

MEDIA RELEASE

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New major infrastructure initiative for social data and digital platform research in Australia

Announced today, the [Australian Internet Observatory \(AIO\)](#) is a major new research infrastructure initiative that will open up the 'black box' of digital platforms and their algorithms.

Digital platforms play a critical role in Australia's economy and society, yet our capacities to collect and analyse data from digital platforms and observe their activities is very limited.

The Australian Internet Observatory will develop the tools and capabilities required to gather and analyse online user experience data, algorithms, and interactions. It will support innovative approaches to the collection and analysis of digital social data and internet platforms and the analytical tools and governance required to support cutting-edge research on social, economic, health and environmental issues.

Distinguished Professor Julian Thomas, AIO Program Lead and Director of the ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision Making and Society (ADM+S) said, "over the last decade there's been a dramatic transformation in how Australians use digital platforms, how they interact with the automated systems and the digital economy, and how they communicate with machines and each other. Every day, we are now using more platforms, more intensively, for a wider range of activities.

"But as researchers we've had very little visibility of how digital platforms work."

The Australian Internet Observatory comprises a range of new tools which give researchers visibility for the first time, over how people use critical services every day such as search engines, social media, video on demand services, messaging systems, and other digital services.

"We realised that there was a real need for new research infrastructure when we were developing some of our projects in the ADM+S Centre.

"We were interested in particular problems, such as the kinds of ads Australians see when they use online platforms, and the lack of regulatory oversight in areas such as gambling, alcohol, or unhealthy foods. We knew that there were few reliable or accurate tools for gathering that kind of information, and that better tools would be useful for many researchers.

"With the support of the Australian Research Data Commons, the Australian Internet Observatory brings together a group of researchers and universities with the capabilities to assemble the necessary techniques and systems. It's not a problem that can be solved within any one discipline or research centre. It requires a collaborative, co-operative effort."

The AIO is a four-year national research infrastructure project that will create an interconnected ecosystem of people, data and tools to support innovative approaches to the collection and analysis of digital social data across a range of disciplines and sectors. It will enable researchers to explore topics such as the distribution of misinformation, the patterns of everyday engagement with business, culture and science, flows of communication in emergencies and humanitarian crises, and the dynamics of political conflict and consensus.



The AIO is an initiative of the ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making + Society (ADM+S) in collaboration with researchers and research centres, university partners and organisations across Australia and internationally.

The facility will be developed and led by RMIT University in partnership with QUT, The University of Queensland, University of Melbourne, Swinburne University of Technology and Deakin University. The AIO is supported by the Australian Research Data Commons (ARDC), enabled by the Australian Government's National Collaborative Infrastructure Strategy as part of the Humanities and Social Science (HASS) and Indigenous Research Data Commons.

Jenny Fewster, Director, ARDC HASS and Indigenous Research Data Commons said, "The Australian Internet Observatory is building on a strong foundation of digital research infrastructure to establish a national, joined-up ecosystem that will enable exciting research. It is a vital new part of the suite of research-accelerating national infrastructure within the HASS and Indigenous Research Data Commons."

Key deliverables include:

- Data governance, ethical and legal frameworks and guides
- A national research training program
- Citizen science data donation program
- An integrated suite of data sourcing and data donation tools including browser extensions, data donation packages and APIs
- Generative AI models for text, audio and image generation
- Test environments and simulation tools
- An integrated suite of open-source machine learning tools and data visualisations

Outcomes for the wider community include improvements to informed decision-making and public policy, democratisation and participation in the digital sphere, and public debate, improved digital capabilities and inclusion, greater platform accountability and transparency.

Visit the [Australian Internet Observatory](https://www.australianinternetobservatory.org.au) website.

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