the concept of "networked privacy" and documents the privacy practices of low-income and LGBTQ+ communities, people who have experienced online harassment, and college students. We all engage in online "privacy work" to navigate how our data is used by the many platforms and services we rely on. Though we've come to think of privacy as an individual responsibility, this misunderstanding limits how we imagine technological and legal frameworks to protect private information. Her research chronicles how the harms of privacy violations fall disproportionately on already-marginalized groups and proposes how understanding privacy as inextricably linked to big data aggregation and platform design can inform structural privacy reforms.

Dr. Marwick wrote about how generative AI compounds these harms in **WIRED**.

Research Highlights

Inequities of race, place, and gender among the communication citation elite, 2000–2019, *Journal of Communication*

Deen Freelon led a review of the "citation elite" of authors at the top of the communication field over the past two decades with CITAP postdoctoral fellows and students Meredith Pruden, Kirsten Eddy, and Rachel Kuo. They find that this elite is overwhelmingly white, male, and U.S.-based and recommend that scholars review their own publications, syllabi, and reading lists to resist these patterns.

#politicalcommunicationsowhite: Race and Politics in Nine Communication Journals, 1991-2021, *Political Communication*

Deen Freelon, CITAP postdoc Meredith Pruden, and graduate researcher Daniel Malmer analyzed discussions of race across the field of political communication and found marked silence on the topic, concluding that "it seems fair to say our field does not consider race to be an especially relevant factor in the study of political communication, and racism even less so."

A review and provocation: On polarization and platforms, *New Media & Society*

Daniel Kreiss and Shannon McGregor push back against the study of polarization in social science research, arguing that inequality (and especially racial inequality) is the bigger threat to democracy. They assert that polarization is a byproduct of movements for greater equality and that resorting to a power-blind analysis reflects "conceptualizations of democracy... so thin, solidarity is so treasured, racial analysis is so rare, and historical memory is so short."

Recentering power: conceptualizing counterpublics and defensive publics, *Communication Theory*

Daniel Kreiss and Sarah J. Jackson (University of Pennsylvania) delve into how communications scholars use the concept of "counterpublics" in studying public speech and argue that right wing movements that defend the privileges of powerful groups are better conceptualized as "defensive."

"Too soon" to count? How gender and race cloud notability considerations on Wikipedia, *Big Data & Society*

Francesca Tripodi co-authored this study of how Wikipedia editors' application of notability guidelines varies based on both race and gender, with the label "too soon" often idiosyncratically and inappropriately applied to the biographies of female and BIPOC academics on the site.

Creating data; creative methods

We pride ourselves on developing resilient, creative research methods that offer meaningful insight into technology platforms, social movements, and inequality even when data access is restricted. Over the past year, we've generated or updated key datasets that support our research as well as the work of other scholars working on these issues.

PIEGraph Data Set

Our Political and Civic Applications team collected Twitter feed data from a representative pool of 1,000 participants, tracking the full contents of their personal information environments (PIE) on Twitter. As Twitter shut down free API access, the team has mapped those feeds to understand the overall information quality of those news feeds and how their information environments vary by partisanship, age, race, and other demographics. These results will be published in a series of articles over the coming year.

Tracking Platform Political Speech Policies

In 2020, the CITAP Digital Politics team published a report on how social media platforms regulated political misinformation. For the 2022 U.S. midterm elections, Daniel Kreiss and CITAP GRA Erik Brooks updated that research to note how platform policies had changed over the past two years, summarizing their findings for **Tech Policy Press**." In Spring 2023, Kreiss and CITAP GRA Bridget Barrett warned that **tech platforms are rolling back these guardrails**, taking a "laissez-faire approach to elections in 2024" -- an analysis amplified in **The New York Times**.

Tracking Public Opinion on Platform Regulation

Shannon McGregor advised a **Knight-Gallup survey** on Americans' attitudes toward platform regulation. The poll found that 90% of Americans believe that social media makes harmful and extreme viewpoints spread. The survey report identified six clusters of opinion on regulating online speech—attitudes that don't map neatly to political affiliation. The survey's findings have been presented to policy makers and researchers in Washington, D.C., and the report was highlighted in the press.

- 30% Reformers: politically left, highly-engaged internet users who support increased government regulation of social media.
- 19% Concerned Spectators: older and less "online" group with privacy concerns, divided as to whether government or tech companies should lead content moderation.
- 19% Unfazed Digital Natives: younger and less concerned about tech harms, who prefer a hands-off approach from government.
- 19% Individualists: politically right and concerned about censorship more than harmful content online.
- 9% Traditionalists: politically mixed group skeptical of government as arbiter of online expression.
- 4% Unplugged and Ambivalent

The CITAP Network

CITAP's work is deeply collaborative. We teach and mentor. Our faculty co-author with students, postdoctoral researchers, and our global community of colleagues. CITAP's affiliate community is international, and our conferences and workshops draw peers, students, and stakeholders.

Mentorship & teaching

CITAP Affiliate Community

CITAP welcomes affiliates from around the world. Our current affiliate network is comprised of 95 faculty and postdoctoral researchers, 15 industry professionals, and 79 graduate students from a broad range of institutions, both in the US (the University of Pennsylvania, Carnegie Mellon University, Columbia University, the University of Washington, Cornell, NYU) and around the world (University of Ottawa, University of Oxford, Ca' Foscari Venice, Kristiania University College, University of Zagreb, University of Hong Kong, University of Johannesburg). CITAP hosts an active mailing list and Slack that are open to all affiliates, holds regular workshops for affiliates on research and professionalization topics, and facilitates lively working groups for affiliates and CITAP personnel interested in similar scholarly issues.

Mentorship & Teaching

Daniel Kreiss's undergraduate research course surveyed how local news coverage framed election denying-candidates for office in dozens of races across the country. Based on data collected from 21 races in 13 states, they found that media coverage of candidates largely noted their election denialism without explaining how those beliefs might jeopardize our democratic institutions. A paper co-authored with course assistant and CITAP graduate researcher Heesoo Jang is in review.

Alice Marwick taught a graduate Communication seminar, "Critical Disinformation Studies," that drew students from across the university. Marwick and eight seminar students co-authored a paper on the moral panic around drag queen story hours, now in review.

Francesca Tripodi brought her graduate student to Montana to conduct hands-on ethnographic observations as part of her NSF-funded research on Search Literacy.

Shannon McGregor worked with a group of six graduate students to analyze data from the aforementioned Knight/Gallup survey. Two of those studies, both co-authored with the graduate students, have since been published.

CITAP supported the work of 9 full-time graduate student researchers this year:

- **Erik Brooks**
  - GRA to Daniel Kreiss
- **Courtlyn Pippert**
  - GRA to Alice Marwick
- **Daniel Johnson**
  - GRA to Deen Freelon
- **Aashka Dave**
  - GRA to Francesca Tripodi
- **Parker Bach**
  - GRA to Shannon McGregor
- **Zari Taylor**
  - GRA to Tressie McMillan Cottom
- **Elaine Schnabel**
  - CITAP Public Scholarship GRA
- **Heesoo Jang**
  - CITAP Policy Collaboration GRA
- **Evan Ringel**
  - Center for Media Law & Policy + CITAP Collaboration GRA

Bulletin of Technology and Public Life

The Bulletin of Technology and Public Life is an open-access publication that showcases research, whitepapers, and other expert writing in a variety of formats. We showcase work that centers questions of power, history, and culture that might not fit neatly in traditional academic journals or that bridge multiple audiences. Editor-in-Chief Alice Marwick and Associate Editor Shannon McGregor launched BTaP with a review of the academic literature on far-right radicalization in spring 2022. This year, we've published amazing new work on information and how it spreads, including...

What Comes After "Disinformation"?

This collection grew from a May 2022 pre-conference at the International Communication Association annual meeting (co-organized by CITAP). In a dozen brief articles, scholars challenge the current state of disinformation research and suggest new directions for future work. As Théophile Lenoir and Chris Anderson summarize in their introductory essay, the collection questions who benefits from the current state of disinformation work, considers disinformation in the Global South, and even challenges how we understand democracy.

> **"Technical solutions to political problems are bound to fail. Historical, structural, and political inequality—and especially race, ethnicity, and social difference—needs to be at the forefront of our understanding of politics and, indeed, disinformation."**

After publication, several of the preconference convenors and BITaP authors participated in a Facebook Oversight Board roundtable on platform content moderation, focusing on disinformation spread during the Brazilian presidential election.

Civic Information Handbook

How do deceptive narratives take life online? This guide, written by Karen Kornbluh and Adrienne Goldstein of the German Marshall Fund with election stakeholders from around the country, explains step-by-step how coordinated deceptive campaigns build their audience on social media and why these campaigns are so effective at catching our attention. They conclude with recommendations and case studies in how civic information providers can borrow these same tactics to promote quality information in their communities.

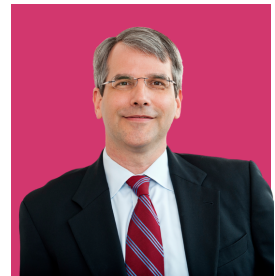## Transnational Information Studies Syllabus

This syllabus explores the role of power in shaping where and how information emerges and circulates. Authors Rachel Kuo (University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign), Pranav Malhotra (University of Michigan), Rachel Moran (University of Washington), and Sarah Nguyễn (University of Washington) divide readings into modules on imperialism and empire, transnational information platforms and politics, and methodological frameworks and approaches. The syllabus offers a breadth of material linking communication and information studies to critical ethnic studies and postcolonial studies.

CITAP's Sister Centers

We regularly collaborate with our two sister centers at UNC, the **Center for Media Law and Policy**, co-directed by CITAP affiliates Amanda Reid and David Ardia, and the **Center for Technology Policy**, directed by CITAP affiliate Matt Perault. We work with both to translate CITAP's empirical research findings into actionable public and technology policy.

Center for Media Law & Policy

UNC's **Center for Media Law and Policy** analyzes the legal and policy issues surrounding emerging technologies and the digital public sphere. CMLP and its affiliated faculty conduct research on freedom of expression, misinformation and political communication, intermediary liability and speech torts, journalism and media business, privacy and transparency, and intellectual property. In 2022-2023, CLMP researchers published 10 articles about subjects from regulating **facial recognition technology** to **First Amendment laws and election misinformation** to **regulating AR gameplay**.

Center on Technology Policy

UNC's **Center on Technology Policy** seeks to craft public policy for a better internet. Utilizing an interdisciplinary academic framework, CTP works to identify knowledge gaps and develop actionable policy frameworks that will enable us to realize the potential benefits of technology while minimizing its harms. By working closely with students and expanding the University's offerings in technology policy analysis, we seek to cultivate and train the field's future practitioners.

CITAP Speaker Series

The CITAP Speaker Series showcases scholars who share our commitments to holistic research and justice. We hosted seven speakers over the 2022-2023 academic year on topics ranging from online harassment of journalists to new measures of Black Americans' political attitudes.

"On Critical Race Theory: Why it Matters and Why You Should Care"
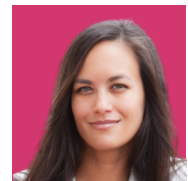
Victor Ray
Associate Professor in the Departments of Sociology and Criminology and African American Studies | University of Iowa
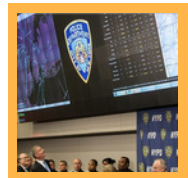
"Capitalizing on Identity in Public Life"

Nancy Leong
Professor of Law & William M. Beaney Memorial Research Chair | University of Denver

"Crime Data and Policing Data as Open Data"

Tamara Nopper
Associate Professor of Sociology | Rhode Island College
Senior Researcher for the Labor Futures Initiative | Data & Society

"When Hate and Harassment Are Just Part of the Job"

Elizabeth Dubois
Associate Professor and Chair in Politics, Communication, and Technology | the University of Ottawa

"Digital Cultures and Governance: Perspectives from the Global South"

Sareeta Amrute
Associate Professor of Anthropology | University of Washington
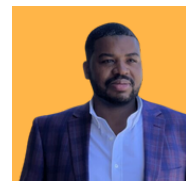
Chinmayi Arun
Executive Director of the Information Society Project & Research Scholar | Yale Law School

"From Margin to Center: Reorienting our Approach to the Study of Race and Inequality in the Social Sciences"

Hakeem Jefferson
Assistant Professor of Political Science | Stanford University

Public Scholarship & Engagement

We are committed to ongoing public engagement as well as reaching expert audiences in journalism, policy, and technology fields, ensuring that valuable research findings are available to those most able to act. Here are a few samples of what we accomplished:

Tressie McMillan Cottom launched a **New York Times opinion column** in spring 2022. Through pieces on scam culture, cryptocurrencies, and consumer citizenship, she considers how our modern American notions of self-reliance and individual action uphold long-standing inequalities and undermine collective political change.

Francesca Tripodi co-authored a report with Define American on the **Great Replacement Network** – a systematic study of how YouTube personalities promote Great Replacement Theory to support anti-immigration policy.

Shannon McGregor addressed the Internet Governance Forum in Washington, D.C. about improving platform trust and safety, and joined fellow KnightCenter CSmAPP (NYU) to share her research on the role of social media in driving political narratives.

CITAP joined the Public Technology Leadership Collaborative (PTLC) as a founding member in 2022. Student researcher Heesoo Jang co-organized a gathering that brought researchers and members of a Covid-19 government task force together to discuss building communities of trust online.

In June 2022, Alice Marwick was invited to the White House to discuss online radicalization and domestic terrorism threats. (Read her **editorial on far-right online radicalization in Slate**.)

CITAP in the U.S. South

Our research addresses issues of national and international importance, but our minds are also on the U.S. South.

In her New York Times column, Tressie McMillan Cottom writes how it is essential to understand political fights in Tennessee and North Carolina "to know where the script our country is writing is going."

> **"We like to look to the horizon instead of to the soil because we bury the people we do not care about in the South. It is where we have put migrants and poor people and sick people. It is where we put the social problems we are willing to accept in exchange for the promise of individual opportunity in places that sound more sophisticated. But the South is still a laboratory for the political disenfranchisement that works just as well in Wisconsin as it does in Florida. Americans are never as far from the graves we dig for other people as we hope."**

CITAP prioritizes engagement in our local community and the larger Southeast region— next year, for instance, we will conduct fieldwork at the presidential primaries in South Carolina. This year, our engagements included:

Understanding the Difference between Book Challenges and Targeted Harassment

Francesca Tripodi discussed book challenges at the annual meeting of the North Carolina Public Library Directors Association. She spoke with library directors across the state on the uptick in book challenges, how libraries handle them, and the difference between book challenge policy and harassment.

Journalism and Democracy

Shannon McGregor joined the North Carolina Local News Workshop gathering in August 2022 to share her research into how journalists can use the health of democracy as a framing device in covering election-related news. For instance, journalists can explain that a new law limits participation from younger voters and hurts democratic participation instead of describing it as a strategic win for one party, or note that an election-denier candidate seeks to undermine our election system rather than simply stating that they deny the 2020 presidential election results. She is now leading a new research project in collaboration with local election journalists and the North Carolina State Board of Elections to test the effectiveness of training and support materials in helping North Carolina newsrooms adopt this frame into more of their election coverage.

CITAP in the media

"What's really important about understanding the network of right-wing information is that it's not just in one space... these are highly interconnected forms of information, and that this has been going on for some time." -Francesca Tripodi in Salon, "**How the right is winning the hashtag wars**"

"On the academic side of the ledger, I teach and research at a public university in the South. Polarization looks very different from my vantage point than it does to a lot of the scholars who are driving this field, working within blue states at powerful private institutions. So if you look at where very interesting research is being done on things like inequality or things like power, it's coming from public universities around the country, the University of Wisconsin, the University of Texas, the University of North Carolina, in part because we're seeing these political dynamics play out in a very vivid, very real way, and one that's often shot through with very salient racial, ethnic and other power dimensions." -Daniel Kreiss in Salon, "**Political "polarization" isn't the real problem in America**"

"In the end, the authors propose that those worried about disinformation on social media (including YouTube) should spend more money on those platforms to run ads to protect against disinformation. In many ways, that is wholly unsatisfying for basically all stakeholders except the platforms." -Shannon McGregor in NBC News, "**Google is trying out 'pre-bunking' to counter misinformation**"

"I don't like the term "radicalization" because white supremacy is baked into the United States from its inception. And white supremacist ideas and racist ideas are pretty foundational. And they're in all kinds of day-to-day language and media and thinking. And so why would we think it's radical to be, for example, anti-black or anti-trans when anti-blackness and anti-transness have these really long histories?" -Alice Marwick on Electric Frontier Foundation podcast, **"So You Think You're A Critical Thinker"**

CITAP research and/ or researchers were featured in:

The New York Times	The Hill	Beyond Black History Month podcast
The Washington Post	Politico	Conspirituality Podcast
USA Today	L'Express	Niskanen Center
NPR	AFP (Agence France-Presse)	DigiChina Project
MSNBC	Liberation	Carolina Connection
NBC News	Science	Africa is a Country
The Wall Street Journal	The Well	EFF Podcast
Time	Chapelboro	MarketPlace Tech
CBS17	UNC Research	KGNU News
The Atlantic	The Daily Tar Heel	WKOW News
Salon	Lincoln Project TV: We're Speaking	Stats + Stories
The Philadelphia Inquirer	The Assembly	Cosmopolitan
Slate	Twitterverse podcast	The Public Diplomat
KQED	Tech Policy Press	Is this Democracy Podcast
The Seattle Times	Reimagining the Internet podcast	

Honors, awards, and leadership

Francesca Tripodi won the 2023 CIP Award for Impact and Excellence

The Propagandists' Playbook also received the Best Book Honorable Mention from the Communication, Information Technologies, and Media Sociology (CITAMS) division of the American Sociological Association.

Tressie McMillan Cottom won the 2023 Gittler Prize

The prize from Brandeis University recognizes outstanding and lasting scholarly contributions to racial, ethnic, and/or religious relations. Dr. Cottom also received the ASA CITAMS Public Sociology Award.

Deen Freelon was appointed to a National Academies of the Sciences Committee on Understanding and Addressing Misinformation about Science.

Shannon McGregor received the Best Public-Facing Scholarship Award from APSA's Information, Technology, and Politics section

Dr. McGregor was also named a Kopenhaver Center Fellow (Center for the Advancement of Women in Communication) sponsored by the AEJMC Commission on the Status of Women.

Alice Marwick was offered the Microsoft Visiting Professorship at Princeton University's Center for Information Technology Policy.

Welcomes & Farewells

Departures

Our first executive director, Katy Peters, left in the summer of 2023. Katy was instrumental in the accomplishments of CITAP in its first three years, setting up a strong foundation for our success and developing a strategic plan and vision that will guide us for the next five years. We thank her and wish her all the best in her future endeavors.

Our founding principal researcher, Deen Freelon, joined the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania as the Allan Randall Freelon Sr. Professor of Communication. With this transition, Freelon will become a CITAP senior affiliate researcher and continue to work with CITAP faculty, postdoctoral scholars, and graduate students on questions regarding race, identity, and mis- and disinformation.

We wished fond farewells to our first two postdoctoral researchers in 2022-23, as Rachel Kuo went to UIUC and Meredith Pruden joined Kennesaw State, both as assistant professors.

This summer, we celebrated four CITAP graduate students and one postdoctoral researcher as they move into assistant professor roles:

- Bridget Barrett to CU Boulder
- Elaine Schnabel to Weber State
- Yiping Xia to Texas A&M
- Andrea Lorenz to Kent State
- Erik Brooks to Chapman University

Arrivals

We welcomed four new postdoctoral researchers: Nanditha Narayanamoorthy from York University, Yiping Xia from the University of Wisconsin, Yvonne Eadon from UCLA, and Qunfang Wu from Syracuse University.

For the coming academic year, we're excited to welcome one new faculty researcher, Shannon Malone Gonzalez, from UNC Sociology. Dr. Gonzales studies marginality and policing, especially how Black girls and women understand and experience police surveillance.

We're also excited to welcome our first CITAP Fellows, who will be joining the center as multi-year graduate student affiliates:

- Knight-CITAP fellows: Lorcan Neill and Carolyn Schmitt
- Hewlett-CITAP fellow: Vivianne Ito