

Justice, Emancipation, Democracy, and Information Access (JEDI)

The SIGIR Workshop on Resisting Corporate and Authoritarian Capture of Information Access Platforms

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Abstract

Information and access to information are both profoundly political; representing sites of tension between oppression and emancipation. However, information retrieval (IR) as a discipline has eschewed this notion that search systems are political, and issues related to social justice, emancipation, and democracy have been systematically excluded. We propose this workshop as a forum for IR researchers who are interested in exploring the role of computer-mediated information access in the struggle for democracy, social justice, and emancipation; and asking what changes we need in our current technological, organizational, and social arrangements in field to realize the desired alignment between IR research and our societal aspirations. This will be a highly interactive workshop employing collaborative and dialogical methods to make progress towards concrete artifacts like collectively workshoping a manifesto.

CCS Concepts

• **Information systems** → **Information retrieval**; **World Wide Web**; • **Human-centered computing**;

Keywords

Search and Society, Emancipatory Information Retrieval, Sociotechnical Information Systems

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1 Title

Justice, Emancipation, Democracy, and Information Access (JEDI): The SIGIR Workshop on Resisting Corporate and Authoritarian Capture of Information Access Platforms.



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2 Motivation

Information and access to information are both profoundly political and represent sites of tension between oppression and emancipation [19]. However, information retrieval (IR) as a discipline has eschewed this notion that search systems are political, and has cleaved strictly to highly algorithmic notions of relevance as the only metric by which such systems can be evaluated [2, 10]. Exclusion of political reflection, however, does not negate the political nature of our work, but rather props up the status quo and neoliberalism [16]. This approach has led to structures of oppression being baked into search systems [23], as issues related to social justice, emancipation, and democracy have been systematically excluded. This exclusion of ideas has also necessarily limited the contribution of researchers from other disciplines on the discourse about the field's responsibility to society, notably information science (IS), human-computer interaction (HCI), social sciences, law, and other interdisciplinary communities like science and technology studies (STS) and Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency (FAccT).

Researchers in IR are beginning to understand the structures of oppression, with a growing recognition that authoritarian forces have influence over how and what information is disseminated [17]; indeed the notion of relevance was developed with retired intelligence agents [34]. The potential for hegemonic concerns to influence information access (IA) only increases in the context of present day information ecosystems (i) whose economics is structured around surveillance capitalism [38], (ii) where generative AI that can produce persuasive language and visualizations to manipulate public opinion is being employed to shape information that is being consumed [21], and (iii) where all major global information access platforms are owned by few privileged individuals and institutions and are under serious risk of authoritarian capture [7]. This reality is harmful to individuals and society; IA systems including search systems, social media platforms, news aggregators, and LLMs are now key to collective sensemaking, how we understand ourselves and our place in the world. Against this backdrop, some researchers are calling for reasserting the interdisciplinary roots of IR [37], explicating the dominant values [35] and sociotechnical imaginaries [20] that critically shape the field, and to center societal, democratic, and emancipatory values in IR research [1, 19, 20, 22, 31]. We propose this workshop as a forum for IR researchers who are interested in asking the following questions:

- (1) What is the role of computer-mediated IA in the struggle for democracy, social justice, and emancipation from social, economic, and political oppression?
- (2) What changes do we need in our technological, organizational, and social arrangements in IR to realize information access as a force for justice, emancipation, and democracy?

The goal of this workshop is fourfold. Firstly, it is to foreground the conversation within the IR community about raising our sociopolitical consciousness and develop shared understanding of how design and governance of IA platforms intersect with concerns of structural forms of oppression, including colonialism, racism, transphobia, religious oppression, casteism, misogyny, and ableism. Second, the workshop aims to identify key risks to our information ecosystems that impede societal aspirations for justice, emancipation, and democracy; in particular those risks that are emerging from the confluence of: (i) Increasing concentration of economic and political power of Big Tech [11, 15, 24, 36], (ii) emerging capabilities of generative AI technologies, such as AI persuasion [5, 6, 9, 25], and (iii) rising levels of global conflicts [30, 32] and democratic erosion [27]. Third, workshop attendees will participate in group discussions to identify key research directions and projects that IR should embark on to support our collective aspirations for social justice, emancipation, and democracy. It is clear that the IR community cannot embark on these research endeavors on our own, and will require to collaborate with a range of communities—including IS, HCI, FAcT, STS, law, and humanities—and be informed by diverse epistemologies—like feminist, queer, decolonial, anti-racist, anti-casteist, anti-ableist, and abolitionist. So, our last goal is to discuss new practices that IR research should adopt to facilitate interdisciplinary collaborations, incorporate diverse epistemologies, and practice movement building to educate and mobilize.

3 Theme and purpose

The aim of this workshop is to explore information seeking and retrieval from an emancipatory perspective, in doing so, we ask:

- (1) *How does the conflict between (a) democracy and authoritarianism, and (b) emancipation and oppression play out across current IR practices?*
- (2) *What practices can help us shift the field towards supporting social justice, emancipation, and democracy?*
- (3) *How can we make visible and understand how information access facilitates collective sense-making, particularly those that remain implicit, and challenge normative sense-making?*
- (4) *How can IR push towards epistemic justice [13] and promote critical thought and sociopolitical consciousness?*
- (5) *How might we safeguard information ecosystems against authoritarian and corporate capture, and the public from mass surveillance and manipulation?*
- (6) *What can IR learn from feminist, queer, decolonial, anti-racist, anti-casteist, anti-ableist, and abolitionist epistemologies?*
- (7) *How do we successfully proceed to challenge power and structures of oppression, going beyond just talking about Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion (DEI) in our communities and about fairness and bias in our systems?*

- (8) *How should IR research situate itself in ongoing struggles against oppression and authoritarianism and realize its work grounded in practices of organizing and movement building?*

This workshop takes an explicitly political lens, leaning on anti-oppression scholars like bell hooks [14] and Paulo Freire [12]. It will use collaborative and dialogical methods to make hidden norms visible and ask how current IA tools help or hinder social justice, emancipation, and democracy, e.g., IA for folks with complex legal status, or risks of ideological censorship under authoritarian platform capture. Ultimately, the goal of this workshop is to cultivate a seed community of scholars interested in developing an IR research agenda to support social justice, emancipation, and democracy.

4 Format and planned activities

We propose an agenda consistent with the goals set out in Section 2. The workshop will be highly interactive employing collaborative and dialogical methods. Table 1 presents a tentative schedule.

- **Opening remarks and short talks:** The opening session will focus on developing a shared understanding of how design and governance of IA platforms intersect with concerns of structural forms of oppression via a curated set of short talks (both invited and participant talks). We will solicit participant talk proposals from the community in the form of 1-page abstracts. A program committee will review these proposals to shortlist selected presentations to be combined with invited talks to curate a diverse program for the session.
- **Breakout session I:** The second morning session will employ a collaborative and dialogical format to identify key scenarios and risks to our information ecosystems that impede societal aspirations for justice, emancipation, and democracy.
- **Breakout session II:** The afternoon session will again employ a collaborative and dialogical format. But this time, participants select one key scenario and reimagine ways in which they want to experience information in that context in support for social justice, emancipation, and democracy; and identify key research directions and projects for IR to support proposed information experiences.
- **Closing session:** In the final session of the day we will collate our learnings, insights, and concrete artifacts like definitions, principles, practices, and framework(s) in a collectively workshopped manifesto. This manifesto will be a concrete outcome of the workshop to be shared with the rest of the IR community to raise awareness and invite more participation in this research agenda.

5 Audience and selection process

The target audience for this workshop includes researchers and practitioners who are interested in societally-motivated IR. Participants do not need any special skills or background, and we welcome all attendees who support justice-oriented, emancipatory, and democratic futures. Please note that this workshop is not a forum to debate whether any group of human beings deserves or should expect justice and emancipation, and any participant who attempts this will be asked to leave. In addition, we aim to encourage participants from IR-adjacent fields like IS, HCI, STS, and FAcT to

Table 1: Planned Schedule for the JEDI Workshop at SIGIR 2026.

Time	Agenda	Details
9:00 am - 9:30 am	Opening remarks	Motivation and context setting for the workshop, followed by a quick note on what to expect from the program of the day.
9:30 am - 10:30 am	Short talks	A curated mix of short (invited and participant) talks to connect design and governance of IA platforms to concerns of structural oppression and authoritarianism.
10:30 am - 11:00 am	<i>Coffee break</i>	
11:00 am - 12:00 pm	Breakout session I	Participants identify key scenarios and corresponding risks of IA that impede justice, emancipation, and democracy through facilitated group discussions.
12:00 pm - 12:30 pm	Report back session I	Participants report back key scenarios and risks from breakout discussions.
12:30 pm - 1:30 pm	<i>Lunch break</i>	
1:30 pm - 2:30 pm	Breakout session II	Participants select one key scenario and reimagine ways in which they want to experience information in that context in future; and identify key research directions and projects for IR to support proposed information experiences.
2:30 pm - 3:00 pm	Report back session II	Participants report back key research directions and projects from breakout discussions.
3:00 pm - 3:30 pm	<i>Coffee break</i>	
3:30 pm - 4:30 pm	Workshop a manifesto	Participants bring together their learnings and insights from the day and collaboratively work on a draft of a JEDI manifesto that articulates important definitions, principles, practices, and framework(s) to be shared with the rest of the IR community.
4:30 pm - 5:00 pm	Closing reflections	open discussions reflecting on the day’s proceedings and identify follow up actions.

attend the workshop. We will publicize the workshop in forums corresponding to those communities as well as invite specific members for invited short talks and general workshop participation.

6 Related workshops and distinction from main conference topics

It is a truth universally assumed that access to information makes everyone’s lives better. However, the determinations of whose lives, how, and what better looks like are less universal than has typically been recognized by our community till recently. In recent years, these concerns prompted several workshops on the topics of bias [3], fairness [8], needs of understudied users [18], disinformation and misinformation [29], safety [26], sustainable development [28], and environmental sustainability [4, 33]. However, these forums have typically been focused on algorithmic aspects without explicitly recognizing that these concerns are saliently political. Workshops, like Normalize [35], have attempted to foreground the norms and values of the field in this context; while BEYOND [37] has pushed to recognize the importance of interdisciplinary approaches. Our workshop builds on these previous efforts to bring together perspectives from outside IR alongside our own community. We are also aiming to bridge with other communities adjacent to IR, including FAccT and workshops like Algorithmic Collective Action¹ that have engaged more explicitly with the politics of technology.

7 Organizers

The list of workshop organizers bring together a rich set of perspectives and strong track records in societally-motivated IR research. All workshop organizers aim to attend the workshop in-person.

¹<https://acaworkshop.github.io/>

Bhaskar Mitra is an independent researcher based in Canada. His research focuses on AI-mediated information access and questions of justice and emancipation in the context of these sociotechnical systems. He is currently serving as the ACM SIGIR Secretary and as an Associate Editor for the ACM TOIS journal. He co-organized several workshops (Neu-IR @ SIGIR 2016-2017, HIPstIR 2019, Search Futures @ ECIR 2024, ReNeuIR @ SIGIR 2024, and LLM4Eval @ SIGIR 2024-2025, and WSDM 2025), shared evaluation tasks (MS MARCO ranking leaderboards, TREC Deep Learning Track 2019-2023, TREC Tip-of-the-Tongue Track 2023-2025, and NTCIR Tip-of-the-Tongue Task 2026), and tutorials (WSDM 2017-2018, SIGIR 2017, ECIR 2018, FIRE 2019, and AFIRM 2019-2020). He has received several awards for his research, including two ACM SIGIR Early Career Researcher Awards in 2024 for excellence in research and in community engagement.

Dana McKay is associate dean, interaction, technology and information at RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia. Her work sits at the intersection of information science and human computer interaction, and she focuses on how advances to digital technology can reduce inequity, rather than increasing it. She is a past chair of the CHIIR steering committee, and has been senior program committee at CHIIR, JCDL, and TPDL and AC chair at CHI. She has organised tutorials and workshops on a range of topics to do with interactive information retrieval, and presented these at CHI, CHIIR, and SIGIR.

Michael D. Ekstrand is an assistant professor at Drexel University, where he leads the Impact, Novation, Effectiveness, and Responsibility of Technology for Information Access Lab (INERTIAL). His research focuses on understanding how information access technology supports or undermines just, equitable, participatory, and democratic societies. He co-founded the long-running FAccTRec

series of workshops on responsible recommendation at RecSys, co-organized FACTS-IR at SIGIR '18, and has given multiple tutorials and lectures at SIGIR, RecSys, ECIR, and elsewhere on fairness and equity in information retrieval and recommender systems.

Sanne Vrijenhoek is a tenure-track researcher at the Centrum voor Wiskunde en Informatica (CWI) in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Her research focuses on building news recommender systems that benefit democratic society through translating normative notions of diversity into system design. She hosted the NORMalize workshop during RecSys 2023-2025 and CHIIR 2024, and conducted multiple collaboration sessions with industry partners.

Maria Murray is a researcher, lecturer, and socially engaged artist in the Department of Media Communications, Munster Technical University. Her research focuses on socially engaged HCI and CSCW in peripheral and pressurised community settings. Maria is particularly interested in developing pluralistic and transformative approaches to participation that access hidden experiences and disrupt social norms to work towards more equitable and sustainable technologies and futures.

8 Potential program committee members

A tentative list of program committee members is as follows: Frederick Van Amstel, Emily Bender, Asia Biega, Ludovico Boratto, Robin Burke, Tommaso Caselli, Shanton Chang, Madeleine Daepf, Joan Donovan, Tim Draws, Jean Garcia-Gathright, Tarleton Gillespie, Asmelash Teka Hadgu, Natali Helberger, Djoerd Hiemstra, Lilly Irani, Kobi Leins, Hanlin Li, Lien Michiels, Laurens Naudts, Safiya Noble, Alexandra Olteanu, Joyojeet Pal, Delfina Martinez Pandiani, Vivien Petras, Joanna Redden, Sarah Robinson, Alan Said, Alain Starke, Plixavra Vogiatzoglou, Nicholas Vincent, and Hilde Weerts.

9 Special requirements

We would prefer a workshop style room with tables that support work in small groups. Other than that, we would need stationery (pens, large format paper, post its), and projection equipment.

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