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Masha Gessen, David Runciman, Jean Twenge, Megan Phelps-Roper, Coleman Hughes join Sydney's Festival of Dangerous Ideas

Australia's original disruptive ideas festival returns this August to provide a *Sanctuary* for curious minds with a taste for danger. The Festival of Dangerous Ideas (FODI) presents an expansive roster of international experts, bestselling authors, cutting edge academics and innovative thinkers; all appearing in-person.

Taking over Carriageworks from 24-25 August for a weekend of conversation, stimulation and provocation, the Festival of Dangerous Ideas (FODI) returns to Sydney, the major events capital of the Asia Pacific, to set – or reset – the current affairs agenda.

Presented by The Ethics Centre, FODI24 will create a sanctuary for those wanting to cut through the noise, ask hard questions and engage in good faith conversation about the most challenging issues of our time.

Introducing the 2024 program, **Festival Director Danielle Harvey**, said:

“At a time when we are surrounded by bad ideas and bad faith, where information is cheap and shallow, we need a place people can come and be curious together and be inspired. A space safe from hype. Safe to listen and ask questions. A space with real experts from all disciplines. Festival of Dangerous Ideas is here to be that space. The line-up won't please everybody (it never does!) and nor does it aim to. But it will be good for everyone. What FODI offers is a precious moment in real time with 87 thought leaders and creatives who will bring you next-level discussion, likely some disagreement, and definitely some hope. Learning more about the world we are making and unmaking is a thrill, and I can't wait for you to discover new ideas and thinkers over one massive weekend of danger.”

Simon Longstaff, Executive Director of The Ethics Centre, presenter of FODI, said:

“FODI was created in anticipation of a time in which the space allowed for principled disagreement would be subject to unrelenting pressure – from all sides. We live in such a time. For over 15 years we have pushed back – creating a forum where it is safe to engage with ideas that challenge and ultimately redefine what counts as ‘conventional wisdom’. This incredible program continues in that tradition – offering a range of topics and speakers whom we are confident will produce at least as much light as heat during the course of the Festival.”

Joining an incredible cohort of local talent, 16 international guests present keynotes including:

As previously announced **Roxane Gay** returns to Australia ten years on from the publication of her internationally bestselling *Bad Feminist* to reflect on what it takes to be a serial dissenter in this age of ‘tribal warfare’ in *How to Have Dangerous Ideas*.

US psychologist **Jean Twenge** was one of the first voices to raise the alarm about the negative impact of the smartphone and associated social media apps – especially on young people. Years on, her research has never been more relevant or urgent. Appearing exclusively in Sydney, at FODI, she’ll explore how these handheld devices are doubling depression rates of American teens, amplifying feelings of loneliness amongst Australian young people and in some circumstances, killing our kids.

The writing and rewriting of historical conflicts to influence the present is nothing new. But in an age characterised by creeping authoritarianism, anyone who questions the logic of competing narratives faces attempts to silence them. From the Holocaust, to Israel and Gaza, Russia and Ukraine, journalist and writer **Masha Gessen** examines the intersection of history, propaganda and censorship as today’s players race to control their narratives.

In this year’s *Christopher Hitchens Oration* (‘The Hitch’), named after FODI’s first keynote address by renowned contrarian Christopher Hitchens, academic and *Talking Politics* podcaster **David Runciman** presents an audacious plan that might just rescue democracy: *Votes for 6 year olds*. In a fractured society, with a deepening void between the views of ‘the old’ and ‘the young’, can the balance between generations be restored? Runciman suggests that the solution may lie in giving children the right to vote.

One year on from the ground-breaking podcast *The Witch Trials of JK Rowling*, host **Megan Phelps-Roper** – also known for *Unfollow*, her memoir about her formative years spent as a member of the Westboro Baptist Church – and producer **Andy Mills** – co-creator of the *New York Times*’ *The Daily* and *Rabbit Hole* podcasts – discuss the role their podcast played in highlighting tensions in the debate about the intersection of gender diversity and feminism. What did the series achieve – and what remains elusive? Phelps-Roper and Mills appear exclusively, in Sydney, at FODI.

As the conflict in the Middle East rages on, academic **Saree Makdisi** argues that Europe and America are complicit in an historic wrong by tolerating the intolerable. Makdisi argues that Israel is not the 'liberal democracy' it pretends to be – at least not for the Palestinian people who continue to suffer the effects of violent dispossession and discrimination. Makdisi asks how this act of self-deception, on the part of the West, can have occurred – and what might now be possible, for both Palestinians and Israelis.

Economist **John N. Friedman** has made a career researching the causes of inequality and its long-term, grim results for children in the US. With fellow economist **Richard Holden** offering a local perspective, Friedman will explore how different policies can reverse the current decline of social mobility by harnessing schools, neighbourhoods, universities and social capital to revive a fading dream of upward mobility.

A fearless crusader against 'vaginal steamers' and 'jade egg enthusiasts', the 'Internet's OB/GYN' **Jen Gunter**, has long been on a mission to dismantle the maze of myths (and misogyny) surrounding women's health. Armed with her sharp wit and medical prowess, Gunter exposes the pervasive misinformation that shackles society, urging women to seize control of their bodies with a call for evidence-based care.

Coleman Hughes, writer, public intellectual and author of *The End of Race Politics*, joins broadcaster **Josh Szeps** for a live, FODI edition of Szeps' *Uncomfortable Conversations*. Drawing from research and personal insights, Hughes will articulate his vision of a 'colour blind' society and a more inclusive culture.

For the inaugural *John Caldon Provocation*, UK comedian, author and public atheist **David Baddiel** will assert that humanity's desperate need for meaning and moral guidance will always lead to some imagination of God. Indeed, Baddiel suggests it is the very urgency of the desire for God that proves His/Her/Their non-existence. Love it or loathe it, Baddiel's bold thesis confronts uncomfortable aspects of the human condition and the role of spirituality. He appears exclusively, in Sydney, at FODI.

Emeritus professor turned sustainability leader **Jem Bendell** is widely known for originating the concept of "deep adaptation". In short, Bendell believes the process of civilizational collapse has already begun and is irreversible – meaning that it is now time to learn how to 'break together'. Exclusively in Sydney, at FODI, Bendell will argue the case for rethinking our place in a failing world and gracefully supporting each other through transition.

In *The Case for Not Having Children*, the elusive South African philosopher **David Benatar** asks if it's ethical to bring a child into this world when every living being is guaranteed to suffer. A leading proponent of anti-natalism, Benatar believes that no matter how counter-intuitive it might sound, there is a moral responsibility to not have children – as the unborn can never suffer. He appears exclusively, in Sydney, at FODI.

The concept of Indigenous excellence is fraught with tension within Aboriginal Australia. The far-left questions its feasibility, the far-right denies its legitimacy, and centrists struggle with how to implement it effectively. In *The Next Frontier* Wiradjuri man **Todd Fernando** suggests these dynamics raise a critical question: Are we ready to accept excellence?

Over the course of the weekend, FODI's international guests will be joined by some of Australia's leading changemakers and thought leaders in a series of salient panel discussions and conversation events:

- **Wrecking the World Order** // Matt Bevan, Avani Dias, Cheng Lei, Hamish Macdonald + more // How a new breed of world leaders are upending everything.
- **Democracy is Not Worth Dying For** // Masha Gessen, Paul Ham, David Runciman // Perhaps the price of democracy is too steep.
- **Uncancelled Culture** // David Baddiel, Tim Dean, Roxane Gay, Andy Mills, Megan Phelps-Roper // Embracing the possibility of public forgiveness.
- **The Pitchforks are Coming** // Myra Hamilton, Carl Rhodes, Jordan van den Berg (aka Purple Pingers) // Why the 1% should be afraid.
- **Speaking Bluntly** // Antoinette Lattouf, Andy Mills, Josh Szeps // Identity politics in journalism.
- **Ending the 'Tyranny' of Pregnancy** // Luara Ferracioli, Brigette Gerstl, Mianna Lotz // Decoding birth: navigating the use of artificial and transplanted wombs.
- **Positive Masculinity** // Monty Badami, Tarang Chawla, Raewyn Connell, Anna Krien // Has the online "manosphere", or the "gender wars" by mainstream conservatives, rather than the intrinsic nature of men and boys, shifted society's ideas of masculinity in a toxic direction?
- **Counterfeit People** // Rob Brooks, Lizzie O'Shea, Patrick Stokes, Emily van der Nagel // Living without boundaries in a digital space will the borders between morality and legality, in the 'real world', begin to dissolve?
- **Contagious Realities** // Alice Dawkins, Sandersan Onie, Jean Twenge, Sonny Jane Wise // How do we know if a diagnosis is real?
- **The End of Protesting** // Jem Bendell, Ed Coper + more // What actions actually make real change?
- **Art is Always Political** // Louise Adler, Brook Andrew, Violette Ayad, Gil Beckwith, Emile Sherman + more // How the culture wars are affecting our pages and stages.
- **The Inhuman Condition** // Megan Evans, Bronwyn Graham, Michael Richardson, Toby Walsh, Benjamin Law // A UNSW special presentation on dangerous ideas in a changing world.
- **Australia is Breaking: The Minefield Live** // Waleed Aly and Scott Stephenson joined by guest Stan Grant // Navigating eroding social cohesion.
- **Absolutely Justified** // Ed Coper, Kosta Lucas, Megan Phelps-Roper // The dangers of unquestioning belief in a compelling story.
- **Anatomy of Evil** // Stan Grant, Simon Longstaff // A meditation on genocide.

- **The Generation Gulf** // Jean Twenge, Stephanie Ward and Sam Koslowski at the Roundhouse, UNSW Sydney, Kensington on 27 August // Accelerating individualism – the generational divide.

FODI's dangerous provocations also extend off stage and across Carriageworks and beyond with a series of installations, performances and immersive experiences designed to test limits and push boundaries.

Exclusive to Sydney, Austrian and Croatian artists and designers **Numen / For Use** will create a suspended cocoon in the foyer of Carriageworks, made entirely from sticky tape. Brave FODI Festival-goers will be offered a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to crawl through the **Tape** installation and go within their own FODI 'sanctuary'.

Australian-based performance collective, **re:group**, bring a live 'jailbreak' experiment to FODI. *Keep Your Head Up* is a deep-dive into the casualisation of the care industry, the politics of incarceration and art-making-as-escape. It features Mirielle Gabriel and her old friend, Steve Wilson-Alexander, as they reconnect and share stories from both sides of the NDIS. re:group use their video magic and the audience to create a prison escape movie live on stage.

A surrealist new interactive work, *Divinations in Transit*, from performance mischief artists **Vicki Van Hout** and **Marian Abboud** invites courageous participants to traverse the Carriageworks site, embarking on a quest that blurs the lines between reality and reverie. Amidst the cacophony of magic and mayhem, a poignant question emerges: Are we truly living in the present, or merely drifting through the currents of time?

Unpick modern life's most dangerous ethical dilemmas, together in the always-popular **Circle of Chairs**. The Ethics Centre invites Festival-goers to take up a chair and sit shoulder to shoulder with leading philosophers including Eleanor Gordon-Smith, Simon Longstaff and Tim Dean. Will you agree with your fellow FODI attendees' views?

A thrilling and shocking treasure hunt awaits you amongst the underground stacks of the State Library of NSW. Led by curators Sarah Morley and Margot Riley, the **State Library NSW Tour: Stacks of Danger** affords punters a peek at some of the most controversial and unexpected works hidden behind the doors of this iconic public institution.

The Last Supper invites guests to take a pause, mid Festival, to unpack the big issues of the day over a glass of wine and dinner with fellow Festival-goers – joined by FODI local and international talent.

Early access to purchase tickets is available to FODI and Ethics Centre subscribers from 7am this morning.

Tickets are available to the general public from 7am on Wednesday 26 June.

Select sessions will be available to stream, livestream tickets on sale in August.

The Festival of Dangerous Ideas (FODI) is presented by The Ethics Centre, a not for profit that advocates for a more ethical society. The Centre's programs are recognised for stimulating

public awareness and understanding, creating a space for open, honest and often difficult conversations. FODI is supported by the NSW Government.

– ENDS –

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NOTES TO EDITOR

- The Festival of Dangerous Ideas 2024 runs from 24-25 August at Carriageworks, Sydney
- Satellite partner events will also be presented at UNSW Sydney and the State Library of NSW from 21-27 August
- The theme of the 2024 event is *Sanctuary*
- The 2024 program features 87 speakers and artists, including 16 international guests, appearing in 88 sessions
- Pre-sale tickets are available to FODI and Ethics Centre subscribers from 7am today
- Tickets are available to the general public from 7am on Wednesday 26 June
- The Festival of Dangerous Ideas is presented by The Ethics Centre
- Subscribe to be first in line for presale tickets at festivalofdangerousideas.com

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