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Comm scholar Dan Lane named UC fellow for research on AI and civic engagement

Artificial intelligence is becoming a fixture of college life, influencing how students learn, seek advice and navigate the world. As a 2026–27 fellow of the University of California National Center for Free Speech and Civic Engagement (UC-NCFSCE), Dan Lane, an associate professor in the UC Santa Barbara Department of Communication, is examining what role these technologies play in civic learning and democratic participation.

While researchers have devoted growing attention to how AI is affecting the way students study, think and learn, far less is known about how these technologies may shape civic socialization.

“Artificial intelligence tools such as ChatGPT and NotebookLM are becoming increasingly central to the college experience,” Lane said. “In addition to their growing role in education, these technologies are also influencing experiences of socialization, providing guidance on topics ranging from adult life skills and careers to personal relationships. We are wondering whether this extends to politics.”

Lane’s project, “AI as a Civic Educator: Artificial Intelligence and the Civic Future of American College Students,” examines AI chatbots as emerging sources of civic

socialization among college students. The research aims to spark public discussion about what forms of citizenship may emerge from AI-infused college experiences and how colleges and universities can engage with AI to promote democratic expression and participation.

This research will examine questions such as: Are students turning to AI to better understand the issues, ideas and conflicts unfolding around them? Can these tools help build civic knowledge and efficacy, or might they reinforce rigid viewpoints, false beliefs or cynicism?

Lane will also analyze the opportunities and risks of AI as an emerging source of civic learning.

"Professor Lane's research is at the cutting edge of determining how individuals and groups can use technology such as social media to reduce political inequalities, improve intergroup relations and reduce political polarization," said Distinguished Professor and Chair of Communications Tamara Afifi. "At a time where political polarization is dividing our country, figuring out how to help people use digital media to become more political involved while reducing division is essential. His work provides deeper theoretical explanations for how to make this happen."

Each year, the UC-NCFSCE selects fellows from a broad range of disciplines and professional backgrounds, including law, journalism, higher education, social science, technology and government. Fellows receive funding to advance research and public dialogue related to expression and democratic participation on college campuses.

As one of the center’s 2026–27 fellows, Lane is part of a cohort whose projects examine topics including the role of AI in civic education, fostering cross-partisan community and protecting academic freedom. Together, their work aims to strengthen civic engagement and deepen understanding of free expression in American higher education.

The director of the UCSB Digital Political Inequality Lab, Lane’s research is at the intersection of political communication, intergroup communication and communication technology. The mission of the lab is to understand how digital media shape political inequality.

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