

AUT

NEW ZEALAND

Research Week 2026

**APPLYING RESEARCH
AND TECHNOLOGY
FOR GOOD**

The School of Communication Studies

Te Kura Whakapāho

RESEARCH SHOWCASE

AUT City Campus | WG126
9 am - 4 pm

Wednesday 2nd,
September

The School of Communication Studies | Te Kura Whakapāho Research Showcase

**Wednesday 2nd of September 2026
9 am-4pm
WG126**

This event celebrates innovative, critical and creative research that shapes the future of media, communication, and the cultural and creative industries. The showcase highlights impactful scholarship across journalism, sonic cultures, screen production and storytelling, digital communication, media cultures, public relations, advertising, communication for social change, media ecosystems and emerging technologies, including AI. Reflecting AUT's commitment to research with impact, the event showcases a vibrant interdisciplinary research culture that engages communities, responds to social, cultural and industry challenges, and advances new ways of thinking, creating and communicating in Aotearoa and global contexts, while fostering future communication experts, leaders and skilled media practitioners.

Organising Committee: A/Professor Arezou Zalipour(Chair), Karen Donovan, Dr Tui Matelau, and Angela Rose Asuncion

Programme

TIME	SESSION
9:00–9:10	Opening remarks & housekeeping A/P Arezou Zalipour & Prof Dan Laufer
9:10–10:30	Session 1 <i>Facilitator: Gregory Treadwell</i>
9:10–9:30	Dr Christina Vogels RITUALS OF MASCULINE HONOUR: What feminist historical methods can teach us about patterns of masculine shame, men's fighting and misogyny
9:30–9:50	A/P Arezou Zalipour AI at the greenlight: negotiating creative agency in early-stage film development
9:50–10:10	A/P Helen Sissons & Dr Philippa Smith “AI Junk”: Journalists’ discourses of uncertainty about technological change
10:10–10:30	A/P Merja Myllylahti Feeding the machine – investigating how well an AI news engine writes political news
10:30–10:50	Morning tea
10:50–12:10	Session 2 <i>Facilitator: Tui Matelau</i>
10:50–11:10	A/P Vijay Devadas Manufacturing settler-colonial consensus
11:10–11:30	Rachel Daniels Authenticity by Design: How SVOD Platforms Standardise Cultural Difference
11:30–11:50	Prof Dan Laufer Managing Spillover crises in the age of GenAI
11:50–12:10	A/P Christina Milligan AUT Screen Production Graduate Employment Survey
12:10–1:10	Lunch
1:10–2:30	Session 3 <i>Facilitator: Vijay Devadas</i>
1:10–1:30	Dr Rebecca Evans The Soundtrack of Childhood: Longitudinal Patterns of Musical Engagement in Aotearoa
1:30–1:50	A/P Matt Mollgard Student Radio Mahi – Impacts, Stories and Reflections
1:50–2:10	Dr Jennie Watts, Dr Rufus McEwan, Thomas Watts, and Dr Patrick Usmar Reconnecting Learners: Reflections on Relationship-based Facilitation of Media Education
2:10–2:30	James Nicholson & Dr Ross Brannigan <i>Nothing</i> : deconstructing and reconstructing the narrative structure of a short film.
2:30–2:50	Afternoon tea
2:50–3:30	Session 4 <i>Facilitator: Arezou Zalipour</i>
2:50–3:30	SCS Research Centres AUT Centre for Screen Practice Research TOROA Centre for Communication Research Journalism, Media and Democracy Centre JMAD Communication for Social Change Research Centre
3:30	Closing remarks

Abstracts

Title: RITUALS OF MASCULINE HONOUR: What feminist historical methods can teach us about patterns of masculine shame, men's fighting and misogyny

Name: Dr Christina Batistich-Vogels

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Abstract: This presentation showcases a recently published project that adopted a feminist comparative historical analysis alongside a feminist systematic review to explore how men's honour-based fighting has been practiced and stabilised over time. Specifically, the eighteenth and nineteenth century practice of duelling was compared to today's (hetero)romantic and homosocial practice of territory marking (men claiming ownership over their (hetero)romantic partner by threatening to fight other men who appear to be romantically interested in her). The contribution this project made to scholarship is threefold. Firstly, territory marking is woefully under-researched, yet a well-recognised masculine practice that impacts both men's romantic relationships with women as well as their homosocial relationships with their peers. Secondly, it was timely to do this research; as far-right ultra-traditional versions of masculinity gain more widespread promotion through media and popular culture, it can be assumed that maintaining masculine honour via violent acts will be a priority for more men. And thirdly, this type of analysis helps shed light on inherent fragilities within these violent practices, signalling how men's ritualised fighting could be destabilised in the future.

Bio: Dr Christina Batistich-Vogels is a Senior Lecturer within the School of Communication Studies. Her teaching interests include critical media theory, textual and discourse analysis as well as collaborative/social interaction theory. Her research passions are fuelled by critical feminist inquiries into violence against women prevention. Within this broad research focus sits her expertise in feminist media studies, youth audience theory, historical feminist methods and historical media analysis.

Title: AI at the greenlight: negotiating creative agency in early-stage film development

Names: Associate Professor Arezou Zalipour

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Abstract: The growing use of artificial intelligence (AI) in screenwriting and film development has intensified debates around creativity, authorship, and the role of algorithmic systems in creative processes. AI-driven analytics systems now evaluate screenplays to forecast box-office performance, model audience demographics, and inform casting choices. While scholarship on AI tools in the creative industries has expanded rapidly in recent years, studies focusing on the screen industries – particularly on AI-driven analytics systems used in screenplay evaluation – especially from a practice-led perspective, are still scarce. This study contributes to this area by presenting a practice-led case study that observed the use of a Swiss-based AI-driven analytics system in the development of a German – New Zealand feature film, *Come Together*. Drawing on academic literature, industry reports, and the author's involvement in the script development of *Come Together*, this article discusses the ontological tensions between human creatives and algorithmic evaluation. By examining these tensions, the article develops

three interconnected conceptual insights – creative flattening, risk of formulaic feedback, and blind spots – as a framework for understanding the negotiation of creative agency when algorithmic evaluation enters the early stages of film development.

Bio: Arezou Zalipour is an Associate Professor in Screen Production and Cultural Studies and Associate Head of School – Research in the School of Communication Studies at Auckland University of Technology (AUT). Arezou’s work bridges screen production, theory, and industry, with a strong focus on the intersection of culture, creativity, screen storytelling, practice and industry, and representation of underrepresented communities. She published *Migrant and Diasporic Film and Filmmaking in New Zealand* (Springer, 2019), the first scholarly volume in multicultural filmmaking in New Zealand, and has contributed to national screen policy, Inclusion and Diversity Strategy – He Ara Whakaurunga Kanorau (2022–2025), through her role on the New Zealand Film Commission’s Diversity and Inclusion Screen Industry Leadership Group. Her research is closely integrated with her teaching in drama and documentary production, evolving modes of screen production, and producing for media ecosystems that include screen technologies, AI, and transmedia production. Her academic articles have been published in *Transnational Screens*, *Communication Review*, *Journal of Media Practice*, and *Film International*. <https://academics.aut.ac.nz/arezou.zalipour>

Title: “AI Junk”: Journalists’ discourses of uncertainly about technological change

Name: Associate Professor Helen Sissons & Dr Philippa Smith

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Abstract: This paper examines how journalists are responding to artificial intelligence as it becomes increasingly embedded in news production during a period of economic and organisational strain. Drawing on interviews conducted in 2024 and 2025 with journalists in New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States, it explores how journalists talk about AI in digital news environments shaped by platform dominance, shrinking newsrooms, misinformation and declining trust. Using Critical Discourse Studies (CDS), the paper analyses journalists’ accounts of AI and what they believe it means for professional identity, newsroom practices and relationships with audiences. The findings show that AI is already embedded across newsroom workflows and valued for speeding up routine tasks. However, journalists also expressed concerns about misinformation, deepfakes, de-skilling and editorial autonomy, with some warning that news ecosystems are becoming flooded with “AI slop” that is increasingly difficult to verify.

Bios: *Helen Sissons* is an Associate Professor of Journalism at Auckland University of Technology and a former BBC reporter with almost two decades of newsroom experience. Her research examines how journalists adapt to digital technologies and changing work practices, drawing on expertise in video ethnography, discourse studies and sociolinguistics. She has published widely on newsroom practice, digital transformation, misinformation and media literacy. Helen is co-director of the Toroa Centre for Communication Research and has advised industry and government on journalism education and online information challenges. Her work is underpinned by a commitment to practice-informed, socially engaged and future focused journalism research.

Philippa Smith is an independent researcher in language and communication and a former journalist whose career spans regional and metropolitan newspapers in New Zealand. Her research explores the intersections of language, media and digital communication, including news discourse, political communication, reality television and internet studies. A former Associate

Professor of Critical Media Studies at Auckland University of Technology, she has also been a visiting scholar at the Oxford Internet Institute. Philippa is deputy director of the Toroa Centre for Communication Research, an honorary research fellow at the University of Auckland, and contributes to research on online harm and digital safety.

Title: *Feeding the machine – investigating how well an AI news engine writes political news*

Name: Associate Professor Merja Myllylahti

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Abstract: AI assistants and tools are widely used in New Zealand newsrooms in news gathering, production and distribution. Some newsrooms have outsourced the writing of routine news, such as stock market releases, completely to AI. Others allow AI to write the first draft of a news article from a single source, such as a press release from police or fire services. A recent study conducted in the US and India shows that some citizens believe that AI news writing is more neutral, balanced and less opinionated than traditional news writing. In this context, this research investigates to what extent this is true. This ongoing, explorative study examines how well an AI-powered news engine writes political news from a single source, a political press release. The research, conducted in collaboration with Newswire.nz, is based on feeding the newswire's AI engine with press releases, prompting it to act as a professional journalist when writing. While political press releases are inherently biased towards the parties that have released them, the researcher's assumption is that when prompted, *the AI news engine will follow journalistic conventions and principles in news writing.*

Bio: Dr Merja Myllylahti is associate professor in journalism at the School of Communication Studies, AUT, New Zealand. She is leading *Trust in News* and *Newsrooms & AI* research projects at the AUT Journalism, Media and Democracy Research Centre. Her academic articles have been published in *Digital Journalism*, *Journal of Media Business Studies*, *Journalism Studies*, *Media and Communication* and *Media International Australia*. Her sole-authored book *From Paper to Platform: How Tech Giants Are Redefining News and Democracy* was published in 2023.

Title: *Manufacturing settler-colonial consensus*

Name: Associate Professor Vijay Devadas

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Abstract: This article investigates how selected media commentators in Aotearoa New Zealand framed the Treaty Principles Bill (TPB). Drawing on a discourse analysis of opinion pieces in *The New Zealand Herald*, *Stuff* and *Newstalk ZB*, this paper examines the rhetorical and ideological work in selected media commentaries by prominent media professionals in Aotearoa. The analysis identifies three dominant media frames – hegemony of logocentrism, spectacle of the indigenous other and weaponization of multiculturalism – that collectively manufactures a settler-colonial consensus around the TPB.

Bio: Vijay Devadas is an Associate Professor in the School of Communication Studies. His research is in the areas of critical theory, media studies and race and ethnic studies.

Title: Authenticity by Design: How SVOD Platforms Standardise Cultural Difference

Name: Rachel Daniels

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Abstract: Recent research on transnational television and Subscription Video on Demand (SVOD) services extends Chalaby's (2026) work, arguing that streamers operationalise cultural authenticity as a strategic construct within a broader "diversity logic" (Chalaby, 2026; Han et al., 2024). Instead of an end in itself, cultural difference becomes a managed branding device, shaped through a "global template" of recognisable genres, streamlined narratives, and high production values. Within this system, local elements are selectively curated for global legibility, producing a form of "platformed diversity" in which specificity is visible yet standardised. Drawing on Jenner's (2024) "grammar of transnationalism," this presentation shows how authenticity is embedded within globally oriented storytelling conventions. Intertwined with this is the growing ambition among New Zealand screen practitioners to secure SVOD commissions as pathways to international visibility. However, such commissions often entail creative compromise, raising questions about ownership, cultural depth, and the limits of platform-driven opportunity.

Bio: This research forms part of Rachel's PhD thesis. Prior to entering academia, Rachel's work in the television sector gave her direct insight into the increasing complexity of the screen industry, as local providers seek to anticipate and respond to the growing influence of global platforms. Central to this experience was an ongoing concern with audience connection, how the industry adapts to competition while continuing to engage viewers and sustain local narratives, cultural identities, and forms of representation.

Title: Managing Spillover crises in the age of GenAI

Name: Professor Dan Laufer

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Abstract: We identify five types of spillover crises associated with GenAI and illustrate them using real-world cases that highlight how reputational damage can extend beyond a single firm and affect others in the industry. We also propose a strategic framework to help organizations identify the risk of spillover crises, and provide guidance for responding to spillover crises when they occur

Bio: Dan is a Professor and Head of the School of Communication Studies at AUT. Dan's area of expertise is Crisis Management, and he has published articles in leading journals for over 20 years. In 2024 Dan was appointed as a Contributing Editor in Business Horizons (Q1), and he currently serves on the editorial board of Public Relations Review (Q1). Dan's work is also of great interest to industry and government, and he has taught workshops to mayors, senior government officials and board members in New Zealand. He also wrote a monthly column on Crisis Management for New Zealand's leading newspapers: the Herald, the Post/Stuff and NBR.

Title: AUT Screen Production Graduate Employment Survey

Name: Associate Professor Christina Milligan

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Abstract: In late 2025, a survey was conducted with screen production graduates from 20 universities in Australasia, with AUT the sole New Zealand university surveyed. The aim was to discover graduate destinations, employment and skills for a sustainable career post-graduation. The survey was initiated by Professor Susan Kerrigan (Swinburne) and A/P Christina Milligan (AUT) and conducted under the auspices of the Australian Screen Production, Education and Research Association (ASPERA), partnered with Swinburne University of Technology and AUT.

A report has now been produced covering the complete survey. However the number of responses from AUT graduates was particularly high, sufficient to produce an additional report specifically relevant to AUT and this report is currently being written. Given that AUT is currently working through a high level, strategic goal of considering what all the university's offerings may look like in the next few years, and given the rapidly changing shape of the screen industry, this report is timely and it is anticipated that it will feed into any future consideration of this particular major within the School's teaching programme.

Bio: Associate Professor Christina Milligan (Ngāti Porou) teaches and researches in screenwriting and screen production, work which is based on a foundation of many years' practice in the screen industries of Australia and New Zealand. In her research, she focuses on exploring the work of Māori and other Indigenous filmmakers, with particular interest in the contrasts – creatively, politically and socially – between the voices of Indigenous filmmakers and their Western counterparts

Title: The Soundtrack of Childhood: Longitudinal Patterns of Musical Engagement in Aotearoa

Name: Dr Rebecca Evans

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Abstract: This presentation draws on a recent paper published in the Journal of the Royal Society of New Zealand. This work was part of an inter-disciplinary and cross-University collaboration between music researchers, data scientists, and longitudinal public health experts. In this paper, we investigated patterns of children's musical engagement across childhood and early adolescence in Aotearoa New Zealand to identify factors that predict sustained participation in musical activities. Using data from multiple waves of the Growing Up in New Zealand longitudinal cohort study, children's musical engagement was assessed across five activity domains. Results showed that engagement patterns shifted with age, with family singing decreasing and individualised music listening and video watching increasing over time. Children's musical engagement trajectories varied widely and were influenced by both individual characteristics and modifiable contextual factors. These findings highlight the need to consider equity of access and cultural relevance when supporting musical participation across childhood.

Bio: Dr Rebecca Evans (Te Rarawa, Te Aupōuri, Tangata Tiriti) is a Music Psychology Researcher and Lecturer in the Screen, Audio and Journalism Department, Te Kura Whakapāho. Her research

explores music and creative, collaborative, time-based practices in relation to human cognition, development and holistic wellbeing. Dr Evans gained her PhD in Music Psychology at Nanterre University, Paris, France. She has worked extensively with the University of Auckland's longitudinal birth cohort study, Growing Up in New Zealand (GUINZ), and is a founding member of the Society for Music Research Aotearoa (SyMRA)

Title: Student Radio Mahi – Impacts, Stories and Reflections

Name: Associate Professor Matt Mollgaard

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Abstract: This presentation is based on a 2025 article from the presenter and collaborator from Ara Polytech Broadcasting School in Christchurch. It is the outcome of several years of research in the student radio sector in Aotearoa that culminated in this article and the book “Other Stations Are Shit: Student Radio in Aotearoa New Zealand” (2023). This research was partially supported by New Zealand On Air and this arrangement will be discussed in the presentation along side the findings, which show the significant and lifelong impacts that working in student radio had on respondents to a public online survey about the sector. The presentation includes information on working with the student radio stations across Aotearoa as partners in the research, and how we created and managed these relationships in mutually beneficial ways. It also discusses the value of public online surveying for data collection.

Bio: Associate Professor Matt Mollgaard works in the School of Communication Studies at Auckland University of Technology. He teaches media research skills, performance, production and critical analysis of the audio industries. His research focuses on radio as a critical and resilient media form that has taken on new spaces and meanings in the digital age. He also produces research, reports and policy advice for the government media funding agency New Zealand On Air.

Title: Reconnecting Learners: Reflections on Relationship-based Facilitation of Media Education

Names: Dr Jennie Watts (corresponding author), Dr Rufus McEwan, Thomas Watts, and Dr Patrick Usmar

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Abstract: This paper examines the challenges and pleasures of leading a two-day media workshop with high-school students and explores how media education can connect learners through collaborative practice. Drawing on facilitator reflection, this study considers the role of *whanaungatanga*, co-construction, and the negotiation of comfort and discomfort within the workshop environment. Held over an intensive two days during the October school holidays, participants and facilitators worked through a small number of activities, culminating in the production of a quality multi-camera video podcast. We observe that students bring significant prior knowledge and experience of media, offering a rich base for relationship-centred learning.

Our findings include that positioning learners and teachers as allies rather than adversaries fostered trust and learner agency. Furthermore, early investment in sharing knowledge of media technologies and digital cultures created common ground and enabled reciprocal learning.

The research team brings together four experienced media educators and practitioners from the Te Kura Whakapāho - School of Communication whose research explores the praxis of teaching and learning in media education in high schools in Aotearoa NZ, with implications for media education at all levels. A second study comprises interviews with media studies teachers in Tamaki Makaurau, the findings of which they intend to share in the near future.

Bios: Dr Jennie Watts is a Senior Lecturer in the Critical Media Studies department. Her research explores communication for social change, with interests in advocacy, education, and communities of practice, as well as media policy and public communication in areas such as environment and literacy. She has brought these diverse perspectives into her nearly two decades teaching, with a focus on developing students' critical media literacy.

Dr Rufus McEwan is the Associate Head of School for Learning and Teaching in Te Kura Whakapāho, School of Communication Studies. His research considers the nature and impact of processes of media transformation on contemporary media landscapes; specifically, changes to industry practice, media policy, and contemporary media work in the New Zealand radio industry. Rufus has been a media educator for over 20 years and has previously worked in the New Zealand radio industry as an announcer and a producer on both music and talkback stations.

Thomas Watts is a lecturer and Academic Advisor to the Critical Media Studies department with well over a decade of lecturing and research experience alongside more than 20 years as an award-winning industry practitioner. His expertise lies in bringing these complementary perspectives together to explore how creative practice, platforms, and audiences intersect and shape one another within contemporary media environments.

Dr Patrick Usmar is a lecturer in the School, and has recently completed his PhD titled *Where Are All the Woke Kids?* A former media professional from London, he works across education, community settings, and public media, advocating for media literacy as a pathway to gender equity and social justice.

Title: *Nothing*: deconstructing and reconstructing the narrative structure of a short film

Names: James Nicholson & Dr Ross Brannigan

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Abstract: *Nothing* is a short film practice as research project created by writer/director Ross Brannigan and cinematographer/editor James Nicholson. The film presents an aging actor's response to memory loss in the context of a production of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. This presentation explores the deconstruction of the original edit of the film, by deliberately destabilising the traditional building blocks of the narrative structure. Influenced by theories of montage, realism and formalism summarised by Gianetti (2008) and the sound theory of Michel Chion (1999), the re-edit shifts the film along the spectrum from realism to formalism by

embracing volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity, as both narrative and stylistic elements. The research explored the alteration of our process, examining the footage to surface poetic aspects and exploring the recombination of image and sound elements. We found that allowing the material to speak to us allowed us to more effectively express themes of loss: loss of power, loss of identity and loss of coherence.

Bios: Ross Brannigan (PhD, AUT) teaches Performance and Screen Production at Auckland University of Technology in Aotearoa, New Zealand. He is a founder member of the Centre for Screen Practice Research at AUT. His professional practice encompasses more than seventy screen and thirty stage productions as actor, writer, director and intermedial designer and maker. Academic interests revolve around the fusing of stage and screen and the collaborative creativity of actor and cinematographer. He is currently researching the complex relationship between the need for an actor to maintain subjective performativity and to concurrently be aware of visual and technical production elements in realist intermedial theatre.

James Nicholson (MA, Auckland) is a lecturer in Screen Production at Auckland University of Technology's School of Communication Studies, Aotearoa, New Zealand. He is a founder member of the Centre for Screen Practice Research at AUT. He is an experienced cinematographer and editor, whose research has focused on screen production practice in both documentary and fiction. Academic interests include the relationship between image and sound in screen production, with a particular emphasis on the placement of voices.

Research Centres

AUT Centre for Screen Practice Research, Director: A/Prof Arezou Zalipour

TOROA Centre for Communication Research, Director: Dr Gudrun Frommherz and A/Prof Helen Scissions

Journalism, Media and Democracy Centre, Director: Prof Wayne Hope and Dr Gregory Treadwell

Communication for Social Change, Director: A/Prof Vijay Devadas and A/Prof Sarah Baker

The School of Communication Studies | Te Kura Whakapāho Research Showcase

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For any questions or feedback, or if you would like to connect with School's research, please contact the Associate Head of School – Research, A/Prof Arezou Zalipour, at arezou.zalipour@aut.ac.nz.