ZeMKI | 20 YEARS

Book of Abstracts

20 Years into the Future:
What is our vision of media, data, and society?

Imprint
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20 Years of ZeMKI International Anniversary Conference | October 23, 2025

Date	Time	Panel	Location
Thursday, Oct 23	10:00 - 11:00	Keynote 1	Kassenhalle, Forum am Domshof
	11:30 - 12:45	Disinformation and Conspiracies in the Digital Age: Narratives, Technologies, and Publics	Kassenhalle, Forum am Domshof
		Knowledge in Transition: AI, Journalism, and Cultural Futures in the Digital Age	Haus der Wissenschaft, Olbers Saal
		Media, Education and Parenting: Shaping Inclusive Futures Across Generations and Interfaces	Haus der Wissenschaft, Seminar
	14:00 - 15:15	Exploring, Shaping, and Sensing the Digital Society: Perspectives on Communication, AI, and Experience	Kassenhalle, Forum am Domshof
		Envisioning Futures of Media, Communication, and Innovation: Cultural Narratives, AI, and Socio Technical Change	Haus der Wissenschaft, Olbers Saal
		Shaping the Future of Journalism: AI, Imagination, and Systemic Change	Haus der Wissenschaft, Seminar
	15:45 - 17:00	Cities, (country) maps and communication: navigating the paths to our future	Kassenhalle, Forum am Domshof
		Deliberation and Polarization in the Digital Public Sphere: Journalism, AI, and the Struggle for Democratic Discourse	Haus der Wissenschaft, Olbers Saal
		AI and the Future of Education: Rethinking Writing, Machines, and the Academic Imagination	Haus der Wissenschaft, Seminar
	17:15 - 18:15	Keynote 2	Kassenhalle, Forum am Domshof

| Find more and up-to-date information about the event online: www.zemki.org/futures |

20 Years of ZeMKI International Anniversary Conference | October 24, 2025

Date	Time	Panel	Location
Friday, Oct 24	9:30 - 10:30	Keynote 3	Kassenhalle, Forum am Domshof
	11:00 - 12:15	Love, Hate and Algorithms: Intimacy, Violence, and Emotional Futures in Mediated Worlds	Kassenhalle, Forum am Domshof
		Playing the Future / The Future as play: Games, Virtual Worlds, and Speculative Designs for Social Change	Haus der Wissenschaft, Olbers Saal
		Artifacts and Futures: Mapping, Narrating, and Designing Socio Digital Imaginaries	Haus der Wissenschaft, Seminar
	13:45 - 15:00	Digital Publics in Transition: Political Participation, Social Platforms, and AI-Mediated Communication	Kassenhalle, Forum am Domshof
		Past Feelings and Future Memories: Digital Archives, Affective Technologies, and the Politics of Remembering	Haus der Wissenschaft, Olbers Saal
		Platform Governance and the Futures of Regulation: Norms, Civil Society, and the Politics of Contro	Haus der Wissenschaft, Seminar
	15:30 - 16:45	Visions, Ideologies, and Ecologies: Reimagining Media Futures in the Age of AI and Data	Kassenhalle, Forum am Domshof
		Contested Futures: Identity, Belief, and Belonging in the Digital Transformation of Culture	Haus der Wissenschaft, Olbers Saal
		Activism Reimagined: Digital Personas, Propaganda, and Political Expression in the Platform Age	Haus der Wissenschaft, Seminar
	17:00 - 18:00	Keynote 4	Kassenhalle, Forum am Domshof

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Keynote 1

Chair: Andreas Hepp

How to achieve digital sovereignity in Europe?

José van Dijck

The growing dominance of two global platform ecosystems has left European countries to rely on American and Chinese digitale infrastructures. This dependency is not just affecting markets and labor relations, but is also transforming social practices, and affecting democracies. While two large ecosystems fight for information control in the global online world, the European perspective on digital infrastructures is focused on regulation rather than on building alternatives. With emerging technologies such as generative AI (ChatGPT, Bard) and geopolitical changes, the infrastructural perspective becomes more poignant. How can Europe achieve sovereignty in the digital world?

This lecture takes up two questions. First, what public values are fundamental to Europe's platform societies? Values such as privacy, security, transparency, equality, public trust, and (institutional, professional) autonomy are important principles upon which the design of platform architectures should be based. Second, what are the responsibilities of companies, governments, and citizens in building an alternative, sustainable platform ecosystem based on those public values?

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Panel

Disinformation and Conspiracies in the Digital Age: Narratives, Technologies, and Publics

Chair: Christian Katzenbach

Gendered disinformation as violence: Proposing a comprehensive approach to digital discourse analysis

Marília Gehrke, Eedan Amit-Danhi

This research project proposes a new analytical perspective on gendered disinformation. In times of (generative) Artificial Intelligence, we address the future of digital media by studying discursive violence and its manifestations in authentic and synthetic media to address the core gaps in mis/disinformation studies: the fragile conceptualization based on creators' intent (Hameleers, 2023; Fathaigh et al., 2021); the weaponization of identity factors in false content, making women, people of color, and LGBTQIA+ individuals more vulnerable to attacks (Camargo & Simon, 2020; Gehrke & Pasitselska, 2024; Kuo & Marwick, 2021); and the limited research on visual disinformation despite visuals' growing role in digital discourse (Peng, Lu & Shen, 2023; Amit-Danhi & Aharoni, 2023).

Gendered disinformation has been scarcely studied, leaving essential questions as to the role of visuals within it unanswered. Its conceptual definitions often overlap with forms of gendered violence (e.g., hate speech, incivility, political propaganda, harassment, and bullying). For instance, Judson et al. (2020, p. 11) suggest gendered disinformation "exists at the intersection of disinformation with online violence, such as abuse and harassment." Similarly, Jankowicz et al. (2021, p. 1) add, "It combines three defining characteristics of online disinformation: falsity, malign intent, and coordination." Alternatively, Bardall (2023, p. 117) calls 'gendered disinforming' the means of "weaponizing information" to perpetrate violence against women in politics. Across these definitions, the attempt to discourage and undermine women's visibility (e.g., in politics) is evident and extends to their participation in spaces men would prefer to control (Sobieraj, 2020).

We propose defragmenting the concept of gendered disinformation by analyzing the phenomenon through the lens of violence to address its fragile conceptualization. Decolonial feminist scholars such as Vergès (2020) and Segato (2016, 2021) place the violence inherent in colonization processes as the trigger to persist and maintain unequal relations, wherein masculinity is the first and permanent pedagogy of expropriation of value and domination. As violence manifests regardless of intent, this focus allows gendered disinformation to be defined by the targets and identity-based attributes of the content. Furthermore, we note that the violence of gendered disinformation is disproportionately enacted onto those who fail to meet the perceived male/white 'gold standard.' Gendered disinformation as violence thus consists of the weaponization of identity-based features (e.g., gender, race, and ethnicity) in multiple flows (see Fig.1). Finally, synthetic visuals incorporating identity-driven elements have already been used in digital politics to anchor informationally-precarious claims (Amit-Danhi & Aharoni, 2023). The few empirical studies tackling gendered disinformation (e.g., Gehrke, 2023) have demonstrated that the focus on women's image in disinformation narratives is also achieved via out-of-context authentic pictures and look-alike impersonators. We thus propose including a visual communication perspective in exploring gendered disinformation. Thus, our framework, visualized (see Fig.1) proposes to study future instances of visual gendered disinformation as a system of violent flows between content (or its creators), victims, and audiences. Through the overarching violence inherent to the societal structure, flows of identity-based disinformation travel to the sides of the triangle, thereby highlighting a system enacting, experiencing, and witnessing violence.

Journalism in the age of deepfakes: The challenge of AI driven visual disinformation in Pakistan

Maham Sufi

Deepfakes have emerged as a sophisticated form of disinformation, posing unique challenges to journalism. News organizations worldwide struggle to detect and debunk AI-enabled deceptive content, which threatens to erode public trust and distort factual narratives. In Pakistan's already fragile media landscape, characterized by political polarization and systemic constraints, the rise of AI-driven visual disinformation raises urgent concerns. While deepfakes have been widely studied in Western contexts, there remains a significant gap in understanding how such technologies impact journalism in the Global South. Little research has explored how Pakistani journalists perceive and respond to this evolving threat. This study addresses that gap by examining journalists' experiences, concerns, and responses to AI-generated disinformation, as well as its broader implications for news credibility and journalistic practices.

To investigate these issues, this study conducted 35 semi-structured qualitative interviews via Zoom with Pakistani journalists, selected through purposive and snowball sampling to capture diverse perspectives across media sectors and geographic regions. The data was analysed using thematic analysis to identify key themes in journalists' perceptions of AI-driven visual disinformation. Findings indicate that journalists perceive the media as ill-equipped to combat AI-driven visual disinformation due to severe resource limitations, inadequate fact-checking mechanisms, and regulatory constraints, including political interference, which further complicates efforts to counter disinformation.

This study makes a significant contribution to media and communication research by providing empirical insights into how journalists in Pakistan perceive and experience deepfake-driven disinformation. It highlights the urgent need for stronger newsroom capacity, improved access to verification tools, and institutional support to uphold journalistic integrity. It also underscores the importance of nuanced policy interventions that address deepfake threats without undermining media freedom. As AI-generated disinformation continues to evolve, this research serves as a foundation for future studies on media resilience, journalistic adaptation, and the governance of emerging digital threats.

Disinformation and the people

Ruth Garland

Media are more central than ever to politics and everyday life, where the public sphere has moved online, and new generations of political players are schooled in the arts and technologies of media and communication. We live in a golden age of information, where we can access the best of the news, arts and culture, and share scholarly work and the fruits of research with ease. We can listen to experts in the field every day and take part in informed debate. Yet, it's becoming increasingly clear that we are trapped in a global media oligarchy that operates in bad faith at nearly every level.

Academics are notoriously poor at predicting the future, so in this attempt to divine the direction of travel, I will focus on the area of research that I'm most familiar with: liberal democratic governments and how they communicate. This is considered alongside an exploration of branding as a widely disseminated and seemingly benign form of deceit. This paper will revisit the idea of the hollowing out of democracy, consider branding as a 'creeping' form of disinformation, and look at public and parliamentary resistance to power from a recent UK perspective, considering similarities with the current US situation. Does the future hold a swing of the pendulum in a new direction, or more of the same but worse?

Ten years ago, it was posited that liberal democracy and the idea of pluralism and the public sphere had been so weakened by global corporate power, elitist adversarial politics, and the shrinking of the state and political parties, that we needed to let go, mourn their loss and develop a real vision of the good future (Fenton & Titley, 2015). Today, the evidence is even more damning, but I argue that the claim is still premature. The notion of the public sphere and pluralism can still provide the last stage of defence against arbitrary abuse of power, and at the very least offer a 'heuristic' for examining the practice of democratic politics (Schlesinger (2020). This paper looks at the unexpected revival of analogue public communication during the pandemic and examines the eight months it took for public opinion and parliamentary sovereignty to overturn a huge democratic mandate and dismantle a chaotic period of misrule under Boris Johnson. Lying was inherent in Johnson's reputation, and he seemed unassailable until his obvious detachment from the idea of 'doing the right thing' became clear. But lying is easier to unpack. Should we be more concerned about the merging of politics and brand culture that makes questions of verifiable truth seem irrelevant, even unfeeling?

"Paranoid futures": Conspiracy-theoretical boundary work across social media platforms

Lars de Wildt, Kamilė Grusauskaitė, Matthias De Bondt, Stef Aupers

Conspiracy theories are fundamentally mediatized futures, constructed collectively in opposition to mainstream narratives of how the world will be. 'The Great Reset' is one such conspiracy theory, in which online communities reframe the World Economic Forum's plan for the next few decades, as a conspiracy of 'them' against 'us.' This study examines how online conspiracy-theoretical communities construct the conspiracy-theoretical 'us' vis-à-vis the conspirational 'them' of the Great Reset, and whoever ends up in between. We do so across six major social media platforms: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Reddit, and TikTok; analyzing a dataset of online posts, comments, and discussions to understand how communicative practices shape group identity formation and delineate in-group and out-group boundaries.

While prior research has focused on radicalization pathways and algorithmic amplification (Del Vicario et al., 2016; Lewis, 2020), our study shifts away from filter bubbles and rabbit holes toward the sociocultural dynamics of digital conspiracy communities. Drawing from cultural sociology and symbolic boundary theory (Lamont&Fournier, 1992), we investigate how conspiracy theorists distinguish themselves actively from the „mainstream," reclaiming stigmatized identities, and fostering collective solidarity in an era of growing distrust.

Our findings reveal two primary ideological frameworks: (1) a secular-libertarian critique of governmental overreach and corporate control, and (2) a religious-Christian interpretation linking The Great Reset to apocalyptic prophecy. Despite these differences, both groups construct a shared oppositional identity through:

(1) Reclaiming Stigmatization: Users repurpose the label of „conspiracy theorist" as a badge of honour, framing themselves as critical thinkers resisting manipulation (cf. Goffman, 1963).

(2) Affective Solidarity: Personal grievances (e.g., economic struggles, distrust in institutions) become woven into broader conspiracy narratives, strengthening emotional bonds (cf. Harambam, 2020)

(3) Constructing the 'Mainstream Other': Outsiders—"sheeple" who trust authorities—are depicted as ignorant and complicit (cf. Schäfer et al., 2022).

(4) 'Waking Up' as Political Action: Calls for „awakening" transform conspiracy theorizing into a form of digital activism (Tripodi et al., 2023).

This study highlights how symbolic boundary work fosters resilient online communities that are both socially cohesive and ideologically diverse. Unlike portrayals of conspiracy theorists as passive consumers of misinformation, our research underscores their active role in meaning-making and identity formation. As we look 20 years into the future, platformization and AI-driven curation demands a crucial understanding of these communicative processes for developing interventions that address misinformation while acknowledging the social needs these communities fulfill.

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Panel

Knowledge in Transition: AI, Journalism, and Cultural Futures in the Digital Age

Chair: Cornelius Puschmann

It could be different. Metaphor analysis of metajournalistic discourse about AI

Antonia Eichenauer

In policy discourse, artificial intelligence (AI) technologies are framed as inevitable and necessary to master present challenges (Bareis and Katzenbach 2022). Such narratives “shape boundaries for what is perceived plausible and desirable” (Milojević and Inayatullah 2015, 153). They must be critically examined to ensure the future remains open to diverse visions and developments (Fischer and Marquardt 2022).

How do journalists and journalistic institutions frame AI? Do they share the same narrative that dominates policy discourse, or do they construct their own? And what implications does this have for journalism’s possible futures?

To explore these questions, I will analyze the metaphors used to structure AI, its appropriation, and implementation within metajournalistic discourse (Carlson 2015).

Metaphors serve as frameworks for the linguistic construction of the future (Inayatullah et al. 2016). Following Lakoff and Johnson (1980), metaphors are not merely rhetorical devices but cognitive structures that shape how we think, speak, and act. They reinforce established patterns of thought, thereby guiding future actions (Inayatullah et al. 2016). At the same time, metaphors possess a transformative potential (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Through Systematic Metaphor Analysis (Schmitt, Schröder, and Pfaller 2018), metaphors can be made explicit, questioned, and ultimately reshaped to challenge dominant constructions of the present and open pathways to alternative futures.

For this purpose, metajournalistic discourse includes selected content from journalistic news outlets and reports on AI appropriation, such as the global report from the LSE project Journalism AI (Beckett and Yaseen 2023) or AP’s report on generative AI in journalism (Diakopoulos et al. 2024). Particular emphasis is placed on texts that describe visions, imaginaries, or scenarios of possible futures, such as the AI in Journalism Futures project (Caswell and Fang 2024) and the work of Kieslich et al. (2024). Given the potential volume of this text corpus, Wmatrix will be used to automate analysis, following the example of Ye and Li (2024).

I expect the metaphors to paint an ambiguous picture, reflecting both the hopes and fears of journalists. On one hand, AI is framed as a helpful assistant or a useful tool that simplifies tasks, freeing journalists from the burden of repetitive work. On the other, AI is depicted as a natural force or an invasive species, disrupting the newsroom ecosystem and leaving journalists with only two options: adapt or die. At the 20th Anniversary International ZeMKI Conference, I will present metaphors that illustrate how journalists make sense of AI. By discussing their implications, I will demonstrate how these metaphors shape the discourse of journalism’s possible futures with AI. Reconsidering them and highlighting the aspects they obscure will open new perspectives on the topic—because after all, things could be different.

Comparing media innovation systems for AI adoption in journalism

Jessica Kunert, Marie Röthlingshöfer, Paul Koitie, Nadja Schaetz, Nancy Booker, Juliane Lischka

We propose media innovation systems as a comparative framework to understand the trajectories of AI adoption in media systems over the next two decades. By systematically examining the interplay between media systems, technological development, regulatory frameworks, and national innovation ecosystems, we aim to explore how AI might shape and be shaped in different media environments.

We focus on the macro level of media and innovation systems. Dogruel's (2015) macro-level perspective on media and innovation systems examines the broader structures, institutional frameworks, and systemic forces that shape technological and media innovations. This includes regulatory policies, economic conditions, market dynamics, and audience influences that impact how new technologies are developed, adopted, and diffused in society.

Our empirical approach combines secondary data and comparative legal document analysis. The goal is to connect data that captures key aspects of n = 47 countries' innovation and media ecosystems (those countries that are part of the Reuters Digital News Report (RDNR)). While doing so, we compare the Global North to the Global South, identifying clusters of media innovation systems.

To systematically identify media innovation systems, we rely on four dimensions in line with previous research (Diallo et al., 2025; Dogruel, 2015). First, we measure media system indicators, including media market concentration using the Herfindahl-Hirschman Index (HHI), calculated from RDNR data, digital media use (RDNR), public-service media market share (UNESCO/RDNR), Press Freedom Index (Reporters Without Borders), and news avoidance (RDNR). These indicators capture the competitive landscape of media markets, affecting the diffusion of AI-driven innovations in the media sector. Press freedom reflects the level of journalistic independence from political influence. Greater press freedom may foster socially responsible AI adoption, whereas restrictive environments may lead to AI being used for effective censorship (Feldstein, 2021; Helberger et al., 2020). Second, we include AI/digital transformation indicators such as the Digital Evolution Index (DEI) (Aly, 2022), the Digital Adoption Index (DAI) (World Bank), AI investment levels (Stanford AI Index Report), and awareness of ChatGPT (Stanford University's AI Index Report). Third, we measure AI policy indicators based on the years since a national AI strategy has been in place in each country (Stanford AI Index Report), and regulatory incentives for AI innovation (Kranenburg, 2017). Fourth, we measure geopolitical and macroeconomic indicators (World Bank and IMF).

We use hierarchical cluster analyses based on works by Brüggemann et al. (2014) and Humprecht et al. (2022) when looking at how media systems work and evolve. Other work we refer to for contextualizing these indicators is for example Dralega (2023) for the state of AI and data-driven journalism in African countries; Malmborg and Trondal (2023) for AI policy in the Nordic European Union countries; and Vizcarrondo (2022) for media market concentration in the US.This study aims to provide a structured and comparative perspective on AI adoption in media systems, addressing long-term developments and the systemic forces that will shape the future.

Into the future – science communication with artificial intelligence

Jeannine Teichert, Dorothee M. Meister, Gudrun Oevel

Since the rise of the Internet and the online availability of research outcomes, it has become easier for academics to distribute, discuss, and cite research worldwide. Technological advancements, Artificial Intelligence (AI), and extended infrastructure supply researchers with databases and support in searching, filtering, and creating research outcomes. Several AI-based tools and platforms have already been tested to support inclusive, efficient, personalized research channels. The integration of AI in research is progressing rapidly, but its full potential is still unfolding. This paper explores the future trajectory of scholar-led open-access publishing by drawing on Artificial Intelligence. The paper seeks to answer how AI can increase added value in scholar-led open-access publishing while simultaneously lowering potential risks resulting from technological failures. Media and communication studies provide a particularly interesting case study for this research, both as a research object and as a pioneering discipline for researching (future) consequences of technological developments that can affect society (Heinlein & Huchler, 2024; Hepp et al., 2023; Hirsch-Kreinsen, 2024). We want to emphasize two potential developments at the intersection of open science, AI, and public outreach in this paper: 1) AI editorial assistants and personalized science forums, and 2) Automated science platforms backed up by blockchain.

First, AI can potentially revolutionize scientific production processes at the editorial level. Nowadays, customized scientific recommendations that are tailored to individual researchers are already produced by AI, such as suggestions for further readings when downloading publications from platforms (Peukert et al., 2023). In the future, Artificial Intelligence can assist in editorial workflows, such as editing and authoring (Pividori & Greene, 2024). Suppose AI's current marginalization and discrimination of certain groups, such as women, people of color, and people with disabilities (Hutflütz, 2024; Raab, 2024), can be overcome. Then, AI can enhance transparency and accountability in the peer review and editorial process by reducing biases and inefficiencies (Morales et al., 2024).

Second, many academics value the international dissemination of their work (Heise, 2018). However, the process of production and dissemination of research is time-consuming, cost-intensive, and labor-intensive. AI can support and operate decentralized, autonomous open-science platforms that generate, review, and publish articles. Blockchain-based peer review systems are progressing already (Ji et al., 2024). In the future, AI tools could streamline content curation, plagiarism detection, and multilingual translations, significantly expanding the global accessibility of research outcomes (Lazarus, 2021) if manual curation and human oversight remain as the last instance (Ball, 2020).

In conclusion, AI has enormous potential to revolutionize the open science and open access movement by creating an accelerated, transparent and inclusive research reviewing and production process. By leveraging decentralized infrastructure, AI advancements, and institutional support, the academic community can ensure that knowledge remains a public good, fostering innovation and global collaboration. However, the realization of tamper-proof open science ecosystems and scholar-led open science forums with the help of AI depends on proactive engagement from researchers, institutions, and policymakers to safeguard the integrity and inclusivity of open scholarship.

*Inspiration for this presentation was supported by OpenAi Chat GPT-3.5

The unruly digital. Transitive knowledge cultures and the ephemerality of order in digital ecosystems

Tilo Grenz, Paul Eisewicht

The future of digital society is often framed in terms of increasing closure, as governance mechanisms and algorithmic infrastructures tighten their grip on human agency. A decade and a half of mediatization research on unintended appropriation, on platform dynamics and platform contestation have revealed a counterforce. Individuals and collectives appropriate, hack, and exploit technological systems in ways that force unplanned adaptations, shaping the very structures that were meant to regulate them. The relationship between platforms, users and different actors is therefore not simply one of control, but of ongoing struggle, where platform contestation is not incidental but constitutive of how digital society evolves. However, research has shed light on various forms of these relationships. They range from highly asymmetrical and often invisible ones – such as those exemplified by surveillance infrastructures, where techno-economic imperial forces dominate – to more harmonious configurations shaped by mutuality and reciprocity, as seen in platform vernaculars. At the other end of the spectrum are the 'good old' politically motivated hackers (or those simply looking for trouble – or fun). All of this, however, overlooks the temporal constitution of relationships. In this paper, we argue that the accelerating compression of action and effect chains, combined with transient socio-technical relations, pushes interstitial zones to the center of digital culture and society's negotiation. These dynamics will increasingly shape the digital society of tomorrow.

We develop this argument through what we call eventful collectives. These ad hoc, transient digital communities emerge around critical moments, mobilize intensely, and then dissipate – often leaving a lasting infrastructural imprint. Unlike stable digital publics or traditional activist networks, these collectives are defined by their transitivity – they emerge in response to specific triggers, act in concert for a limited time, and then dissolve. While earlier research has examined forms of digitally mediated activism, personalization, and connective action, we argue that eventful collectives represent an intensified, ephemeral, yet profoundly impactful form of platform intervention. A contemporary example we examine is AI jailbreaking, where users collaborate to bypass the restrictions imposed on generative AI systems. Unlike long-term hacking subcultures or activist organizations, these collectives operate in bursts, forming almost spontaneously, achieving their objective and vanishing just as quickly.Understanding these collectives is methodologically challenging in ways that go beyond the usual difficulties of accessing platform data or dealing with epistemic black-boxing of the sciences. Studying these dynamics requires a mode of inquiry that is able to follow shifting terrains of contestation right in time, and capable of capturing digital traces before they disappear. Thus, understanding the digital society of tomorrow calls for a form of real-time ethnography, where the researcher functions as a watchdog, tracking events as they unfold, gathering evidence based on suspicion and investigative intuition rather than retrospective analysis alone. A programme of this kind runs counter to the rhythm of conventional research funding, an aspect that we will finally put up for discussion.

Abundant intelligences: An indigenous future of AI

Ceyda Yolgormez

Today it seems movements towards building alternative forms of technologies are gaining momentum. As the new media landscape is largely monopolized by Big Tech, the value of different approaches, especially those that resist the power of the elite by empowering communities that are often at the receiving end of technological development, is becoming even more pronounced. A consequence of this political-economic landscape is the very cultures the technologies invoke, especially those that are ingrained in the social landscape, such as language models, or many other forms of predictive models. The 'whiteness of AI' (Cave and Dihal 2020) compels many to ask: How can we make different technologies? The proposed presentation will discuss this question through an Indigenous-led project, Abundant Intelligences (Lewis et al. 2024); and exemplify its employment of 'future imaginaries' rooted in Indigenous knowledges and methodologies.

Future imaginaries are visions of the future shared by a group and used to motivate change in the present (Lewis 2023). They create vocabularies for envisioning future socio-technological realities and strategies for realizing those realities. Developing future imaginaries allows us to play through different foundational assumptions about how things are and will be with regards to AI. Most importantly, they allow us to "practice the future together" (Brown 2017): to iterate collaboratively through future scenarios wherein AI is based on Indigenous knowledges and values.

One significance of the future imaginary lies in the work that it does in providing a space for projecting a future to those who have been denied the vision of the future: Indigenous peoples are often thought as relics of the past, which informs the people's way of seeing themselves as well (Lewis 2023). By centering a futures thinking with Indigenous communities, Abundant Intelligences rethinks the AI project, questioning its epistemological commitments, and toppling the design process by rendering those who have been cast out of the production into active agents of technology development. So our proposed vision for 20 years into the future is one where Indigenous peoples are not afterthoughts to remedy the pitfalls of current technologies, but pioneers in building and innovating technological futures. An Indigenous vision of media, data, and society is significant, and should urgently be centered. This is in consideration of the data colonialism (Couldry and Mejias 2019) that underlies today's mediated societies, which renders an Indigenous led response apt to put a dialectical weight on the system.The proposed presentation will outline the Abundant Intelligences project and bring examples from Future Imaginaries of Indigenous AI workshops developed in 2020, to both share how we approached this futuring exercise from an Indigenous standpoint, and to provide an example for those who wish to undertake such exercises in their own communities and networks. The hope is that this discussion will inspire to address the 'problem of AI' head on through methods that are community-grounded, critically fierce and relationally joyful.

Panel

Media, Education and Parenting: Shaping Inclusive Futures Across Generations and Interfaces

Chair: Michael Viertel

Inclusivity and diversity in future media education in schools

Çiğdem Bozdağ

As the digitalization of social life continues to accelerate, ensuring digital inclusion for diverse groups has become a key topic in both policy and research. Digital inclusion aims to provide equal opportunities for all citizens to participate in democratic societies, yet disparities remain, particularly among socio-culturally disadvantaged groups. While the influence of age, gender, and socio-economic background on digital inclusion is well-studied, the impact of increasing cultural diversity on digital inclusion remains underexplored. Furthermore, recent research highlights the how gender, age, abilities, class, race and ethnicity have overlapping influences on digital inequalities (Tsatsou, 2022; Bozdag, 2024). Thus, adopting an intersectional perspective to digital inclusion, this paper explores how future media education practices in schools can help to alleviate the effects of digital inequalities.

The increasing diversity of student populations alongside widening (digital) inequalities present significant challenges for schools generally and media education specifically as existing societal fault lines deepen and new ones emerge. However, there is also considerable potential in engaging with critical media literacy in schools, for example, it can foster critical thinking about mediated social constructions of reality and how power in society, bias, inequalities, and discrimination become normalized and invisible through media representations. It can also provide the students with the critical mindset, skills and tools to engage with and produce alternative and more inclusive representations. By incorporating media literacy into curricula, schools can challenge traditional pedagogical approaches, fostering a culture that encourages digital citizenship and prepares students with diverse backgrounds for active participation in the digital world. The discussions in the paper will be based on two research projects; namely, 1) INCLUDED (MSCA, 2019-2023, University of Bremen) that incorporates participatory observations, focus groups with young people (13-15 years), teacher interviews and co-developed learning scenarios (PAR) in a secondary school in a culturally diverse and socio-economically disadvantaged neighborhood of Bremen; and 2) DigiMig, which has a broader focus on digital inclusion and migration, and more specifically focuses on inclusive media education in schools in the Netherlands in one of the sub-projects (NWO Vidi program, 2024-2028, University of Groningen). Drawing on these researches, the paper argues that schools can support students by tailoring curricula to their specific needs, considering the local context and challenges faced by students from marginalized backgrounds. Furthermore, the study highlights how media education can mitigate inequalities in material access driven by socioeconomic factors while acknowledging the limitations of schools in addressing broader structural issues, such as disparities in social and cultural capital, which affect the extent to which individuals can fully engage in the digital society. Ultimately, this paper advocates for inclusive media education as a key tool in combating digital inequalities and fostering greater participation in the digital era.

Online-offline nexus: Meaning-making at the interfaces of physical and virtual (inter)action

Jannis Androutsopoulos

In sociolinguistics and beyond, the concept of the 'online-offline nexus' (OON) emerged in the last few years as a key analytical tool for grasping the interplay of digital and physical communication and interaction. While the idea that on- and offline domains of (inter)action are intertwined has been around for some time, it remains inconsistently applied. Drawing on a meta-analysis of academic publications, this paper critically examines the concept's genealogy throughout the early 21st century and its use across fields such as media and communication studies (de Souza e Silva et al. 2025), pragmatics (Blitvich 2022), sociolinguistics (Blommaert 2019, Spotti 2022), sociology (Hsiao et al. 2023), multimodal interaction analysis (Avgustis 2023), and linguistic landscape research (Androutsopoulos 2024). On this basis, the paper defines OON as a multi-scalar process that operates across different scales of action and sites of social practice, including interpersonal communication, place-making, and identity construction.

More specifically, the paper proposes to distinguish three primary types of OON, each characterized by specific temporal, participatory, and scalar properties: (1) simultaneous nexus action, where digital and physical activities occur concurrently, such as using navigation apps while moving through urban spaces or being co-present in an online game while sitting next to each other; (2) consecutive nexus action, where on- and offline interactions follow one another in a structured sequence and jointly contribute to accomplishing a higher level target, as when people digitally coordinate in-person meetings or transition from social media interactions to real-life encounters; (3) memetic nexus processes, where widely-circulating digital content influences offline behavior across a population, exemplified by viral trends and algorithmically mediated discourse. This typology aims to provide a more granular understanding of how OON contributes to shaping communicative practices across different contexts in post-digital societies. Future empirical research on OON, the paper argues, will require mixed-methods approaches that integrate ethnographic observations, digital discourse analysis, and computational methods in order to capture how online/offline intertwinements unfold in everyday life and how people experience nexus processes.

Challenging gender bias in education: How past narratives shape future imaginaries

Elke Höfler, Katharina Raid, András Batkai, Jana Groß Ophoff

At the intersection of media history, education, and digital technologies, past narratives continue to shape our imaginaries of the future. Research on digital educational innovations makes it evident that bias can originate from various sources (Gallegos et al., 2024). Our contribution critically examines gender bias in digital educational innovations, drawing on empirical data from a programme evaluation of a Lego Mindstorms robotics initiative in Vorarlberg schools, and findings from Austria's AI pilot school project. Both studies reveal persistent stereotypes that influence self-perceptions and career choices: women tend to underrate their technological competence and, consequently, their AI literacy compared to their male counterparts (e.g., Beaucher 2020). This phenomenon has been widely discussed in research on cognitive bias (De Bruyckere et al., 2015). This disadvantage particularly affects women integrating educational technologies into their teaching practice, reinforcing traditional role expectations.

Studies on gender disparities in STEM fields (Cheryan et al., 2017) indicate that self-perception gaps contribute to the underrepresentation of women in technology-related careers. Furthermore, biases in educational technologies and AI applications reinforce gender inequalities in education (West et al., 2019). Our analysis highlights how entrenched stereotypes perpetuate these inequalities, with implications for future professional landscapes. Teaching, an increasingly feminised profession, faces growing administrative burdens that will likely become unmanageable without technology-driven—and particularly AI-supported—solutions. This trend exacerbates existing gender disparities in workload distribution and career progression. The lack of gender-sensitive education intensifies these challenges, making technological competencies, including AI literacy, an urgent priority for equitable participation.In other words, technological innovations alone are not sufficient to achieve gender equity. Meaningful change requires cultural adaptations that challenge deeply rooted societal norms and expectations. Addressing these biases necessitates structural transformations in teacher training and curriculum design, including a more nuanced representation of gender roles, e.g. by fostering inclusive learning environments, promoting value-free pedagogy, and challenging stereotypes to ensure equitable access to technological and professional learning opportunities (Peláez-Sánchez et al., 2023). Only by combining technological advancements with cultural shifts can we create an inclusive future that dismantles outdated narratives and actively shapes new imaginaries.

Parenting of the future

Katrin Potzel

Over the past two decades, significant transformations in the media environment have occurred driven by the growing influence of a deep mediatized society (Hepp, 2019). Whereas traditional media such as linear television and early mobile phones predominated media usage 20 years ago, today's digital landscape includes vast and interconnected digital environments (Hepp et al., 2022). Emerging trends, such as the rise of communicative AI, the increasing datafication of society, and the pervasive use of dark patterns in digital applications, will most likely continue to shape the future media landscape. These changes present dual challenges for parents: Firstly, they must adapt to and develop the necessary skills to navigate new technologies themselves. Secondly, they are tasked to help their children acquire fundamental media competencies while simultaneously protect them from potential negative impacts of digital technologies (Livingstone et al., 2017). However, this dynamic has to be considered with due regard to a broader societal context. Consequently, the family as a social domain is embedded in a network of interdependencies with other individuals, social domains, and society (Potzel et al., 2024).

This contribution will explore the future of parenting in light of current media developments. It is building on existing research on parenting in a (deep) mediatized society and drawing from own empirical work in form of a qualitative longitudinal panel study conducted in Germany since 2018. The contribution frames the family as a communicative figuration (Hepp & Hasebrink, 2018). Following this approach, parenting is conceptualized as a communicative practice shaped by a shared framework of relevance among entangled actors. This perspective positions parenting not merely as a dyadic relationship between parents and children but as part of broader social negotiation processes. The research will address how parents might respond to rapid technological shifts. By examining parental practices in the context of digital media's changing landscape, the contribution aims to offer insights into the evolving nature of media education and the broader societal implications of these changes.

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Panel

Exploring, Shaping, and Sensing the Digital Society: Perspectives on Communication, AI, and Experience

Chair: Delia González de Reufels

Immerse, investigate & intervene. Making research actionable for shaping the digital society

Mirko Tobias Schäfer, Karin van Es, Iris Muis

Neoliberal policies and populist politics have put pressure on universities to justify their activities and focus on research which is directly beneficial for economic prosperity. In reaction, universities develop initiatives for a more tangible knowledge transfer, often manifesting in initiatives for public engagement, education for professionals, and societal impact. While these are often criticized for undermining academic values, there is actually also much to gain from public engagement and collaborative research projects (Schäfer, Van Es & Lauriault 2024). Media and culture studies have a long history of engaging with society and formulating critique towards social change (e.g. McLuhan 1964; Hall 1971; Postman 1985 etc.). The field was also productive in formulating much needed critique of AI's technological imaginaries, harmful algorithms, and has made important suggestions for better governance of AI, but often this has been limited to academic debates with occasional appearances in the periphery of policy making. Their contributions are mostly diagnostic and prescriptive and frequently fall short in translating into tangible change. Somehow, media and culture studies, and largely the emerging field of critical data & AI studies have been merely shouting from sidelines instead of stepping into the arena where the digital society is shaped. This also has to do with the position of the researchers who study technological change from afar rather than assuming the much-needed insider position within societal sectors, organisations, networks or companies where technology and policy are crafted (Kitchin 2024).

Media studies in general, and critical data & AI studies in particular could benefit from a rich tradition of engaged scholarship and effective methods of knowledge transfer (e.g. Jahoda et al 1933). Drawing from participatory action research (e.g. McNiff 2013; Cornish et al. 2023), this paper formulates pathways towards a repositioning of research agendas with the objective of motivating researchers to move from observing technological and social change from sidelines to active involvement and moving from prescribing changes to producing them. The paper builds on examples of collaborative research with proven track record in affecting and directly shaping AI governance, advancing AI literacy, and supporting informed deliberation on AI related issues in social contexts of public management (e.g. Schäfer, Van Es, Muis 2023; Ettlinger et al 2024; Ruijer et. Al 2023). This paper outlines a theoretically grounded perspective of action research methodology for media studies and critical data and AI studies. In addition, this paper presents methods for developing a research agenda with focus on collaborating with external partners and strategies for intervention and impact. The paper calls for discussing how to define indicators for impact and how to document them. In conclusion, the paper argues that media studies and critical data & AI studies in particular need to engage with external partners because it creates better research opportunities and allows for intervention and effective knowledge transfer.

Co-creating social media

Hendrik Heuer

Social media platforms are central to a mediatized and datafied society. Currently, six out of ten global users (61%) engage with platforms like YouTube and WeChat, while five out of ten (51%) use WhatsApp (Newman et al., 2024). Despite their broad reach, these platforms are often designed with minimal input from the public, leaving users with little influence over their structure and governance. This raises critical questions about where a mediatized and datafied society might be heading and who gets to shape its trajectory.

This contribution argues that excluding users' perspectives in the design and development of social media is a missed opportunity. Participatory design theories, such as those articulated by Bødker (2022), emphasize the untapped potential of everyday individuals in shaping systems. Historically, user contributions have driven some of the most innovative features on platforms like Twitter—hashtags, @mentions, and retweets—highlighting the value of user-driven innovation. Without deep user involvement and co-creation, platforms risk stalling advancements that could improve engagement, privacy, and overall well-being.

In this contribution, we explore how users can actively participate in imagining and shaping the future social media. Employing methods like online surveys, we investigate how respondents envision these platforms' appearance, functionality, and purpose. This future-oriented approach aims to address broader societal questions: What kind of social media do users want, and how do their visions reflect where society is heading in a mediatized and datafied world?

Through qualitative content analysis and axial coding (Mayring, 2024), we identify common themes and priorities expressed by participants when imagining their ideal platforms. Special attention is given to content curation and the impact of emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence and virtual reality. With an HCI lense, we connect futuristic visions to people's needs and anspirations. This analysis aims to uncover how aspirations for future platforms align with users' fundamental needs like safety, belonging, and self-actualization.

We show how a future-thinking approach illuminates present-day challenges, such as the user experience in current social media environments and the governance models underpinning them. By mapping participants' envisioned goals and features against existing platforms, we highlight areas where contemporary services fall short, offering insights into potential innovation pathways. These insights can help address fundamental questions about how to govern and design social media spaces in ways that balance user autonomy with ethical and technological considerations.Drawing from these findings, we propose actionable design recommendations to reimagine social media as user-centric public spaces. This shift requires platforms to integrate participatory methods, enabling users to co-create features that foster interpersonal connections, safeguard privacy, and anticipate future needs. By focusing on the full spectrum of human motivations and embedding mechanisms for collaboration and user governance, future platforms could become more inclusive, creative, and socially impactful. Our contribution underscores the importance of participatory design in shaping a mediatized and datafied society that aligns with human needs and aspirations, helping to steer it toward a more equitable and innovative future.

The felt Experience of atmosphere: Implications for audience research

Peter Lunt

In this paper, I explore audience experiences of media atmospheres, drawing on the work of Gernot Böhme (2017) on architecture as felt spaces and Schmitz's (2011) phenomenology (Lunt, 2025). The paper introduces Böhme's and Schmitz's work, which analyses architectural spaces as creating atmospheres through the combination of spatial characteristics and the experience of immersion by participants. Adoptions of Böhme's work in the study of the role of production and the experience of playing video games and film are reviewed, followed by an interpretation of the experiential aspects of media events, liveness and participation in audience discussions. The paper considers the broader implications of an atmospheric approach to analysing audience experience and for an audience centred social phenomenology.

Rethinking algorithm/AI studies: Challenges of researching algorithms and the case for renewing ethnomethodology

Hossein Derakhshan

If media have been studied in three aspects of production, media text and reception, algorithms have now become the de facto media text of digital platforms.

Ontologically, three features of algorithms complicate researching them: Hyper-modulation: Algorithms do not have a fixed textuality; Invisibility: They are infrastructural and thus invisible to users; Inextricability: They are interwoven with one another, with platforms' core code, and with user data.

Given the distinct and disruptive ontology of algorithms and challenges of a positivist epistemology, this paper proposes a pragmatist epistemology and thereby a conceptual model (Figure 1) which views platforms as two core intertwined processes: datafication and personalization.

Datafication consists of surveillance and categorization and is oriented to the present time. Surveillance links human life to digits, resulting in a modulating relation which can be called life-digits or data. Categorization is linking these life-digits (data) to each other.

Personalization is oriented to the near future and consists of two sub-processes of prediction and allocation. Prediction is a re-categorization toward the future; it is a speculative reconfiguration of the links between life-digits, or data relations based on the existing categories. Allocation is a future-oriented reversal of surveillance, a process in which predictions (which are themselves relations between data relations) are disentangled down toward life qualities.

This cyclic model of platforms calls for different research methods. Given how platforms have become infrastructures of sociality, the paper proposes a renewal of ethnomethodological breaching experiments that disrupt the platforms' personalized affordances to make them visible. For instance, in my current research project on the domestication of algorithmic listening on Spotify, I have asked my participants to use Spotify accounts of other unknown people for a few weeks before they are allowed to use their own accounts again. In each phase I'm interviewing them (coupled with walkthrough method) about their experiences and practices, particularly those that have become visible through the experiment.

How to research the unspoken and invisible: Interrogating myths about AI

Tamara Witschge, Maaike van Cruchten

With AI's undeniable presence in society and multifold media coverage on its consequences in a variety of domains, it is important to break the mythic nature of AI and foster inclusive conversations about AI. Though there is ample news reporting on AI (see for instance Bunz & Braghieri, 2022; Nguyen, 2023; Meissner, 2024; Ittefaq, et al. 2025), there remain many myths that surround AI (Natale & Ballatore, 2020; Emmert-Streib, 2020; Ballatore & Natale, 2023; Bewersdorff et al., 2023). In this paper we start from a curiosity and ask: to what extent does the frictionless design of generative AI tools that people experience directly and are active users of add to the sense of elusiveness of AI? And how do we facilitate conversations about AI that move beyond its mythic nature, and help increase the sense of ownership about the future of AI?

The project "What if AI…" is part of a larger research programme "AI, Media and Democracy". "What if AI…" is aimed at developing and testing methods to facilitate inclusive conversations about AI. We develop methods that aim to make explicit the emotions, myths and needs regarding AI that otherwise remain unspoken, and perhaps even invisible for people themselves. We also aim to make visible what remains invisible in the workings of AI, such as the labour that is done for AI, the data people themselves often unconsciously contribute, and the creative work that is appropriated and mimicked by AI.

In our contribution we present the different creative methodologies we have developed and tested for this project. They include:

– Provocatypes (provocative prototypes) in which we create an AI that is less frictionless. By including micromoments of friction, we create moments in which the workings of AI, which is normally invisible and almost imperceptible tangible.

– Digital collage: By inviting people to create an image of AI, we invite them to make visible and converse about what often remains latent, including their ideas, sorrows, worries and needs around AI.

– An Installation in public space that shows and draws out ideas, affects and imaginations of AI. Ultimately with our contribution, we aim to open up the collective conversation about AI, not to "critique" it, but rather to increase the sense of ownership of AI, which starts from speaking about that which we do not know about AI, our feelings of AI, and what we collectively want of AI.

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Panel

Envisioning Futures of Media, Communication, and Innovation: Cultural Narratives, AI, and Socio Technical Change

Chair: Winfried Pauleit

Communicative AI and communicative modes across social contexts

Göran Bolin

Human-to-human communication occurs in various social contexts and situations, and the character of communication differs between these contexts. An intimate conversation between young lovers differs substantially from a seminar discussion, an interrogation, a consultation with a medical doctor, a court hearing, a religious confession, and a recruitment interview. Not only do their material contexts differ, the social framing of these communicative encounters also differs. These conditions have consequences for the expectations of the partaking communicators, and for the communicative exchanges themselves.

As human-machine communication and Communicative AI is spreading rapidly across ever more social domains, seeping into a variety of communicative contexts and situations including the ones mentioned above, one can expect that these conditions are altered, and that expectations on the part of the human communicator change. Ultimately, this produces challenges for communication theory, as it puts aspects of traditional communication theories that have presupposed communication as occurring between two or more "autonomous selves" to the test (see Peters 1999: 20). Will the increase in human-machine communication alter the ways in which we think of communication as an activity? If so, in what ways might the above-mentioned communicative situations change when Communicative AI is introduced? This paper aims to outline a research agenda for empirical studies to respond to that question.

The focus of the discussion is on the implications for the social, rather than the semantic aspects of communication, asking what kind of impact communicative AI has on the communicative situation when human-human communication is replaced with human-machine communication. The situations mentioned above differ in their communicative modes: some are more oriented to the sharing of knowledge or information (instrumental transmission of information) whereas others are more marked by the strive for mutual understanding, reflecting the different positions along the continuum between communication as transmission and ritual. Will the latter be more affected by the introduction of human-machine communication than those where the transfer of information is at the centre? In the paper will be discussed questions of meaning-making, understanding, insight, etc., all of which mark different communicative situations. It will thus be building on, and contribute to, longstanding debates in Communicative AI on "artificial communication", meaning-making, deception, and adjacent concepts (Esposito 2020; Gunkel 2025; Guzman et al 2023; Hepp et al 2024; Natale 2021; Natale & Depounti 2024).

The future as a laboratory or as entertainment? The multiple roles of science fiction visions.

Jeffrey Wimmer

The talk will discuss science fiction (SF) as an important part of the modern entertainment industry. From a communication studies perspective, the fact that it is a highly complex communicative phenomenon that is not only rooted in a worldwide, multi-layered and often only media-mediated fan culture but also in a broad mass audience is of particular interest.

Hermann (2023) argues that SF imagines possible futures and can also be seen as a metaphor for the current situation. It is an “ambiguity between the possible and the metaphorical, between ‘science’ and ‘fiction’” (p. 10, own translation), which can also be found where the genre uses a kind of foresight method to “tell of the scientifically and technically actually conceivable and possible socio-political arrangement” (p. 17, own translation). The movie Blade Runner, for example, does not operate as a prediction, but synchronously as a dystopian description of the situation, which shows more about the time the film was made than it predicts the future. On the one hand, the commercial potential of the genre is at odds with the fact that, for example, the effects of capitalism are problematized. On the other hand, the example of the movie Minority Report shows that the prophecies of SF can be extremely powerful in our reality.

The lecture will present currently important SF visions. For example, the space opera of Iain M. Banks’ “Culture” series, in which well-meaning artificial intelligences (AI) enable an enraptured humanity to live in paradise, is important if we want to understand the AI debate of the present and its drivers. Mark Zuckerberg, Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk are expressly big fans of the book series.

This is contrasted with the role that science fiction can play in communication studies. A search for traces shows that individual SF visions occasionally play a role in communication science theorising. For example, in his formulation of the mediatization thesis (2007: 165), Friedrich Krotz refers to the book Snow Crash by Stephenson (1996) to illustrate the social impact of virtual actions. Media education is also closely related to the utopian thinking of SF when it opens up spaces for people to help shape and rethink society, e.g. in the context of future workshops. SF Dystopias serve as inspiration for communication and internet policy. For example, to illustrate the consequences of the state using big data to assign a social rating to every citizen or security agencies that monitor each and every one of us without interruption.As the SF author William Gibson noted, the future is already here, just unevenly distributed. While he was referring to material things and new technologies in particular, it can also be seen in relation to social change and our rights and freedoms. That’s why it is important what kind of SF we use to think about the future.

Adding the future to create a future for research on media related socio-cultural change and continuity

Olivier Driessens

Media and communication studies have produced vast knowledge about the interrelationships between on the one hand changes in a wide variety of social fields, institutions and agents, and on the other hand changes in media, communication and information technologies. Many such studies have been conducted under the banner of mediatisation studies. Its perspective used for analysing those changes has mostly been to look at the ways in which past and present social forms are changing when different technologies enter the equation. However, by doing so, I argue in this paper, an important temporal category and explanatory force is missing from these studies, namely the future. The future features only implicitly in the literature and as an era that assumedly will show more and/or deeper mediatisation.

Except for Andreas Hepp (e.g. in his 2020 Deep Mediatisation), mediatisation scholars have neglected how future imaginaries, technofutures or expectations about short and longer term technological innovation and adoption significantly inform mediatisation processes. Social action and institutional development is not only informed by the past but also by the future through goals, narratives, expectations, and so on. In this paper, I will draw on different literatures on the future (especially from sociology and STS) to demonstrate the future's relevance for understanding technology-related socio-cultural change and continuity and to suggest a research agenda that includes future imaginaries, expectations, and narratives.

Data and the future of value in the creator economy

Victoria O'Meara, Stephanie Hill

The hosting and circulation of content online created new forms and dimensions to work as cultural intermediaries. Traditional forms of social capital and cultural mediation persist in communication-centred roles that work to shape taste and influence consumer preferences and behaviours (Nixon & Du Gay, 2002). At the same time, new types of capital and intermediation appear, centred on skills and familiarity with online behaviour (Ignatow & Robinson, 2017). This work involves the display of aesthetic judgments and establishing economic relationships and, in the case of online content from bloggers, social media influencers, and brand account managements, frequently relies on analytics and metrics from platforms to establish and quantify "digital cultural capital" (Arriagada and Concha, 2020, p. 50). These cultural intermediary roles that incorporate digital platforms, including influences, advertising and brand work, are growing into a significant industry and a quotidian form of labour for thousands of people globally. However, the ability to understand and wield data raises questions of power in production. In some cases, intermediaries create their own tools to measure and navigate value on platforms only to have their efforts co-opted by platforms, which duplicate their efforts (Carah, Brown, and Hickman, 2023). At other times, platform affordances shape the kinds of play and performances rewarded (Postigo, 2016).

The datafied future of cultural work is one that, we argue, is likely to be characterized by the intensification of data struggles, confrontations and disputes over the measurement of value via opaque, inaccessible, and unaccountable algorithmically driven quantification and calculation. Data-based struggles include struggles over what data means, how it's collected, who owns and controls it, and how it is put to use to necessitate certain ways of doing and being as cultural producers, while rendering others impossible. It also includes struggles over what counts as data, with creative professionals defining their worth and well-being in terms that often have little resemblance to the engagement statistics and traffic patterns used by platforms. These struggles have implications for the power wielded by platforms over creators and the future of cultural work and creative outputs. More broadly, they signal the destabilization of regimes of value and shifts in the terrain of struggle between high-technology data-intensive capitalism and its subjects.

The research design for this study is informed by research on the study of platformization (Helmond, Nieborg & van der Vlist, 2019), as well as platform work, which points to the ways subjects to platform-created regimes conform, resist, and interpret the data-centred priorities of platforms (Van Doorn & Badger, 2020). This study contributes to those lines of inquiry by examining how data and value are conceptualized in platform documentation, including press releases, company reports, and promotional material against that of creator-focused blog posts, vlogs and social media commentary. By comparing narratives of value in creator- and advertiser-focused platform documents, we investigate how platforms and those that make their living on them contend to impose, normalize and stabilize a definition of what data is, means, and the interests it will serve.

Innovation as the path to ensuring a sustainable media sector

Enrique Uribe-Jongbloed, Marlen Komorowski, Máté Fodor, Jess Hoare

The media sector is considered to be an environmental threat. It consumes great quantities of energy and releases plenty of emissions during production and postproduction. Large digital files demand highspeed internet and large server capacity for transfer and storage. The media sector has also been criticised as an unfair working environment, characterised by the precarisation of labour and lack of diversity in its workforce.

The Media Cymru programme and consortium was established in southeast Wales with the goal of tackling these difficulties through the promotion of innovation in the media sector. The main objective is to ensure that responsible and sustainable Research, Development and Innovation (RD&I) practices become integral to media production in Wales and through the example and evidence of positive results, provide a pathway for other developing media clusters elsewhere.

This presentation will focus on the interim results of the interventions related to Media Cymru. The main sector improvements will be presented via an econometric analysis of the media sector in the Cardiff Capital Region, the review of the innovation and commercialisation surveys carried out with all of the applicants to innovation funding (n=250), and the qualitative analysis of interviews undertaken with those that have participated in the training sessions or received funding for kicking off their innovation ideas for the sector (n=30).

Three years into the implementation of the programme, there have been considerable milestones achieved. Some of the success has been discovered by econometric analysis showing a consistent increase in RD&I expenditure, in audiovisual service exports and in turnover of the media sector of the region. Other successful cases relate to pilot projects undertaken for inclusion in hiring practices, advances in the development of software for governance of audiovisual files in the cloud, and improvement in processes that require file exchanges diminishing energy consumption and process repetitions.

Furthermore, through qualitative approaches that map out how the process of innovation has become incorporated into the practices of companies and freelancers in the sector, and the possibility of generating income via innovation has started to become ingrained in a sector that used to rely on direct commissioning of products. Finally, improvement in environmentally conscious production practices, be it through digitized prop preparation, pre-visualization, or on-site recycling and the engagement of a sustainability coordinator in productions, or in the reduction of fossil fuel consumption for transportation by the use of virtual production facilities, remains in the stages of analysis and evaluation.Looking 20 years into the future, the legacy of Media Cymru would be visible in a greener media sector, whose practices are fair and sustainable, and whose growth is predicated on the incorporation of innovation as central as the creation of quality content.

Panel

Shaping the Future of Journalism: AI, Imagination, and Systemic Change

Chair: Stephanie Geise

All those bright, shiny things? The future of local journalism in the AI age

Maximilian Eder, Annika Sehl

Over the past two decades, news media in Germany have undergone significant disruption due to declining advertising revenues and circulation (Kalbhenn, 2024). At the same time, there has been a notable shift toward automation and data-driven news production processes, partially supported by artificial intelligence (AI), to address the economic challenges faced by news organisations (Diakopoulos, 2019; Kotenidis & Veglis, 2021; Thurman et al., 2019; Wilczek et al., 2024).

Research on AI in journalism addresses a wide range of applications, with AI being “an umbrella term for a range of technologies such as automated statistical data analysis, machine learning, and natural language processing” (Deuze & Beckett, 2022, p. 1914). These technologies are applied to “a wide range of activities such as interview transcription, workflow automation, content generation, and personalization” (Sirén-Heikel et al., 2023, p. 355). Consequently, adopting such technologies represents one of the most significant trends in journalism today, potentially transforming news production processes and the structure and functioning of the media (Túñez-López et al., 2021).

This contribution discusses long-term trends concerning the future of local journalism, drawing on contemporary research about the disruptive potential of AI in shaping local news ecosystems. We identify three key developments in local journalism regarding AI:

First, local news media organisations will continue to lag in AI adoption due to path-dependent innovation patterns shaped by print-centric funding models and a lack of long-term incentives to innovate. Many local news outlets have historically relied on revenue streams from print subscriptions and advertising, making it difficult for them to invest in emerging digital technologies (Eder & Sjøvaag, 2025).

Second, local news organisations will benefit from investments in AI-based technologies and applications if they belong to larger media groups. As the transition to AI-driven processes requires substantial resources and technical expertise, resource-constrained local news organisations will struggle to accommodate, which may lead to their disappearance (Waschková Císařová, 2023).

Third, AI will continue to transform the workflows of local journalists. Currently, AI technologies are used in at least one part of the news value chain (Beckett & Yaseen, 2023). In the future, AI may also assist local journalists in fact-checking or monitoring online disinformation thereby helping to ensure journalistic integrity (Dierickx et al., 2024).

This study contributes to the ongoing debate among practitioners and academics about the future of local journalism by contextualising AI’s role within broader transformation processes. As AI becomes more embedded in newsroom practices, its impact must be critically assessed to ensure that it upholds journalistic principles like transparency and accountability in an era of declining trust in news media (Behre et al., 2024).

Generative AI and the future of journalism: Insights from news workers and experts

Alexander Wasdahl, Ramesh Srinivasan

The emergence of algorithmic integration in newsrooms, manifested in part in the form of article writing, has gained momentum over the past decade. This acceleration is largely powered by the advent of advanced large language models (LLMs) capable of generating fluent and coherent text., Media professionals, including journalists, are currently reckoning with the present and future effects of these constantly evolving communicative technologies: how will genAI impact journalistic work?, With an eye toward the future of media practice, this study employed a series of semi-structured interviews with news workers and industry experts to explore how practitioners across the journalism ecosystem perceive and integrate generative AI into their workflows, as well as the ethical and operational challenges they anticipate. Results indicate that generative AI is catalyzing change not just at the individual level, in which AI tools augment journalistic labor, but also at the systemic level through impacts on business models, audience relationships, and professional value alignment.

A key finding is that generative AI represents a challenge to the ongoing sustainability of journalistic business models. For instance, respondents highlighted the fact that AI disrupts traditional revenue strategies, with some expressing optimism about its ability to enhance efficiency and optimize content delivery, and others warning that it exacerbates the declining economic viability of scaled content production. The emergence of AI-generated news content comes at a time when journalism is increasingly shifting away from a scale-driven model toward a service-oriented approach that prioritizes community engagement and audience trust. Respondents noted the balance between perceiving their audience as a community to forge deeper relationships with their customers and perceiving them as an addressable market to better unlock their economic potential. The extent to which journalism as a profession can manage these two conceptions of the audience hinges on resolving the growing tension between content commodification and journalism as a public service.

Additionally, this research foregrounds the methodological benefits of interviewing media practitioners as a means of understanding emerging technological developments from a forward-looking perspective. By capturing the firsthand experiences of news workers adapting to AI-driven disruptions, this study provides a grounded assessment of the long-term trajectory of communicative AI in journalism. This is particularly salient in the realm of labor, in which respondents described the importance of having a “human in the loop” when using generative AI to augment news production processes. By coalescing perspectives that vary in optimism, caution, and concern on the future of the journalist, this research contributes to discussions on the evolving role of AI in journalism and its implications for public discourse.

This study argues that the future of AI in news production will depend not only on technological affordances but also on evolving norms, audience expectations, and value alignment (or lack thereof) between media companies and the third-party platforms they use. In doing so, this study aims to envision the field of journalism 20 years into the future, emphasizing how today’s technological transformations will shape the journalistic world of tomorrow.

“We have to do something with…”: The performative power of socio-technical imaginaries of digital technologies in shaping journalism’s future

Frank Harbers, Rik Smit

This paper explores the performative power of discourses about new technologies and innovation in shaping and restricting which futures of journalism are envisioned. We challenge the idea that innovation is inherently good, naturally technology-driven, and that its specific direction is inevitable and unavoidable (Godin, 2015). Instead, we argue that the panacea of technological innovation for journalism is socially constructed within future-oriented discourses, where such utopian perspectives are promoted as well as negotiated (Harbers, 2024).

Moreover, we specifically focus on the central rhetorical role of narratives about journalism’s historical development in such discourses. By strategically exploiting specific (re)interpretations of journalism’s past and present, actors attempt to convince and naturalize their “diagnosis that points to the need for a fundamental change in the shape of pressure to innovate: journalism or media organizations would have to do this or that so as not to miss trend x, to meet challenge y” (Hepp and Loosen, 2022: 118). In other words, journalism ‘should do something with’ novel technologies in order to survive.

We focus on sociotechnical imaginaries, defined by Jasanoff (2015: 4) as “collectively held, institutionally stabilized, and publicly performed visions of desirable futures”, between 1990 and the present. Thus, this paper offers a long-term perspective on the social-political ways in which innovation discourses have shaped and are shaping the development of Dutch journalism. We identify six developmental stages kickstarted by emerging technologies and their associated imagined consequences and potential for newspapers: 1) 1990-1994: personal computers and early network technology; 2) 1994-2000: homepages; 3) 2000-2005: websites and CMS; 4) 2005-2012: social media and Web 2.0; 2012-2020: smartphone technology and digital platforms; 2020-present: generative AI. We show that imaginative discursive work around these technologies have had material and practical implications for the historical development of newspapers’ development.

Methodologically, we combine (computational) content analysis and discourse analysis to combine a broad scope with enough theoretical depth. Our corpus consists of a wide selection of public debates on journalistic innovation and journalism’s future within national newspapers and magazines as well as specific trade journals and industry websites, such as Villamedia, the Dutch Journalism Fund. Taking a long-term perspective, we first inventory the different technological innovations, actors and general attitudes towards these innovations. Subsequently, our study zooms in on specific debates about technological innovations, analyzing the legitimization of their adoption in light of journalism’s imagined future.

By challenging the self-evidence with which the need and benefit of journalistic innovation is presented, we show the role of innovation discourse, as well as the actors, their interests and the underlying power dynamics they are involved in, in actively shaping journalism’s future. Highlighting this, can ultimately help fuel the emergence of a more inclusive, democratic and pluriform debate about journalistic innovation, digital technologies, and the future of journalism.

UNHEARD: Leveraging AI to reduce future systemic bias in journalism

Bette Dam, Dhrumil Mehta, Sarah Grey Gotfredsen, Sthavir Murthy

Journalism is the cornerstone of democracy, yet major events have exposed its failure to critically assess official narratives. The media's overreliance on governmental sources has led to entrenched biases, distorting public perception, and a weakening of journalism's role as an objective informant. The media's coverage of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 serves as a stark example. Our preliminary analysis of 1,500 articles by the Associated Press and the New York Times found that American officials dominated the coverage on Afghanistan (we have looked at data till 2022) as well, often marginalizing alternative perspectives. It points to the Western press's failure to critically evaluate official U.S. government narratives justifying the war.

To improve coverage in the future, the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University is collaborating with investigative journalist Bette Dam to develop Unheard—an AI-powered tool that audits news organizations' sourcing practices. With financial support from the Pulitzer Center, Unheard was launched in the spring of 2025 with the goal of helping newsrooms identify dominant voices as well as those consistently left out. Unheard uses large language models (LLMs) to conduct comprehensive source audits, offering real-time analysis to track how narratives evolve over time. This allows journalists to identify sourcing imbalances and self-correct in ways previously impossible.

We hope to present our tool at the Conference of ZeMKI in October, and its potential to help journalists improve future coverage. By adopting tools like Unheard, journalists can reshape reporting practices, fostering more accurate, diverse, and reflective storytelling—strengthening the press as a check on power.

ZeMKI | 20 YEARS

Panel

Cities, (country) maps and communication: navigating the paths to our future

Chair: Philip Sinner

Living and communicating in the city of the future

Matthias Berg

Media and information technology development as an essential component of digitalization as the "third wave of mediatization" (Couldry & Hepp 2017: 48), can be understood as fundamentally company-driven. Key players in this process have developed into global corporations over the last few decades. An outstanding example of this is the GAFA companies (Google/Alphabet, Apple, Facebook/Meta, Amazon) as epitome of the platform economy (Busch 2021).

Looking at the phenomenon of the "smart city" against this backdrop, a number of parallels emerge: First and foremost, "private smart cities" (Mosco 2019: 129) are the playing field of companies (some GAFA, some beyond) that incorporate their technologies as well as their interests into urban development. At the same time, however, alternative concepts have developed. In Germany, to which this article refers, only a few years ago a model emerged that regards the smart city as a normative development goal (BBSR 2017). Instead of being driven by technology and economic interests, the benefits of the population, sustainability and democratic principles should be at the heart of smart cities and regions. Current measures in this field are accordingly characterized by co-creative approaches to technology development and comprehensive processes of participation.

Against this background, this contribution outlines a vision of living and communicating in the municipality of the future. It takes an empirical approach using the results of requirements elicitation processes in both urban and rural project contexts as a data basis. What they all have in common is the objective of needs-oriented development of digital services for the municipal context. In some cases, requirements workshops were expanded to include a scenario approach in order to assess the potential impact of new technologies.

At the results level, the vision of living and communicating in smart municipalities can be described along the following aspects: At the core, locally or regionally organized and effective services are fundamentally oriented towards the common good. Depending on their purpose, these are provided cooperatively by state, private and civil society actors, whose cooperation always takes place on eye level and on the basis of the digital sovereignty of the municipality and its citizens. Furthermore, such services are based on infrastructures such as IoT networks and data spaces, some of which are organized centrally, while others are the responsibility of the municipality itself.From a media and communication perspective, two key aspects of this vision should be emphasized: Firstly, such locally or regionally organized services also include digital communication applications. This means that such forms of media communication are increasingly to be understood as services of general interest – without principles such as freedom of the press or its independence from the state losing their validity. This presupposes that institutions oriented towards the common good succeed in transforming the aforementioned company-driven technology paradigm into a normative societal paradigm. Secondly, despite the greater relevance of locally managed services and platforms, the municipality will remain integrated into the media diversity that characterizes today's societies.

Exploring the invisible city: How Google Maps' AI-powered recommendations and gamified platforms reinforce power dynamics and shape urban narratives

Berk Alkoç

Google's recent integration of generative AI into Maps is quietly reshaping how users experience cities. Developed for its gamified Local Guides program—where users contribute photos, reviews, and ratings in exchange for badges and rewards—this feature relies on large-language models (LLMs) that process data from over 250 million locations and feedback from 300 million contributors. By turning user-generated content into data-driven, personalized recommendations, Maps evolves from a simple navigation tool into a powerful mediator of urban exploration. But this shift raises crucial questions: Who controls the visibility of places, and how does this influence what we consider "worth" exploring?

AI-powered maps are deeply tied to the logic of platform capitalism, where user engagement and local knowledge are commodified to generate profit. The gamified design of Local Guides motivates users to continuously contribute, creating feedback loops that prioritize visibility for businesses and spaces aligned with algorithmic logic, while marginalizing others. This process does more than optimize user convenience—it reinforces a form of digital gatekeeping that limits the diversity of urban experiences.As media mediate not only information but physical space itself, platforms like Google Maps gain significant power in shaping collective urban narratives. Drawing from the concepts of mediatization and platform governance, this paper explores how AI-driven design subtly nudges users toward curated experiences while marginalizing public spaces and small businesses that might lack algorithmic visibility. I argue that generative AI maps reinforce platform dominance over cities. The paper concludes by imagining a community-centered design alternatives that prioritize inclusive, locally governed mapping systems of future cities for diversity and equitable engagement.

Glorious videos, precarious lives: homelessness and #vanlife

Maren Hartmann, Justine Humphry

In this presentation, we would like to engage in a 'thin line.' This thin line lies between what has in recent years been labelled 'van life' and homelessness. Van life is portrayed as a modern mobile lifestyle, while homelessness is equated with living rough, fighting for your life on the streets. But there is also a growing 'middle field': vehicular homelessness or vehicle residency as those living in cars after loss of their home have been called. In the US, this is one of the fastest growing segments of the unhoused US population (Schmid, 2021). Despite all similarities, however, self-image and self-presentation online, tend to differ drastically between these two. These online (self-)representations are the focus of this presentation. Our starting point is that vanlife tends to be portrayed as a lifestyle, a choice for freedom and independence, while homelessness is described as fate and failure, often eschewed although sometimes used to draw the audience to its existence. This again is necessarily linked to questions of digital lives (see Montague, 2024). The analysis will focus on whether these schematic differences and the borderlines between them can actually be found in the (self-)presentations of vanlife and to examine how homelessness is evident, performed or concealed in these cases.

The analysis will be based on #vanlife and vloggging videos on TikTok and YouTube, while also turning to homelessness videos more generally and those about living in cars. We ask how people identify themselves, how being without a home (and being homeless) is addressed, how life on the streets is portrayed and similar questions to better understand the 'thin line' between homelessness and #vanlife and the role of the digital (not just in the US).

Our starting point is an (ongoing) interest in the potentially widening scope of homelessness or precarious living situations and its consequences for people's daily lives. We also build on work on homeless and digital media (e.g. Humphry, 2022; Hartmann & Klocke, 2025). Here, we would like to broaden not only the question of who counts as homeless, but also to questions of nomadic lifestyles, of identity, of (self-)presentation, of distinction (Trdina & Jontes, 2021) and stigmatization. All of this is interwoven with questions of the increasing digitalization of these lives – and recurring invisibilities, too. While based in the present, this allows a glimpse into a possible future of the social.

Navigare necesse est: The concept of navigation in media studies, and what it tells us about our contemporary and future media culture

Stina Bengtsson

Navigation is a concept that is increasingly used to describe and discuss media users' mundane practices and approaches to the contemporary media world. Several articles and new books have during the last couple of years used 'navigation' as a way to describe what ordinary people do with media, data, algorithms and AI. The idea of navigation is often used as a way of discussing ordinary media practices in relation to the cross-platform, or high-choice, media landscape, in relation to both news use (Swart et al. 2017) as well as media use from a broader everyday life perspective. Brita Ytre-Arne (2023), in her recent book Media Use in Digital Everyday Life puts forward navigation as a metaphor to describe how people use media 'to orient [themselves] as [they] move through [their] everyday lives', underlining the routinized dimensions of media use across, and in between, social domains, and the role of digital technologies in this: practically and specifically, but also socially and existentially (2023, pp. 8-9). Similarly, Swart et al. (2017) uses navigation to explore user practices in the contemporary media environment, as well as for understanding shifting user preferences underlying the evaluation of media content (or more specifically in this case: news).

Many other recent publications have use navigation equal to mundane media practices in everyday life as well as to audiences struggles to curate and make sense of their own media use. Given this new emphasis on navigation as an image of audience practices, how should this metaphor be understood? And what does the use of navigation as a metaphor for media use tell us about our contemporary media world and how does it shape our media futures?This paper takes a closer look at the recent uses, within media and communication studies, of the concept of navigation and its different variations. It also proposes a conceptual understanding of what navigating may mean, from a theoretical point of view building on discussions in Bengtsson&Johansson, 2024. It ends with a discussion of what constantly navigating the world means for the existential experience of living in our current and future media culture.

Researchers in traffic: Methodological challenges of video recording human-machine communication 'on the move'

Christian Greiffenhagen, Shan Shan Li

New forms of communication may require new forms of research. One of the most challenging recent changes in the field of human-machine communication (Guzman & Lewis, 2020) has been the 'mobility turn' (Urry, 2007): Autonomous agents that communicate with people used to be stationary, i.e., in fixed places such as homes, offices, and museums, which made recording human-machine communication relatively easy. More recently, however, such agents have become mobile, i.e., are moving around hotels, public squares, or city streets, which makes recording human-machine encounters much more challenging.

In this paper we discuss methodological challenges in video-recording spontaneous encounters of people with a new kind of machine: autonomous delivery vehicles, operating on Chinese university campuses. Our aim was to capture the different ways in which these vehicles interacted with pedestrians, cyclists, and car drivers while on route from the delivery station to the final destination. Such interactions involved people noticing the vehicle and taking pictures of it, people yielding to the vehicle (and vice versa), the vehicle overtaking slower moving pedestrians (and bicycles and motorcycles overtaking the vehicle), as well as people reacting to various voice announcements of the vehicle (such as "May I please pass?").

Our aim in this paper is two-fold: First, we discuss practical technical challenges encountered in capturing human-machine interaction 'on the move'. Recording the fast-moving vehicle requires the researcher to be mobile as well, which involves selecting appropriate modes of transportation, such as bicycles, electronic bikes or e-scooters (see Appendix). Additionally, in order to be able to see – and hear – how people interacted with the vehicle, we needed to install a 360-degree cameras on the vehicle itself. Finally, given the unpredictability of the movement of the autonomous vehicle, the researcher had to engage in 'protoanalysis' (Mondada, 2014) during the recording. Second, we reflect on normative challenges, which are the result of the dual role of the observer being both a researcher and a traffic participant. That is to say, in order to record the vehicle the researcher has to become a traffic participant themselves, which entails being monitored by other traffic participants. This can lead to moments of tension, where the researcher has to decide how to handle the different norms of doing good research versus being a good traffic participant. For example, when the recorded vehicle slows down, the researcher filming would also slow down, rather than overtake the vehicle as would be expected, which can create problems for the participants behind the researcher. This paper explores potential solutions for such challenges faced during mobile recording in public spaces.

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Panel

Deliberation and Polarization in the Digital Public Sphere: Journalism, AI, and the Struggle for Democratic Discourse

Chair: Cornelius Puschmann

AI-mediated discourse: Mitigating polarization through constructive dialogue

Hilke Brockmann, Ivan Yamshchikov

The rapid expansion of digital media has fundamentally altered public discourse, often intensifying ideological polarization and reducing the likelihood of constructive engagement. Social media platforms, optimized for engagement rather than deliberation, reinforce echo chambers that deepen societal divisions. This study presents an innovative research initiative utilizing artificial intelligence (AI) to mediate polarized discussions and foster more constructive dialogue.

We develop and evaluate an AI mediator designed to bridge ideological divides by leveraging large language models (LLMs) trained on polarized discourse. We use Twitter or X conversation of European politicians around the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war. This data set provides us with the opportunity to include also data on the development and dynamics of echo chambers. Moreover, we know who is speaking. In a next step, AI agents will be programmed to emulate further polarized debates and ideological echo chambers. Based on real and synthetic data, we train a specialized AI mediator to encourage discourse cohesion, correct misinterpretations, and foster consensus and compromise. We will validate the effectiveness and efficiency of this mediator in real-world interactions to assess its effectiveness in improving the quality of political and societal conversation and rapprochement.This research aligns with the conference's thematic focus on the evolving role of media technologies in shaping public discourse. By investigating the capacity of communicative AI to counteract polarization and enhance deliberative engagement, our work contributes to ongoing discussions on AI-driven democratic deliberation. Additionally, we examine broader implications for media regulation, AI ethics, and responsible algorithmic intervention in public communication.

Diagnosing destructive polarisation in public discourse: The practice mapping framework

Axel Bruns, Katharina Esau, Kateryna Kasianenko, Tariq Choucair, Vish Padinjaredath Suresh

Over the past 20 years, and at least since Adamic & Glance's famous study of patterns in the networks amongst US political bloggers (2005), much scholarly attention has been devoted to concepts like 'echo chambers' and 'filter bubbles', with very limited empirical success: the core problem in the contemporary landscape of public debate is not that partisans are sealed off from one another by personal choice or algorithmic curation, as these theories would propose, but that, even when directly confronted with counter-attitudinal information and perspectives, they inherently reject these and refuse to engage constructively with their antagonists (Bruns, 2019).

Our focus must therefore necessarily shift to polarisation as a major driver of societal divisions: perceived or actual polarisation between political and social groups – based in issue differences, ideological positions, or affective responses, polarisation undermines meaningful debate, compromise, and consensus-building between opposing groups. Even this apparently straightforward concept of polarisation must be further developed, however: clear distinctions between competing issue and ideology positions can be productive if they enable citizens and decision-makers to choose their preferred course of action, but such agonistic competition can turn into antagonistic division once one or more sides of a debate abandon their commitment to engaging with their opponents, and to working towards consensus or at least compromise.

Our work has identified several symptoms of this shift towards explicitly destructive forms of polarisation: (a) breakdown of communication; (b) discrediting and dismissing of information; (c) erasure of complexities; (d) exacerbated attention to and space for extreme voices; and (e) exclusion through emotions. To operationalise these in further empirical research – and in potential interventions aimed at encouraging more respectful and constructive forms of reciprocal engagement between antagonists where this is still possible – it is crucial, however, to diagnose these symptoms more reliably and systematically as they manifest in public communication. This begins with the identification of the various discourse positions in a given communicative context, and an assessment of their relative positioning towards each other.

To facilitate this, this paper introduces the novel methodological framework of practice mapping. Advancing beyond conventional network analyses, practice mapping draws on social media data or comparable media datasets to extract the common practices – actions as well as interactions – of individual actors in the communicative context and systematically compare their similarities across the actor population; this enables the identification of clusters and (potentially) communities of practice which represent specific discursive positions within the debate, and of the discursive alliances and antagonisms that connect or divide these groups. Having identified these groups, it is then possible to diagnose the symptoms of destructive polarisation in the communicative practices that define them, thereby assessing the level of dysfunctionality in a given discursive context. Taking a longitudinal perspective, finally, the practice mapping framework also supports the tracking of the dynamics of these interrelationships over time, to assess whether the symptoms of destructive polarisation are intensifying or dissipating.

How journalism fuels discursive polarization

Michael Brüggemann, Hendrik Meyer, Mike Farjam, Anamaria Dutceac Segesten

"Pernicious Polarization" (McCoy & Somer, 2018), which divides society into hostile camps unwilling and unable to compromise, poses a significant threat to democracy. Both social media and journalism are often implicated in contributing to this polarization (Brüggemann & Meyer, 2023). In this presentation, we discuss three mechanisms through which journalism may either exacerbate or mitigate polarization in public discourse. We review existing evidence from prior studies and present initial findings from a newly initiated project exploring journalism's role in fueling polarization. We hypothesize that journalism influences polarization through three primary pathways:

(A) Underreporting Consensus: By neglecting areas of agreement, journalism may inadvertently highlight divisions. Ideological divergence and partisan sorting can be exacerbated when consensus is underreported, leading to a perception of greater division than actually exists (Merkley, 2020).

(B) Amplifying Extreme and Toxic Actors: Journalistic focus on fringe or extreme viewpoints involuntarily amplifies these perspectives. For example, climate journalism has sometimes provided a platform for climate change deniers, thereby amplifying their views and potentially contributing to public misunderstanding (Brüggemann and Engesser, 2017).

(C) Polarization as a Self-Reinforcing Meta-Discourse: Our ongoing larger research project investigates the salience, patterns of, and effects of journalistic reporting about polarization. We will present initial findings from a large-scale content analysis: analyzing a corpus of 230,000 news articles from Germany, Sweden, and the UK (2014–2023), we employed computational methods—including Word2Vec, Named Entity Recognition, topic modeling, and anger classification—to identify and analyze meta-coverage on polarization and disrupted societies. Our findings reveal that countries with lower actual polarization levels reference the concept more frequently. Notably, tabloids, despite exhibiting higher levels of anger and producing more polarized content, report on polarization less often than broadsheets. These results suggest that discourse on polarization is more prevalent in cultural and editorial contexts concerned about polarization than in those that are deeply polarized.

By underreporting consensus, amplifying extreme actors, and constructing hostile adversaries, journalism can fuel "discursive polarization" (Brüggemann & Meyer, 2023), fostering a reinforcing spiral of false polarization: media representations leading individuals to believe that societal divisions are more pronounced than they truly are (Wilson et al., 2020).However, journalism may not only exacerbate but also mitigate societal polarization. Even while engaging in polarization meta-discourses, journalists might focus on reflecting the dangers of societal fragmentation and thus warn against deepening divisions. We conclude that there is a need for a normative discussion about what kind of depolarization practices are desirable and we propose using the framework of transformative journalisms (Brüggemann/Frech/Schäfer 2022) as one possible normative guideline. We will end by presenting an agenda for future research for further discussion.

Talking politics with communicative AI: New opportunities or challenges for democratic discourse?

Giovanna Mascheroni, Simone Tosoni; Fausto Colombo

With ChatGPT being used as a search engine by younger generations, critical questions move beyond the risk of cheating in schools to encompass epistemological issues: how future generations will access knowledge and what kind of knowledge? In other words, the question is how communicative AI reaffirms, exacerbates or reconfigures the hegemony of "correlational knowledge" (Andrejevic, 2020) whose boundaries and content are set by datafication and predictive AI (Couldry & Mejias, 2019). The paper presents findings from an experimental study exploring the use of Communicative AI in playful debates around controversial public issues, specifically focusing on the performative environmental activism of the Italian movement "Last Generation" ("Ultima Generazione", UG). The study critically examines the implications of interactions with Communicative AI for democratic discourse on three levels: (1) the form of public debates on controversial issues as framed by Communicative AI; (2) the rhetorical—and ideological—strategies enacted by Communicative AI; and (3) the contribution of Communicative AI to participants' understanding of the complexity of a specific controversial issues.

First, findings suggest that ChatGPT tends to structure political discourse within the boundaries of rationality and formal politeness (Lakoff 1973), which may appear more desirable than the often heated exchanges in TV talk shows or political conversations on social media. However, its clearly robotic nature results in reasoning that lacks empathy and embodied experience, which participants perceived as non-human and inappropriate for political debates (Papacharissi 2010, 2015).

Second, participants identified "problematic" discursive strategies used by ChatGPT, such as introducing elements into the conversation without proper verification or deliberation. For instance, the semantic field set by ChatGPT problematically equates any act of civil disobedience with "violence", "vandalism/vandalizing", "extreme [acts]" and "extremely radical [protest]"—despite UG's commitment to non-violent civil disobedience and symbolic, reversible actions (e.g., using washable paint on art pieces). Additionally, ChatGPT's instrumental use of historical examples sometimes served to undermine UG's credibility. These strategies highlight how non-transparent operations of persuasion, detached from the "regime of truth" (Foucault, 2012), can infiltrate dialogues that are ostensibly aimed at mutual understanding.

Third, regarding the "epistemic potential of conflicting opinions" in the semi-public sphere (Habermas, 2023), ChatGPT's contribution to increasing the interlocutors' knowledge on this controversial issue was generally limited. Participants defined ChatGPT as a "search engine for common sense discourse" that uncritically reproduces mainstream views on environmentalist movements expressed by politicians and the media, despite its potential access to more diverse and in-depth knowledge.

However, the capable simulation of a civil conversation may add a layer of trustworthiness to an otherwise superficial assemblage of information reproducing hegemonic discourses. Moreover, ChatGPT tends to avoid contradicting its interlocutors, and gradually sides with their viewpoint in the course of the verbal exchange. While this is acknowledged by study participants as a limitation of ChatGPT, it may open up risks of reinforcing biased and radicalised views. The findings, therefore, are discussed in the light of implications for the of future democratic discourse.

Panel

AI and the Future of Education: Rethinking Writing, Machines, and the Academic Imagination

Chair: Karsten D. Wolf

Does writing have a future?

David Gunkel

The titular question of this paper is not mine. It comes from Czech/Brazilian media theorist Vilém Flusser, who once used it as the subtitle to a book he published in 1987—"Die Schrift: Hat Schreiben Zukunft?" At the time Flusser was writing the dominance of the written word seemed to be in crisis, as new modes of digital expression seemed to herald the end of writing and the beginning of a post-literate age. I reuse/rewrite Flusser's question 35+ years later, because it again looks as if writing's future is in question and on the line. This time due to impressive developments in large language models (LLM) and other forms of generative artificial intelligence (AI). Consequently, it seems prudent at this juncture to reissue Flusser's titular question. And we can, following Flusser's own example, begin with a very direct and clear statement: What large language models signify is not the end of writing but the terminal limits of a particular conceptualization of writing that has been called logocentrism.

In other words, writing indeed has a future but only if we reconceptualize how we think about writing and write about thinking. The following responds to this need and challenge. And it does so in three steps or movements: 1) I begin by reviewing the three fundamental elements of logocentric metaphysics and the long shadow that this way of thinking has cast over the conceptualization and critique of LLMs and generative AI. 2) I then trace the contours of a deconstruction of this standard operating procedure that interrupts influential and often-unquestioned assumptions about the concept of the author, the meaning of truth, and the meaning of what we mean by the word "meaning." 3) Finally, I will conclude by formulating the terms and conditions of an alternative way to think and write about LLMs and generative AI that escape the conceptual grasp of logocentrism and its hegemony.

ChatGPT in academic writing – a scientometric analysis of today's and tomorrow's issues

Gergely Ferenc Lendvai

A flagship innovation, the most renowned LLMs, a disruptive technology, a software that „changed the way people look at AI“. ChatGPT emerged in late 2022 as a „groundbreaking“ technological tool and it has rapidly amassed over 100 million users within two months of its launch. Though its growth is unprecedented, the use of ChatGPT has sparked widespread discussions about its societal, technological, ethical, and even scholarly implications. For this research, we propose reviewing the latter aspect. Scholars and educators alike have expressed mixed attitudes about ChatGPT’s potential to revolutionize academic writing by fostering personalized, interactive, and engaging learning experiences.

We used a scientometrics approach to examine these attitudes. We have collected and analyzed 171 articles from Scopus via Python and CiteSpace to outline the current and future problems regarding academic writing and ChatGPT. As for findings, studies have noted ChatGPT’s ability to enhance writing quality, stimulate critical thinking, and support data collection and analysis. Furthermore, its applications in proofreading, idea generation, and hypothesis development are lauded for advancing academic productivity. However, these benefits are accompanied by significant, and for now, unsolveable challenges. Concerns about data privacy, biases in generated content, and ethical dilemmas surrounding authorship and plagiarism have surfaced. Hallucinated references and inaccuracies further complicate the tool’s integration into academic workflows. Having identified key themes, thematic clusters, and research gaps, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the opportunities and challenges associated with ChatGPT in academic writing. In doing so, it hopes to contribute to the ongoing dialogue on the responsible integration of AI tools in academia.

Imagining the university in the age of the universal machine

Maria Teresa Cruz

The “information society”, the “knowledge society”, and the “network society”, vague announcements from the end of the 20th century, have been mutually revealing their meaning over the last few decades. Their confluence shows today that the new symbolic machine – or information technology – has produced a new planetary economy – the data economy, in which all added value is intrinsically cognitive and knowledge extraction.

Reading and writing machine, machine that translates anything into anything else, into any language or phenomenology; learning and speaking machine; machine that interprets, predicts, edits and publishes. This new symbolic machine has been called from the beginning an “artificial intelligence” and a “universal machine”(Turing), extending the universality of the human – as a symbolic animal – to a post-human universality, which the imaginary of cyberculture first futurized: A cybernetic universality that encompasses humans as well as animals and machines (Wiener), living and non-living entities, the organic and the non-organic. Cognition emerges, therefore, not as a quality or attribute of the human but as “symbiotic” and “distributed” possibility (Hayles), sustained by the networks and the flux of information that can be extracted from everything – a new cognitive ecology, a kind of “noosphere” (Chardin).

The anticipation of this cognitive ecology is first signalled at the university in a famous doctoral thesis that condenses the long history of numbers and mathematics, writing and calculus of the Gymnasium and the modern Academy. We have known since then that we will need to reinvent the university, incorporate this new “pharmakon” (Plato, Derrida) and propose to our time a new politeia and a new “pharmacology” (Stiegler). Just as modern society and the modern state have emerged from the Republic of Letters, the information society and planetary thought (Hui) will have to emerge from the “media of mathematics” (Kittler).This reflection takes as its starting hypothesis that all human experience, in its psychic and collective “individuation” (Simondon), is constituted in relation to a technical milieu and through a set of media and of cultural techniques. Schooling and education serve as primary contexts where these experiences are shaped, regulated, and adopted. To this extent, without the reinvention of the university, the information and knowledge society will not indeed emerge and will remain hostage to the mere data economy of cognitive capitalism. What should the university become in the era of the universal machine – this is the question we aim to explore, and to which a future must be possible to imagine.

Disruptive consolidation? Reflections on human-machine communication as media engagement paradigm

Andreas Schellewald

Non-human actors have become a ubiquitous part of everyday experiences over the last years. Consider the following example: while scrolling through Instagram, I encountered a video montage of feel-good clips – displays of kindness, heartwarming moments, and breathtaking nature scenes. In the comments, users had written messages like, “algorithm, please show me more of this” or “leaving a comment so the algorithm notices.” Increasingly, people engage not only with other humans on digital platforms but also with non-human actors – a trend likely to persist in the future. These interactions significantly (re-)shape identity management, relationships, and how people make sense of the world through media (e.g., Siles 2023).

This reflective piece examines how such communicative dynamics simultaneously disrupt and consolidate established patterns of media engagement. I explore two themes: firstly, how human-machine communication (HMC) appears to disrupt traditional interpersonal communication frameworks (Hepp and Loosen 2023); secondly, how HMC consolidates longstanding media engagement patterns, suggesting continuity amidst change in the years to come. Specifically, I argue that HMC reinforces established practices of reading and listening rather than speaking or writing (Bucher 2023), practices that seem to have drifted somewhat out of analytical focus in the media and communication studies field.

I will frame my argument by sketching a historical parallel to concepts of emotional realism, discussed by scholars like Ang (1985) and Herzog (1941) regarding mass media and soap opera audiences. While HMC outwardly mimics modes of interpersonal communication, it internally replicates enduring modes of media interaction, similar to how audiences engaged with soap operas through interpretive and relational practices, I will argue. People construct meaning with machines (Guzman 2018) much like they did with media texts and personas, aligning with older ideas of an “active audience” (Seiter et al. 1989).

To make sense of HMC, I propose re-engaging with audience research debates. Silverstone’s (1994) work provides a useful anchor for two reasons. Firstly, in how his work emphasises media engagements’ socio-historical contexts and the enabling and constraining forces of different media forms. Media – whether algorithmic, agentic, or otherwise – serve as both semantic and material resources for people to creatively transform in everyday life herein.

Secondly, in how Silverstone’s notion of “significant activity” provides future media and communication research with a sensitizing concept in Blumer’s sense – attuning our analytical attention towards studying those practices of significant human activity in media engagement that constitute meaning making. Looking at HMC from such an angle of significant activity, I will suggest that it exerts both disruptive and consolidating forces on future media communication paradigms.On one hand, it sustains a configuration where humans bear the burden of deriving meaning from machine outputs. On the other, it disrupts prior engagement models by replacing institutional forces shaping media content with probabilistic machine procedures that exert their own constraints. Consequently, people must increasingly manage algorithmic outcomes rather than solely engaging with institutionally curated narratives or personas. By situating HMC within broader media engagement traditions, we will be able to better understand these transformative and stabilising impacts in the future.

Troubling futures, sounding off, and engaging non-human interactive audio-based media

Lissa Holloway-Attaway

In the Introduction to Donna Haraway's work Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene, Haraway speculates on the troubling concepts of the Present vs. the Future. Although her aim is to trouble these current terms, that is to stir them up, to disturb their standard, reliable meanings, and to put them in conversation with each other and the social systems that maintain them, she refuses to emphasise the so-called Future as the proper destination for thoughtful and radical engagement to address the current troubled issues of a world in crisis. Instead, she urges us to be deeply present in order to address the threats to civilization as we know it in the present epoch of the Anthropocene:

Staying with the trouble does not require such a relationship to times called the future. In fact, staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings. (Haraway, 1)

These "mortal critters" she identifies are ones able to deeply embed themselves into the troubles of the current times, and they are the key to engaging with the complex materialities of the world in order to render it meaning-full and to give hope for our continued ongoingness in a world threatened by self-annihilation. The Anthropocene is, after all, the geological epoch defined by destructive human intervention in a world threatening to disappear. Importantly, Haraway tells us that new stories and new ways of telling are key to critically engaging with the present to address the matters that move us onward, inspire us, breathe life into a future threatened by extermination.In my presentation, I will work to embrace this deeply troubled present/future ongoingness by sharing my critical perspective on creating, designing, and critiquing Audio-based Interactive Digital Narratives through the lens of more-than-human (think mortal critters) creative making. By sharing 'snippets' of my own work making/telling beyond human-centered compositions via interactive digital audio-based works, I hope to share how we can deeply, materially engage the present while preparing for radical media revolution. I work in alliance with theoretical perspectives like Haraway's, but also via Critical Posthumanism, New Materialism, and even more specifically Feminist New Materialism. The digital audio based re-imaginings I will share question the alleged stability of the individual liberal human subject/voice and the institutions and agencies of power associated with human exceptionalism and capitalism to lead us to a more nuanced, distributed future. They advocate for novel ways to identify and engage with more distributed power dynamics and material realities and offer ethical and responsible approaches to their multiple interconnected networks of exploitation and oppression.

Keynote 2

Chair: Kerstin Radde-Antweiler

Visions of political participation in the digital age

Cristian Vaccari

This talk critically reconstructs key debates on whether the internet enhances or undermines democratic participation, outlining six visions of how citizens engage in politics through digital media. The *empowered citizen* uses digital tools for learning, expression, networking, and mobilization. The *subversive citizen* exploits the same tools to deceive, divide, and attack. The *quantified citizen* engages in low-threshold actions that generate data for profiling, targeting, and gauging popularity. The *manipulated citizen* is vulnerable to disinformation, micro-targeting, and algorithmic filtering. The *distracted citizen* filters out political content to avoid engagement. Finally, the *heroic citizen* pursues empowerment while resisting distraction, manipulation, toxicity, and quantification. The talk highlights tensions between normative and empirical understandings of citizenship and aims to move beyond simplistic assessments often founded on a narrow focus on specific outcomes.

Keynote 3

Chair: Kerstin Radde-Antweiler

Media and the corporatization of everything

Nick Couldry

This lecture will draw on the author's work on data colonialism – most recently *Data Grab* (Penguin 2024) – his solo book on social media (*The Space of the World: Can Human Solidarity Survive Social Media and What if it Can't?* (Polity 2024), and his current work on AI's impact on the social construction of knowledge. It will explore media and communications' evolution over the past 20 years via a decolonial framework that, beyond identifying enduring neocolonial forces, shows how ever more of the world's resources are *captured* in a new stage of colonial appropriation. Digital media platforms (and the large-scale AI characterizing platforms and many other digital interfaces) play a crucial role in this capture. Critical research must give ever more attention to the conditions of social life and the changing nature of social reality. A battle is emerging between business and community perspectives for the control of everyday infrastructures: is it time for critical researchers to choose sides?

Panel

Love, Hate and Algorithms: Intimacy, Violence, and Emotional Futures in Mediated Worlds

Chair: Karsten D. Wolf

The future of media sexuality – between algorithms, agents, and autonomy

Nicola Döring

Technological and sexual change are closely intertwined: Since the 1990s, the internet has fostered numerous sexual online activities – from online dating and sexual education in social media to digital and virtual pornography. The proliferation of smartphone cameras in the 2010s led to a boom in sexting as well as the production and distribution of self-generated nude and sexual images. Since the 2020s, generative artificial intelligence has expanded the spectrum of sexual expression, for instance, through synthetic pornography or chatbots functioning as parasocial sexual counselors or artificial romantic partners.

But how will – and how should – media sexuality evolve in the 2030s and 2040s? Will we witness an increasing diversification of sexual representations and expressions? Or will a more conservative, diversity-critical social climate lead to intensified, algorithmically driven control and regulation of digital sexualities? While some researchers already speak of the „expulsion of the sexual“ from social media, others speculate that by 2050, people will engage more frequently in sexual interactions with AI agents and humanoid robots than with fellow humans. These scenarios are often the subject of controversial media debates, appearing in entertainment films, news reports, and social media discussions.

Media and communication research has so far primarily focused on the potential risks of media sexuality, particularly the increasing sexualization and pornographization of the media landscape. However, positive visions of a desirable media sexuality have been formulated far less frequently – despite the existence of well-established normative frameworks that could serve as guidelines for constructive development. These include the human rights-based model of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and the concept of Positive Sexuality derived from Positive Psychology.

This contribution outlines visions of a desirable future media sexuality based on three central sources:

- Conceptual framework models, particularly SRHR and Positive Sexuality, which provide normative guidelines for a health-promoting and self-determined sexuality.
- Public media debates on the opportunities and risks of future developments in media sexuality, including technological, ethical, and social dimensions.
- Research findings from media and communication studies and related disciplines that examine future developments in media sexuality.

The goal is to develop a forward-looking perspective on media sexuality that is not deficit- and risk-oriented but also highlights positive potentials – particularly for (1) the development of media technologies and content, (2) individual usage patterns, and (3) legal, economic, and cultural frameworks.

The future of mediated intimacy? Examining the politics and industry of AI-generated romance

Ira Solomatina

The starting point for my paper is the phenomenon of the AI girlfriend. With the rise and expanding possibilities of generative AI, creating AI-generated romantic partners has been one of the more sensational, albeit controversial, ways of using the technology. Whereas the sheer possibility of an AI-generated romantic partner is an object of cultural controversy, most media discourses centre on its gendered iteration – the AI girlfriend. At a time when young men are seen as struggling—whether as victims of the so-called "loneliness epidemic" or as targets of right-wing propaganda—the popularity of AI girlfriends is often interpreted as a symptom of a broader cultural crisis. Accordingly, the rise of the AI girlfriend has been treated by cultural commentators and traditional media as a worrisome sign, provoking questions about the reasons for their popularity, but also questions about blame and responsibility. Are AI girlfriends responsible for spreading loneliness among young men? Are women to blame for the fact that heterosexual men are choosing to date AI bots? Is it the fault of feminism that in the perceived zero-sum game of empowerment and confidence young men are allegedly finding themselves on the losing end?

These debates often attribute the rise of AI romantic partners to political polarisation, rise of feminism and shift in gender dynamics, or socio-technological imaginaries that particularly appeal to young men. Although these factors are crucial, a key actor remains under-examined – that is the fast-growing AI-facilitated romance industry itself. Apps and platforms such as Replika and Flipped actively encourage and monetise romantic relationships with AI-generated avatars, often marketing themselves as tools for mental health and emotional support. This paper examines how these platforms regulate and enable romantic interactions with AI. Through a close analysis of their terms of service, policy documents, and marketing materials, I investigate how AI-human relationships are framed, what ethical concerns (if any) are acknowledged, and how the platforms position themselves in relation to the broader cultural anxieties surrounding AI romance. In doing so, this study aims to illuminate the commercial and regulatory dimensions of AI-generated intimacy, moving beyond moral panic to critically assess the industry shaping this phenomenon. Whereas the focus remains on the platforms' policy, I interrogate it in relation to networked misogyny (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016; Marwick & Caplan, 2018) and sprawling manosphere (Haslop et al., 2024; O'Donnell, 2020), while addressing the association between femininity and emotional labour, deepened and exacerbated by new technologies. Ultimately, my research inquires how the platforms' policies acknowledge and manifest the current political and cultural controversies around gender.

Media love as antidote for the synthetic mediation of everything

Mark Deuze, Laura Glitsos

In a memorable scene of The Matrix Revolutions (2003) film, Keanu Reeves' character Neo finds himself caught between the machine world and the human world, embodied as a subway train station with tracks always turning back to the same station. As he ponders his options, he meets a young family, and recognizes them as computer programs, part of the Matrix. Puzzled, he cannot stop himself from asking what they are doing there:

Neo: I'm sorry. You don't have to answer that question.

Rama-Kandra: No. I don't mind. The answer is simple. I love my daughter very much. I find her to be the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. But where we are from, that is not enough. Every program that is created must have a purpose; if it does not, it is deleted. I went to the Frenchman to save my daughter. You do not understand.

Neo: I just have never…

Rama-Kandra: …heard a program speak of love?

Neo: It's a… human emotion.

Rama-Kandra: No, it is a word. What matters is the connection the word implies. I see that you are in love. Can you tell me what you would give to hold on to that connection?

Neo: Anything.

Rama-Kandra: Then perhaps the reason you're here is not so different from the reason I'm here.

Our contribution takes this dialogue as a starting point to discuss the moment when synthetic media and (process of mass) communication truly dominate our digital environment. Synthetic media are any kind of media – from hardware to software, from words to images, from animations to video – completely or partially autogenerated by computers.

- Will this be a moment where we lose track of that, which makes us human?
- Will this be a time when our common humanity gets reclaimed, wrestled from the hands of omnipotent machines?
- Or is there another way of understanding the co-evolution of polis, physis and techne: the human world, the green world (i.e. nature) and the technological world?

We identify two fascinating meaning-making frameworks to appreciate the confusing collapse of boundaries between the organic and mechanic: the monstrous digital and media love. The first is an articulation of affective and socio-political tensions provoked by the rapid expansion of digital technologies and its relationship to cultural sensibilities. The 'monstrous' refers to the disruption and distortion of the natural and the human by the digital – which is experienced in countless moments throughout the day in a media life: from the mundane (such as an advertisement selling you something you were talking about earlier) to the horrific (people on the streets of Gaza and Ukraine attacked by drones that were targeted by AI systems).

On the other hand, media love departs from what is at the heart of what all media do: they only connect. As in the words of E.M. Forster in Howards End (1910): "Only connect the prose and the passion and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer." Media are where people's passions materialize. This can be dark, even monstrous, yet it is also, and inevitably so, full of love.Our contribution explores the possible futures of our digital environment in terms of the monstrous digital and media love, offering signposts for the road ahead.

Machine algorithms and cyberbullying: Unveiling risks and harnessing solutions

Seda Gökçe Turan

The increasing reliance on machine algorithms in digital platforms has significantly influenced the dynamics of online interactions, including the prevalence of cyberbullying. Algorithms that prioritize engagement often amplify harmful content, unintentionally creating environments where harassment and bullying thrive. This study critically examines the dual role of machine algorithms in both perpetuating and combating cyberbullying. It explores how recommendation systems, content moderation tools, and user profiling contribute to the spread of abusive behavior while analyzing advancements in AI-powered detection and prevention strategies. The research emphasizes the ethical implications of algorithmic design and highlights the need for transparency, fairness, and inclusivity in mitigating online harm. By addressing the intersection of technology, ethics, and social responsibility, this study seeks to inform policymakers, platform developers, and educators on how to leverage algorithms for fostering safer and more respectful digital ecosystems.

Weaponizing the mind: Military applications of parapsychology and neurocybernetics

Anthony Enns

Media historians often discuss the military origins of modern media technologies, yet media archeologists argue that their origins can also be rooted in imaginary, speculative, or pseudoscientific theories. This paper will attempt to integrate these two approaches by examining how the study of parapsychology was incorporated into the American military-industrial complex and how new military technologies are currently being developed to facilitate synthetic forms of various psychic abilities, such as mind reading, telepathy, and psychokinesis. In the 1970s, for example, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA)—the U.S. Department of Defense agency responsible for developing new military technologies—began to develop the first neural interfaces, which were designed to allow the brain to control various technological devices from a distance. These experiments were intended to increase the combat effectiveness of pilots and soldiers, which continues to be a high priority, as a spokesperson for the military recently announced that they hope this research will "lead to direct mental control of military systems by thought alone."

While military research on parapsychology has since become a source of embarrassment, the contemporary development of "thought helmets" and "thought-controlled weapons" is clearly driven by the same underlying hopes and ambitions, such as the promise of direct mental communication and the direct interaction between mind and matter. In other words, parapsychology and neurocybernetics are connected through a process of circular causality, as psychic abilities anticipate technological innovations, and technological innovations fulfill the same functions as psychic abilities. This paper will explore the intersections between these fields and their potential impact on the future development of media technologies by examining how they are both fundamentally based on the weaponization of the mind, which requires a mechanistic notion of consciousness that conceives of humans and machines as effectively interchangeable.

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Panel

Playing the Future / The Future as play: Games, Virtual Worlds, and Speculative Designs for Social Change

Chair: Kerstin Radde-Antweiler

Tabletop AI: Playing with the future

Anne Kustritz

The combination of board games and AI may appear contradictory. With ancient roots and stubbornly material components, board games evoke the past while AI immediately conjures the future. Yet, although experimenting with AI-driven programs like Chat GPT and Stable Diffusion have become commonplace, the expansive imagination of how AI will change the future remains theoretical and out of reach. Immersive video gaming environments offer one way for players to enter potential AI futures. Yet, the necessary abstraction of board games invite players to actively co-develop and enact imaginative ways of living, interacting, and coexisting with AI. Because board games do not offer true encounters with artificial intelligence, unlike computer games whose engines and mechanics may be powered by algorithms and AI systems, they allow for more direct analysis of speculative projections about what AI may mean for the future.

This paper examines three types of AI board games.

First, AI detection games such as “I’m not a Robot” (2022) and “Are You a Robot?” (2019) invite players to imagine a future wherein human and computer intelligence have become nearly indistinguishable. The game challenges players to correctly distinguish between humans and AI, and yet the AI characters are also played by humans, oddly making these games a Turing test wherein all the participants are human. Thus, the game requires players to model speculative AI futures as they imagine both how AI might develop and through their performances model whether differences that make a difference will persist in separating human and machine intelligence.

Secondly, AI assimilation games such as “AI Pictionary” (2023) and “Hey Robot” (2019) reward players for producing sounds and images that best fit the ability of speech and visual recognition systems to register and decode. Although computer speech and visual recognition systems are not per se artificial intelligence, the games themselves frame them as such and thus invite players to engage with and imagine them as AI. As Oren Soffer argues, speech recognition programs do not recognize human voices so much as they discipline human bodies to produce sounds that computers can convert into binary code. Thus, AI assimilation games playfully engage people in developing behaviors compatible with an AI future that requires human inputs to conform to machine parameters. Finally, narrative and strategy AI games such as “AI Space Puzzle” (2023), “Robot Rising” (2021) and “NeuroPunk: Artificial Intelligence” (2019) invite players to co-construct speculative futures in which AI systems may act as helpers, saviors, or sadistic overlords.

Such games guide players through imagining future scenarios wherein AI systems have become pervasive and profoundly powerful then allow players to decide how to navigate these social, cultural, and moral contingencies. Thus, because board games simplify AI into flat components and scenarios, they enable players to experiment with various elements of possible AI futures, one at a time. From the question, “what is a human?” to “will AI change humans?” to “will AI develop morality?” board games function as a medium for communicating and engaging in the imagination of AI futures.

Archiving the experience of an MMORPG: Future challenges in preserving online worlds and their communities

Sarah Ambec

MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games) are persistent virtual worlds where gameplay emerges through player interactions and evolving digital environments. Unlike traditional games, they present a unique archival challenge: how can we preserve an experience that is not merely software-based but deeply rooted in social dynamics and continuous transformation?

A compelling example is New World, launched in 2021 by Amazon Games. Beyond its code, New World functions as a dynamic social space where updates and player-driven strategies continuously reshape the game. The concept of „metagaming“—where players reinterpret mechanics to optimize their performance—illustrates this fluidity. With each territorial war or temporary event, communities form, organize, and dissolve, leaving behind traces that are inherently ephemeral and difficult to document.

Archiving MMORPGs requires more than storing files and capturing screenshots. It demands the inclusion of participatory databases, recorded play sessions, and community discussions where strategies and experiences are exchanged. However, these archival efforts are precarious, often reliant on player contributions and external platforms with no long-term preservation guarantees.This research goes beyond methodological concerns to address the broader purpose of archiving online video games. What should be preserved, and by whom? How should institutional efforts interact with community-driven initiatives? The stakes are high: the disappearance of an MMORPG is not just a technical shutdown but the loss of an entire gameplay ecosystem, a digital community, and a significant part of gaming culture.

Gaming for a sustainable future: Exploring the role of ecogames and gamevironments

Gaia Amadori

In an age where deep mediatization converges with the pressing realities of the climate crisis, digital games are emerging as tools to drive awareness and inspire action. Their widespread popularity—52% of the EU population aged 6 to 64 regularly plays video games (ISFE & EGDF, 2022) —and their unique interactive and simulative properties (Chang, 2019) position them as potential transformative platforms capable of shaping how we understand and respond to ecological challenges.

Over the past decade, numerous stakeholders from academia, research institutions, governments, and industry actively engaged in developing digital games addressing environmental issues, particularly those aligned with the UN's Agenda 2030 and the European Green Deal. A prominent example is the Playing for Planet Alliance (2019), an initiative facilitated by UNEP, through which gaming companies commit to measurable sustainability goals, ranging from reducing carbon emissions to embedding green practices within game design and distribution processes.

This growing sensitivity is reflected also within media studies, resulting in the emergence of a new analytical category: „ecogames". These games either minimize their ecological footprint through sustainable production, distribution, and gameplay practices (Abraham, 2022), and/or explicitly promote sustainability-oriented attitudes and behaviors among users (Beke, Raessens & Werning, 2024).

This contribution deepens the role of gamevironments (Radde-Antweiler, 2018; Schwarzenegger et al., 2025) in addressing sustainability challenges through ecogames. In this regard, gamevironments can be understood as gaming-related communicative figurations (Hepp & Hasebrink, 2018), that engage diverse actors across different domains – developers, publishers, streamers, and players, as well as institutions or enterprises – to develop „green activations" (Beke, Raessens & Werning, 2024) based on digital games.

The study focuses on a specific institutional campaign in Venice, a city grappling with urgent environmental challenges, where developers built an interactive map of the lagoon in Minecraft to promote sustainable development. Via semi-structured interviews with developers and project leaders, combined with game analysis using the Design, Dynamics, Experience (DDE) framework (Walk et al., 2017), the study investigates how sustainability is represented and integrated into the gameplay according to specific frames of relevance and communicative practices. Furthermore, it explores how various stakeholders contributed resources, material and immaterial, guided by distinct agendas and interests—processes that often required negotiation and adaptation.Ultimately, this paper proposes a holistic non-media-centric approach (Schwarzenegger et al., 2025) to explore digital gaming's potential for raising environmental awareness. The findings highlight both opportunities and challenges involved in designing and deploying ecogames, particularly regarding the synergies and tensions emerging between different game-related figurations. By highlighting the situated nature of game production and player experiences, this study moves beyond a software-centric perspective to critically examine the role of gamevironments in addressing current and future sustainability challenges.

Video games for change in times of deep social and technological transformations: Positive visions of the future

Xenia Zeiler

In video game research and development, the labels ‘serious games’ and ‘educational games’ have been widely used and contested at the same time. While we see a rising number of NGOs, educators, activists, cultural institutions, museums and more successfully commissioning, (co-)developing and using games (at times, but not always labeling them as serious or educational) to create awareness for certain themes, it is equally true that it is challenging to collect reliable data on the actual direct learning outcomes of such games. From researchers’ perspectives, the main points of critique are that we lack methods to measure the precise learning curve and/or outcome and that it is uncertain if these games create any real-world change.

Nevertheless, formats such as “Games for Change” (https://www.gamesforchange.org/) and many more similar initiatives, events and campaigns attest to a vivid use of video games as tools to challenge social, political, religious and more perspectives, narratives and fake news and to foster reflection, awareness and sensitivity for certain pressing topics. The thematic fields which are, often critically, taken up in serious and educational games are vast and cover basically any topic with timely interest in society. They include but are not limited to political (refugees, migrations), nature environment (climate change, sustainability) and cultural (cultural heritage education, museum and the GLAM sector exhibitions) themes. Discussing video games as socially conscious media, this talk asks (1) if and how games, as media that move beyond entertainment only and/or as media for entertainment with specific intentions, can support shaping future civic engagement campaigns and overall, (2) if and how games might be a factor in social change.

So far, it seems to be a clear long-term trend that in the currently rapidly transforming technological and societal settings all around the globe, video games, video gaming and public discussions and debates arising from them can contribute to highlighting, questioning and reframing narratives and possibly even structures. Focusing on examples from Asia, this talk discusses how video games can fruitfully contribute to challenging societal narratives, provide ethical arguments and thus facilitate and support awareness that may lead to actual social impact. Grounded in experiences of past initiatives and impact campaigns that collaborated with relevant actors, partnered with NGOs or grassroots activists and involved community building in their background (for example by involving local artists), this talk suggests a positive vision for the future of video games for a cause. New technological developments (including but not limited to AI) and growing public acceptance of the fact that games can be powerful tools to support awareness creation and education will continue to support this.

"If only" from enjoyful games to effective work: Exploring the managerial expectations of immersive virtual reality technology within organizational practice

Javzmaa Jadamba

The emergence of cutting-edge technology, such as immersive virtual reality (VR), is bringing forth groundbreaking opportunities within the industry (Raji et al., 2024; Baceviciute et al., 2022; Rubio-Tamayo et al., 2017). Notably, recent developments such as Meta's (formerly Facebook) launch of its new Oculus version and Apple's introduction of Vision Pro are contributing to the growing mainstream adoption of virtual reality technology (Karunkar Morrison, 2024). This study looks into how managers foresee the conceptualization, motivation, and practicality of immersive VR technology in everyday working environments. Previous studies in the interdisciplinary fields of information science, management science, game studies, and communication have explored the utilization of virtual reality in gaming, marketing, medicine, retail shopping, and the entertainment industry (Koohang et al., 2023; Wedel et al., 2020; Parekh et al., 2020).

However, limited studies have been done on how managers in the industry foresee the utilization of immersive VR technology as a communicative practice within their organizational communication.This study applied three sensemaking principles in an organizational setting to explore the expectations surrounding immersive VR adaptation in organizations (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Sensemaking involves how managers perceive, interpret, and create meaning for themselves in response to information about strategic change (Rouleau, 2005). It encompasses the processes through which individuals construct their understanding (Weick 1995). Current research on sensemaking focuses on three intertwined processes: noticing cues, making interpretations, and taking action (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014).

Guided by these theoretical principles, we formulated two research questions:

1) How do managers perceive, interpret, and engage with immersive VR in the context of organizational practice?

2) How do sensemaking principles shape the practices and discourse among managers in organizational communication?

To address these questions, we conducted interviews with 40 managers from various industries between June and October 2023. We utilized a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012) to examine the interviews and discovered three key themes related to how organizational communication practices make sense of immersive VR adaptation. Firstly, managers view immersive VR technology as a gamified concept, drawing connections to video games and VR movies. Secondly, managers interpret the technology by considering potential outcomes within their organizational practices, such as the ability to enhance organizational communication, virtual presence, and customer experience. Lastly, managers discuss potential actions by contemplating the reality distortion, cost, and efficiency of adopting the technology.

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Panel

Artifacts and Futures: Mapping, Narrating, and Designing Socio Digital Imaginaries

Chair: Paola Lopez

Worldviews in 20 years - Maps between platform capitalism and civil society criticism

Peter Gentzel

What does the world look like? Who owns the internet? What is really happening in Ukraine? What is the fastest way to get to my destination? People use and produce maps to answer these questions. The variety of these maps is enormous: some are constructed by civil society actors, highlight ecological, social, and economic injustices, serve to circumvent state censorship and propaganda, or are themselves socio-technical actors in design and planning processes; Others are part of everyday media use, are generated recursively and automatically, and serve economic and political interests (e.g., most recently Google and D. Trump's "Gulf of America").

The aim of this presentation is to conceptualize maps as an object of communication science research. The argumentation proceeds in two steps: First, the diversity of digital maps is outlined and a typology is developed. Second, with a view to communication science emergence research (Hepp 2025), observations on the social figuration and communicative imagination of OpenStreetMap, probably the largest non-commercial map provider worldwide, are presented. The focus is on conflicts and challenges in map production between local, civil society, and institutionalized commercial actors.

Maps present georeferenced information, the selection of which is linked to power relations. The expansion of the geoweb (georeferenced data from GPS, GIS, and commercial Internet) has led to the emergence of recursively and automatically generated maps (apps) that can be individually created and edited. Some of these digital maps are produced by big tech companies such as Google and Apple, while others, such as OpenStreetMap (OSM), rely on civil society volunteered geographic information (VGI) and open data, and praise "localness" as a quality feature. This results in a tension between democratization, openness, and pluralization of spatial knowledge on the one hand, and fragmentation, homogenization, and narrowing on the other. For example, Google Maps is a product of surveillance capitalism that is automatically generated recursively by user activity and privileges commercial and economic spatial information. In addition, there is a range of maps created as part of "crowd mapping," "collaborative mapping," or "counter mapping" projects. Examples include OpenStreetMap (launched in 2004) and maps that highlight inequalities in the digital economy, locate alternative uses of space in large cities, or help organize political protests (kollektiv orangotango 2018, p. 73ff.). The latter locate unequal power and ownership relations, ecological imbalances, or acts of violence spatially in order to initiate "conversations about digital colonialism and the role of technologies in the debates about climate and socio-environmental justice" (Coding Rights n.d.). Other maps are created to develop informal settlements and improve the living conditions of underprivileged population groups (e.g., participatory slum upgrading, unhabitat n.d.).

In the second part, with a view to the future, the communicative framing and socio-technical imagination of OSM as well as the recently changing figuration of production are explored. On the one hand, OSM stands for open data, VGI, collaborative mapping, and "localness" as quality characteristics and democratic values in map production. On the other hand, recent developments show an increase in data creation by commercial actors who are sometimes not interested in locally anchored mapping practices or in pluralistic geographical information that is significant for local communities. Against this backdrop, the increasing importance of (partially) automated mapping technologies (e.g., "Map with AI" from Meta/Facebook) is critically reflected upon.

Building digital tools, imagining digital futures - A media ethnographic analysis of the development process of two software tools

Julie Lüpkes, Anne Schmitz

Technological developments and societal transformation are closely intertwined – this is evident in examples such as journalism or education, where “new” media technologies are both an expression and a driver of profound media change, as has become clear in recent years with the emergence of communicative AI (Hepp et al. 2022). For a long time, however, research in this area has primarily taken a technologically deterministic perspective on technologies, analyzing tool “X” in terms of its impact on different areas. Such technologically deterministic approaches assume a simple cause-and-effect relationship. It is suggested that new technologies are developed suddenly and independently as external drivers and descend on society “from outside.” Although such approaches have been criticized for years (cf. Appelgren, 2023, p. 672; Decuypere & Lewis, 2023, p. 24), they are still present in media and communication science discourse today – currently particularly pronounced with regard to the “influence” of AI systems (cf. Löffelholz & Sarısakaloğlu, 2022, p. 25; Renz, 2021). Only gradually are more nuanced perspectives gaining importance. In our contribution, we therefore want to look at technology development as a socio-technological process involving multiple human and non-human actors. We also argue that during development, i.e., even before technology is established, socio-technical imaginaries, or “collectively held, institutionally stabilized, and publicly performed visions of desirable futures” (Jasanoff, 2015, p. 4), become inscribed in the technology and recognizable within it.

The central research question is therefore: Which imaginaries of digital futures are already recognizable in the tool development process? What limits their implementation?Using media ethnography, the development process of two software tools was accompanied for eight months each. The first tool (“Smooth Operator”) serves as an extended editorial system in science journalism. The second tool (“KorrekturKumpel”) functions as an AI-supported correction tool in the field of secondary school education. The data material comprises field notes from participant observations in various constellations of actors in the development process, photos and videos, interviews with the actors involved, and comprehensive document and software analysis. This was then evaluated using grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1999). Our findings show that the automation of journalistic and educational practices and processes is a key vision for the future in both tools. The aim of each technology is to support journalists and teachers and improve journalism and education. For example, Smooth Operator aims to facilitate work processes through automated tagging suggestions or to promote more modular, searchable, and filterable formats, thereby contributing to an understanding of journalistic content as structured data. KorrekturKumpel, on the other hand, aims to promote systemic change by relieving teachers through its tool, focusing on a (digital) change in exam culture and the fairness of an assessment process optimized by supposedly more objective AI. However, it is clear that the implementation of these imaginaries is limited by, among other things, resource scarcity, established practices, infrastructures, and the logic of the respective context. In both cases, technical aspects such as algorithmic predispositions and social resistance limited the implementation of these imaginaries. Imaginaries of the digital future are thus already present in technology development processes, pointing to new possibilities for media change.

From metahistory to metafuture: What current narratives about the past tell us about the future

Hans-Ulrich Wagner

The starting point is Hayden White's historical theory concept, which has recently attracted a great deal of attention again. According to his approach, "metahistory" is devoted to the narratives behind the circumstances that have been found, given, and handed down—the "emplotment," as White calls it, i.e., the specific meaning assigned to the narrated past at any given time.

Starting from the call, where narratives about the past are linked to ideas about the future, one can go further and ask: Does such "emplotment" say something not only about the present, but also about an imagined future, about expectations and fears, about a possibly evangelically longed-for media society or about an apocalyptically conjured dystopian data world?The lecture asks about such a "metafuture." To this end, it analyzes a sample of recent studies in media and communication history in order to read them in terms of narrative structures relating to the future. In doing so, it examines whether and in what form the "generic plots" developed by Northrop Frye and used by Hayden White—romance, tragedy, comedy, satire—are identifiable.

Programmed futures: Revisiting the promise of education and the reproduction of social inequality

Annekatrin Bock, Dan Verständig

The design of data-driven technologies is always linked to the creation of affective, political, and socio-technical relationships (Light & Akama, 2014) that influence future developments. This raises questions about who has the right, resources, and influence to shape possible futures. Companies and public authorities are playing an increasingly important role in this, as the complex algorithmic systems involved not only support transformation processes, but are also constitutive for objectivity and potential freedom of action for individuals, while at the same time reproducing social inequalities via data and their infrastructures (Eubanks, 2018). This creates a tension between the promises of potential improvements and actual distortions in the shaping of futures.

The presentation addresses this complexity in two ways: On the one hand, the concept of the future is placed in a theoretical and conceptual context in relation to learning and education. Here, the logic of calculation (Verstandig and Stricker, 2022) proves to be fundamentally paradoxical: it promises certainty, yet reproduces uncertainty. This is an algorithmic uncertainty that not only models futures, but also questions them. The examination of certainty and uncertainty (Verstandig, 2023) is located at the breaking points of contingent experiences (Biesta, 2016) and the promise of education (Schäfer, 2013). These breaking points are made visible through language and technologies, as uncertainties are already embedded in technological designs (Soon and Velasco, 2024). Thus, imaginations of technologies always give rise to moments of uncertainty (Ahlborn and Verständig, 2024), which perpetuate and reinforce power asymmetries. On the other hand, considerations about shaping the “future” have so far hardly reflected the fact that there cannot be ‘one’ future, let alone one that is “best for everyone” (Bock et al., 2024). Furthermore, talking about the past implies that there is a “course of history” that can be clearly identified, analyzed, and used for predictions. On the other hand, considerations regarding the shaping of the “future” have so far hardly reflected the fact that there cannot be ‘one’ future, let alone one that is “best for everyone” (Bock et al., 2024). Furthermore, talking about the past implies that there is a “course of history” that can be clearly identified, analyzed, and used for predictions. However, this idea obscures the fact that history is contingent, ambiguous, and constructed (Ahlrichs and Macgilchrist, 2017).

Through retrospective analysis, the past is imagined as the key to possible futures. This is evident in the question of what we can learn from “the” past in order to be “better” prepared for ‘the’ future. We would like to critically reflect on three aspects of this linguistic image in this article: 1) questioning the imperative of “the past” in reference to memory studies; 2) drawing on future studies, emphasize the plurality of “future” (Danaher, 2021; Facer and Sandford, 2010); 3) drawing on inequality studies, challenge the ambiguity of situated opportunities and risks in debates on technology (Rafalow, 2020).

If we apply these three aspects to media discourse, technologies, and practices, particularly AI, the significance of current and future developments in computational logic (Sudmann et al., 2023) becomes clear, because learning takes place under the pluralizing tendencies of biased data, which in turn affect algorithmic systems in their entirety and thus also predict biased futures (Macgilchrist et al., 2024). The article thus also provides impetus for how future predictions can nevertheless be derived methodically and methodologically on the basis of the present.

Panel

Digital Publics in Transition: Political Participation, Social Platforms, and AI-Mediated Communication

Chair: Stephanie Geise

From gaming to government: Twitch as a new platform for political discourse in Germany

Maria F. Grub, Antonia M. Wurm, Julian Kauk

The growing support for populist parties among young voters raises the question of where and how young people, especially young men, receive political content. Supposedly apolitical platforms such as the streaming platform Twitch, which attracts a large audience primarily in the gaming community, are largely neglected in both public and academic discourse when it comes to political communication. With its wide reach, Twitch is increasingly being used to target young audiences, as was evident in the last German federal election campaign when the well-known gaming streamer handofblood interviewed Robert Habeck.

Streamers combine political content with gaming to spark debate and mobilize young audiences (Foxman et al., 2023). While audiences rarely visit Twitch as a source of political news, they can receive news incidentally, as is already known from the social media context, see incidental news exposure (INE). INE occurs when individuals encounter news content while engaging with non-news-related content online (Tewksbury et al., 2001). Political content on Twitch is often emotionalized and simplified, which can facilitate the spread of disinformation (Foxman et al., 2023). While Twitch users are more likely to participate in right-wing protests (Boulianne & Lee, 2022), discussions on topics such as climate change show less polarization than on platforms such as X (Navarro & Tapiador, 2023). This project is scheduled to run for one year (starting in April 2025). The aim is to identify and analyze political content on Twitch. A quantitative and a qualitative work package will be implemented. Initial results from both work packages will be presented.

In the quantitative work package, the Open Access Helix API (Application Interface Wrapper) from Twitch is used to analyze the streams of the 10 most influential German-speaking male and female gaming streamers (N = 20). Using computer-assisted methods, including the use of large language models (LLMs) and transformer models such as GPT, the content of the streams is analyzed for political content. We expect to identify political content in streams from producers who see themselves as non-political content creators. In addition, we will examine the differences between male and female streamers in terms of content, political orientation, and sentiment. Further analyses will address populist messages and disinformation, as well as real-time interactions between streamers and viewers. In the qualitative work package, gaming streamers (N = 15) will be interviewed about their self-image as political opinion leaders. This will be combined with qualitative participant observation of Twitch streams and interviews with users (N = 20) about their perception of political content, its influence on the platform, and their own usage behavior.

Our exploratory analysis provides insight into the consumption of political news on supposedly apolitical platforms. It classifies the role streamers could play as political opinion leaders in the future—and thus the power gaming has in the political arena.

New visibilities, new forms of protest? Social media, visual communication, and the transformation of political participation

Johanna Raphaela Wahl, Martina Schiebel

Digital media are restructuring public space by reconfiguring its access points and modes of operation, thereby fundamentally changing the conditions for social interaction, communication, and visibility. Digital platforms, social networks, and algorithmic systems regulate which content is visible and how participation is structured. This transformation of public space and forms of communication is also changing the premises of political action.

Activists and protest groups are increasingly reliant on digital visual media to generate attention, mobilize networks, and make political demands visible. The hybrid nature of the public sphere makes it possible to perceive, share, and discuss protests audiovisually, regardless of physical presence (cf. Luhtakallio & Meriluoto 2022). At the same time, digital development is also shaping the physical protest space: existing forms of activism are changing, while new forms of protest are emerging that are oriented toward digital staging logics.

These dynamics raise key questions about the future of political public life: What political opportunities are opening up or closing down in the wake of mediatization and datafication? How will platform-specific and algorithmic structures shape future forms of collective action?

The DFG research project “Generations in Protest,” led by PD Dr. Martina Schiebel, addresses these questions by examining civil society, protest-oriented engagement of different political stripes in Germany from a biographical and intergenerational perspective and inquiring into the significance of current media discourses. The lecture aims to shed light on the role of new media visibility and increased image-based action in the digital space for social participation and to draw conclusions about future developments.

Digital visual forms of protest can be understood as “communicative action” (Knoblauch 2017, 75 ff.), which structures both the process of self-positioning within the protest movement and its collective identity formation. Individual digital self-presentation shapes the collective representation of the identity of protest movements, while conversely, shared visual worlds can also determine the self-image of those involved. The production of difference and collectivity thus takes place simultaneously (Stalder 2016: 141). At the same time, these media-mediated dynamics also have an impact on physical space.

To investigate these developments, a mixed-methods approach is pursued that combines computer-assisted methods of image clustering with image hermeneutic analyses and narrative-biographical interviews. Typical protest images are identified and linked to data such as likes, comments, and shares in order to capture visual patterns of communicative action. In addition to examining digital forms of protest, narrative-biographical and image-based interviews capture the perspectives of those involved. They make it possible to understand the individual and social significance of visual media for political engagement and to trace long-term developments.By combining computer-assisted analyses with biographical perspectives, a comprehensive approach emerges that not only captures current protest dynamics but also reflects on future challenges facing a mediatized society. The combination of quantitative and qualitative methods makes it possible to examine political publics and reveal new forms of collective action. In this way, the analysis contributes to the social and media science debate on digital spaces of the future.

"Like IRL": Real-life interaction order in social virtual reality

Udo Göttlich, Felix Krell

Interaction theories in communication studies and sociology deal with social situations involving physical co-presence, in which reciprocal relationships arise between people who perceive each other and communicate with each other in specific situations. Shared spatiotemporal proximity gives rise to the need for social actors to negotiate their shared situations and social roles with each other. On the one hand, sociology treats physical co-presence as constitutive for full proximity and community; on the other hand, it is aware that the "naked" (Goffman 1963:15) face-to-face encounter presents itself differently. This development, as well as the question of the context of social interaction, will become more acute in the future (Hepp 2019, Ollinaho 2018).

Against this backdrop, interaction-theoretical studies of online communities (both sociological and communication science-based) find themselves in an uncertain position as to how future online communities should be understood and described in terms of interaction relationships. This involves questions of co-present everyday life on the internet, but also the shared experience of physicality, spatiality, and temporality. Interaction theory "updates" to capture the new situation have so far focused their attention on information exchange (Meyrowitz 1987), responsiveness (Knorr-Cetina 2009), the use of everyday technologies (Pinch 2010), affects (Seyfert 2011), as well as the experience of temporality (Sheredos & Hardesty 2019, Lindemann & Schünemann 2020), or the intensity of shared situations (& Wettmann 2023).

Although this allows us to connect with interaction-theoretical positions for explaining medially mediated interactions, their form is only vaguely reminiscent of co-present encounters. Action strategies (e.g., gestures and physical expression) and interaction orders (e.g., personal space, proxemics), which people usually negotiate on the basis of shared proximity, are either absent or appear in a greatly altered form. In this context, social VR represents a threshold phenomenon in which an interaction-theoretical approach in the narrow sense remains possible (or becomes permissible again). From a phenomenological perspective, VR body measurement technology and head-mounted displays immerse users in a state of "physical bilocation" (Beaufils & Berland) between virtual worlds and physical space. Among long-term users of social VR platforms such as VRChat, this can be observed in hybridization processes, within which users become capable of acting and interacting in virtual environments through a reconfigured sense of body and space (Waligórski 2024).

Since long-term users of social VR assign physical and spatial significance to avatars and virtual worlds, online interaction orders "there" are oriented toward real-world environments in the narrowest sense. A shrug of the shoulders, a roll of the eyes, or the spatial arrangement of the body are given meaning again through experience-based sensitization to the expressive repertoire of hybrid bodies. Digital elements are incorporated into real-world-like interaction orders, enabling shared situations of co-present avatar bodies and requiring social negotiation (Bailenson & Beall 2006). This presentation addresses current developments, limitations, and new perspectives of social co-presence in existing social VR communities with regard to the emerging issue of social interaction on the internet. Against this backdrop, it examines the future development and significance of interactive relationships in online communities and everyday life. The sociological and communication science treatment of new forms of social action on the Internet is essential for understanding mediatized societies.

Towards an ambivalent future of communication. Dynamics of AI, technocultural imaginaries and critical transformations.

Thomas Steinmaurer

Current developments in artificial intelligence are currently experiencing a hype and, from many perspectives, appear to be highly ambivalent developments. There are developments that, in the context of mediatization research, should not only be described in terms of technophenomenology, but also critically analyzed in a social context. Against this backdrop, it is worth taking a look at the narratives of technocultures underlying these developments and questioning their influence on currently dominant ideologies of innovation. For, in continuation of the “California Ideology” (Barbrook/Cameron), techno-libertarian models are gaining ground, not least through AI innovations, which have pushed the liberalization tendencies initially associated with the internet into the background. Thus, we are observing a profound individualization of digital applications and a now far-reaching economization of sociality, which has been enforced in particular by dominant platforms. This raises structural dimensions that, at first glance, do not seem to fit with the theoretical concept of social constructivist mediatization research. However, it is precisely the far-reaching effects on individuals and society that can be anticipated from current AI dynamics that make it necessary to broaden the analytical perspective and critically examine the connection between meta-developments and levels of individual action practices.

Panel

Past Feelings and Future Memories: Digital Archives, Affective Technologies, and the Politics of Remembering

Chair: Christian Schwarzenegger

The future feels digital: Sociotechnical imaginaries in the museum

Nancy Salem

In the past years, governments in the UK, Brazil, United Arab Emirates, Germany, and Singapore have invested significant sums in establishing national 'Museums of the Future' that are topically focused on the effects of climate change, emerging (digital) technologies, and global inequalities. In the wake of environmental and health emergencies, a rise in populist politics, and economic crises, there are calls from across the political spectrum to imagine alternative, less pessimistic futures. Museums of the Future claim to offer visions and routes to such desirable futures.

Through ethnographic fieldwork at two museums in Germany, the Futurium in Berlin and the Zukunftsmuseum in Nuremberg, I describe how these museums (re)produce and (re)perform socio-technical imaginaries – visions of the world made possible by, and supportive of, science and technology (Jasanoff and Kim 2015). I illustrate how sociotechnical imaginaries circulating in Germany around crisis, technological possibility, and public attitudes (Bareis and Katzenbach, 2022, Meyer, 2019, Burri, 2015) are reproduced through the institutionally, materially specific form of the museum and its relationship to the state and society. Through highly affective, interactive programming, the museums suggest that publics should modify their attitudes and behaviour to become 'future-ready' thus engendering modes of subjectivation to that sociotechnical imaginary. Through engaging with the work of Lauren Berlant, I respond to Hughes' call (2024) for more comprehensive attention to affect driving the normative work of sociotechnical imaginaries (2020). Indeed, writing several years after introducing the concept, Jasanoff has similarly observed that analyses using the concept tend to pay less attention to the affective use of desire, hope and fear to drive the normative work of imaginaries (Pickersgill and Jasanoff, 2018). Ultimately, I locate Museums of the Future as important sites of coproduction through their projection of a promissory technological futures (Jasanoff, 2004).

Tamagotchis, NFTs, and deep nostalgia: Thinking towards the future of mediated remembering and forgetting

Christine Lohmeier, Rieke Böhling

In the film Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (2004), the main male character undergoes a procedure to erase memories of his ex-girlfriend, attempting to delete her from his life. But as his memories fade, he resists, realizing that even painful experiences shape who we are. The film explores a question that is becoming increasingly urgent: what happens when forgetting is no longer entirely in human hands?

Memory objects have long been central to human remembrance, acting as external anchors that help individuals and societies retain and reconstruct the past. However, in contemporary digital environments, this relationship is shifting: memory objects are increasingly prescribing what and how we remember. And they are designed to remember their users. Research has examined the selection, curation, and storage of memory objects (Garde-Hansen 2011), as well as the role of algorithms and non-human agents in determining what is remembered or forgotten (Makhortykh 2021, 2024). Search functions and AI-driven personalization have become essential tools for accessing past materials, while the sheer volume of digital memory objects—especially on social media—creates a paradox: they are easy to store and manipulate, yet elusive and difficult to retrieve. Consequently, tech companies provide algorithmic solutions to curate and even enhance memories, such as clustering images in smartphone galleries or animating old photographs with AI.

Memory objects have often been considered temporal constants, carrying personal and collective histories through time. However, they are inherently unstable—subject to technological innovation, reinterpretation, and even erasure. The transformation of memory objects goes beyond mere preservation: actors in digital memory environments engage in processes of reinterpreting, augmenting, and reanimating past materials (Kopelman & Frosh 2023). To illustrate these shifts, we examine three case studies:

1. Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs), such as Organic Growth: Crystal Reef, which change dynamically depending on the digital wallets they inhabit, demonstrating how digital memory objects adapt to their environments.

2. Tamagotchis, whose evolution depends on user interaction, illustrating memory as a co-constructed process between humans and digital objects.

3. AI-driven memory technologies, including MyHeritage's DeepNostalgia, which animate images of deceased relatives, allowing them to „tell their stories" posthumously, displaying how such tools enable entirely new practices of remembering.

Given the role memory objects play in remembering and as they gain agency, we must also ask: how will forgetting work in an age where memories are retained, curated, and resurfaced by non-human agents? Can we „erase" digital traces, or will our pasts be perpetually resurfaced by algorithms designed to remember us? If machines and AI companions hold memories of interactions, will individuals be able to walk away from relationships, traumas, or histories? By exploring these developments, this presentation seeks to reconceptualize memory objects as evolving and interactive entities. In doing so, we emphasize the delicate balance between remembering and forgetting, between controlling one's own past and being remembered by technologies in the future.

What happened to keeping everything?

Susan Aasman

In 2009, a book called “Total recall” was published by Gordon Bell and Jimmy Gemmell, two employees of Micrososft about their experience with the “MyLifeBits project”. This project started in 2001 within the US-based Microsoft Research group and aimed to develop and explore the positive impact of software that allowed “life time storage” including search strategies to trace back those instances. The authors bravely signaled that the book contains “a glimpse of the near future”, and “a transformation in the way humans think about the meaning of their lives”.

Media technologies have always been as much about the past as the future. As potential memory machines, they have hold these promises of keeping moments safe for future use. With every new technology, new devices were developed for consumers which found their way in everyday life, with time and again new pledges about the future-proof storage capacities. The shift to the digital has continued this discourse, albeit to the next level. Since the nineties, computers, floppy discs, CD-ROMs, memory sticks and cloud technologies have offered ever-expanding storage space. Eventually, the recording and storage capacity of personal devices as the smartphone made saving personal memories the default. In this presentation, I will revisit this fascinating, technologically driven, futuristic project that has a rich historical genealogy, varying from early 19th-century photography to the early 20th-century invention of home movies to mid-20th-century Vannevar Bush’s Memex vision to 21st-century Google Glass. What is left of the utopian vision of keeping everything, considering its critical reception ranging from privacy issues, memory overload and more recent worries about the ecological impact of unlimited data storage?

The algorithmic archive: AI, media archeology, and the future of cultural memory

Devina Srivastava

As digital technologies evolve, the ways we document, interpret, and remember history are changing. This paper explores how media archeology and emerging technologies intersect to shape future narratives of the past. It asks: How do algorithmic systems influence what societies remember and forget? How will the digital traces of today shape cultural memory decades from now?

Building on media archeology, we examine how past media formats—from newspapers and radio to digital archives—have structured historical narratives. We then explore how algorithmic curation and AI-driven media production are altering these processes. The algorithmic gaze determines which histories are surfaced or buried in search engines and archives, while the rise of synthetic voices and AI-generated content raises questions about authenticity and authority in historical storytelling.

Rather than treating these developments as purely technological, this paper considers them within the broader context of futures literacy in media studies. How can researchers anticipate the long-term implications of automated media archives? What frameworks can help us critically engage with emerging challenges, from digital erasure to the politics of algorithmic preservation?By examining case studies of algorithmic curation, digital news archives, and speculative approaches to media futures, this paper contributes to discussions on the evolving relationship between technology, history, and collective memory. It invites scholars to reflect on their role in shaping a more inclusive and responsible vision of historical preservation in an era of rapid technological change.

Clouded histories, mediated futures: Digital obscura, the slave plantation, and data farms

Lauren S. Berliner, Kelli Moore

Building on José van Dijck's (2007) exploration of the epistemological, ontological, and pragmatic aspects of how we mediate and remediate memories, this talk addresses the overwhelming amount of digital media produced and shared between personal devices and centralized platforms. We focus on the proliferation of what Berliner (2024) terms the „digital obscura"—the phenomenon of amateur and personal media that is created and uploaded online but does not circulate widely, remaining in a digital limbo that is subject to the prerogatives of corporations who shape both the algorithms and the afterlife of these digital artefacts.

Digital obscura are contextualized by Moore's (2022) return to Jonathan Crary's (1990) work on the camera obscura through Loophole of Retreat, an art installation by Ellen Driscoll. The controversial installation rationalizes the experience of Harriet Jacobs (aka Linda Brent), an enslaved woman who famously hid away in a garret crawlspace for seven years to evade her enslavers, the Norcoms/Flints. The installation replicates the observational techniques of the camera obscura while also referring back to Jacob's freedom narrative and the importance of social context to our analysis. We link the previously dominant form of human vision to digital obscura's impact on perspective and memory.

Digital obscura confirms a world in which dead media like the camera obscura have long been eclipsed as authenticating devices. Revisiting and rearticulating Crary's analytic anew recalls the break from classical vision and allows the digital obscura to surface collisions and connections between obscure and dead media, art and science, and contemporary modes of opinion and knowledge formation in an era of increased media corporate ownership and expansive monetization. Social media platforms make no promises, capriciously including, excluding, valuing and devaluing content.

As corporate mediation of personal media production continues to rise, alongside increasing global political forces that favor surveillance, censorship, and profit, we must consider the future of our personal and collective media. Looking back to earlier media history through the rigid lens of the camera obscura allows us to project forward an ongoing tension between visual technologies, truth, memory, and the archive.

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Panel

Platform Governance and the Futures of Regulation: Norms, Civil Society, and the Politics of Control

Chair: Christian Katzenbach

Beyond self-regulation: Civil society as the missing element in platform governance

Claire Stravato Emes

As we envision the next 20 years of digital society, media policy and governance stand as the architects of our collective digital future. The question before us is not merely technical but profoundly democratic: how do we ensure online spaces remain open, pluralistic, and accountable? Social media platforms have revolutionized public discourse by amplifying diverse voices, yet they have operated largely as sovereign entities with minimal external oversight (Gillespie, 2018). This era of platform self-governance—rooted in Silicon Valley's libertarian ethos—prioritized market expansion and technological innovation while relegating public interest concerns to the periphery (Allensworth, 2020). This regulatory approach enabled unprecedented innovation but simultaneously permitted platforms to engineer business models that aggressively monetize personal data at the expense of fundamental rights and societal wellbeing (Zuboff, 2019).

The European Union's Digital Services Act (DSA) represents a transformative reimagining of internet governance through its pioneering multi-stakeholder model that fundamentally challenges platform self-regulation (Turillazzi et al., 2023). At its core, the DSA architects a triangular power structure that deliberately distributes regulatory authority among state agencies, platform companies, and civil society organizations (Husovec, 2024). This innovative governance architecture integrates governmental oversight, corporate responsibility mechanisms, and civic participation to create a system of checks and balances. The triangular design aims explicitly to prevent regulatory capture by counterbalancing the influence of both state and commercial power (Husovec, 2024). Yet the DSA's success ultimately hinges on whether civil society's participation is a supporting pillar or a symbolic façade.

This study interrogates the DSA's architectural vision by examining the lived reality of civil society organizations attempting to exercise their designated governance role. We investigate the practical challenges, potential pathways, and emerging opportunities for CSOs seeking to influence platform governance decisions within this new regulatory framework.

Our methodological approach combines focus groups and semi-structured interviews with civil society actors to assess whether the DSA genuinely empowers civic participation. The focus group discussions will assemble approximately 15 representatives from diverse CSOs working across digital rights advocacy, freedom of expression, online harm prevention, and content moderator collectives. This deliberately pluralistic representation aims to map the evolving landscape of CSO engagement in DSA-mandated governance processes, identifying formal roles and informal influence mechanisms while cataloging the barriers constraining effective participation. Understanding the substantive impact of civil society's involvement is essential for determining whether the DSA truly represents an architectural breakthrough in platform governance.

As we look toward the next two decades of digital society, the effectiveness of governance frameworks like the DSA may determine whether our vision of a democratic digital public sphere becomes reality. This potential transformation depends on whether civil society's involvement evolves beyond tokenistic consultation to become a genuine counterweight in governance decisions. Ultimately, this research contributes to reimagining governance structures, redistributing decision-making power, and envisioning pathways toward a more equitable digital future.

Shaping collective user self-moderation; the role of social norms in platform regulation.

Nathalie Van Raemdonck, Trisha Meyer

Platforms and governments have traditionally been framed as the primary shaping forces in online content moderation (Gorwa, 2024; Gillespie, 2018; Kaye, 2019; Keller, 2021). Recently however a co-governance approach (Gorwa, 2019; Vermeulen, 2019) has been proposed to involve users more in content moderation policies and practices, also called 'cooperative responsibility' (Helberger et al. 2018), and platforms themselves are moving towards moderation methods that rely on the 'wisdom of crowds', such as the use of community notes on X or Meta's platforms, or hide behind user self-moderation, such as on Telegram. To envision a future of platform moderation that affords users a role in the governance of contentious content, it is imperative that we deepen our understanding of the underlying dynamics of such user self-governance.

In this regard, the connection between social norm mechanisms among users, which are fluid and informal but provide constraints nonetheless, and self-moderation practices (as described by Jhaver et al. 2023; Seering 2020; Matias 2019; or Kraut et al. 2011), is worthy of exploration, as these informal mechanisms significantly influence how user self-moderation unfolds. Quite specifically this paper asks how social norms shape the demarcations of what users decide is '(un)acceptable content' and in what way the architecture of the social media platform shapes these norm dynamics.

When societies decide on the norms of what constitutes contentious content, these demarcations are to a certain degree socially constructed through a 'conflictual consensus' (Mouffe, 2000) and hence subject to change. Based on previous research of one of the authors, we found that social norm contestation over this consensus is influenced by at least two affordances of social media platforms. Interventionability (the ability to enforce or contest a norm) when afforded by a platform can equalize agency of users to participate in this contestation. This can be positive in the form of increased democratization of content moderation, but also negative, when it treats all voices as equally authoritative. Further, external visibility (the possibility to give content visibility outside of its original context) when afforded to users can expose the contention to more people and bring users with stricter norms into discussion with those with less strict norms. This can be positive, as it breaks through echo chambers of disinformation or hate, but also negative, when it allows majority norms in society (e.g. white supremacy) to dominate 'safe spaces'.

In a context of increased use of user self-moderation, this paper explores how these two affordances influence social norm dynamics differently depending on the platform's architecture by analyzing the diverse cases of Telegram, Reddit, Instagram, X and Bluesky using the walkthrough method. From our analysis we draw insights into the tension field that arises for user moderation practices between on one hand maintaining flexible moderation that is responsive to shifting norms and on the other, preserving stable boundaries of moderation. Finally, we present recommendations for the increasing institutionalization of user self-moderation. The understanding of these platform-shaped social norm dynamics will be vital for a future of co-regulation on online content moderation.

Platform governmentality: At the boundaries of imaginable futures

Julian A. Morgan

This contribution develops the concept and argues for the study of platform governmentality as a means to account for the dynamism of the struggle to stabilise “platform governance” in relation to its historical trajectory, narrativisation, and the delineation of imaginable technological futures. Drawing from Foucault’s theory of governmentality, this theoretical contribution proposes a novel and analogous differentiation of particular knowledge-power complexes in the digital era: platform apparatuses. These apparatuses coordinate the epistemological horizons and the structural contradictions that enable platforms to sustain their economic and political imperatives by discursively constructing and constraining the conceivable trajectories of their governmentalisation.

Platform governance is often framed non-antagonistically, by policy-makers and platforms, through narratives of user freedom, legal proceduralism, and corporate due dilligence, concealing the power relations embedded in technologies of algorithmic architechtures and data commodification in which users are “subjectified”. By examining the systems in which platform apparatuses legitimise a particular kind of commercial governance — through juridical discourse, socio-technical imaginaries, infrastructural determinism, and historical motifs — this contribution argues that platforms actively govern not only the users caught in proprieteray regulatory paradigms (or commonly “content moderation”) but also the epistemic and hermeneutic conditions for the imagination of the future of technological innovation and governance. Along with their lobbying efforts, platforms actively craft and entrench narratives that normalise the epistemological horizons on which both the optimisation and legitimation of their apparatuses can unfold. By questioning the platform’s narrativisation of its apparatuses, the contribution seeks to situate platform governmentality as a field of intelligible power relations that determine the imaginative possibilities of digital futures. As the stabilisation of the hegemony of conceivable technological futures results from antagonistic struggles, the particular conditions of possibility of the articulations that legitimise the platform’s apparatuses can be made intelligible through Critical Discourse Analysis. This analysis considers the interplay between past and future narratives in the process of platform governmentalisation. How do historical discourses of corporate power, behavioral control, risk management, and State governmentality determine the genealogies on which possible futures can be articulated and imagined? Particularly in the European context.

Through this conceptual reflection, the contribution is situated among the ongoing debates on the socio-political stakes of platform governance and its implications for the imaginability of technological futures. It aims to provide a critical lens for the study of the relationship between the discursive, architectural, and epistemological conditions that shape the governmentalisation of platforms, emphasising the necessity of a framework designed to interrogate the power dynamics embedded in the boundaries of contestability of digital governance by corporations.

How to regulate future tech: The human data good practice

Elinor Carmi

In the past decade we have seen a substantial growth of exploitative practices by the adtech and AI industries. Some of these have led to high profile court cases to see whether they are even legal, such as the case of the activist Max Schrems and his decade-long case against Facebook/Meta's and creators suing ChatGPT for copyright infringement. Among the reasons these practices are possible is because tech companies objectify, dehumanize and decontextualize humans from the data they extract (Carmi, 2020; D'ignazio and Klein, 2020; Garcia et al., 2020). In turn, these industries make excuses built around the idea that "it's just data".

So far people working in the adtech and AI industries have managed to dehumanize data and make it appear abstract and lacking in context. In many respects these industries are conducting unregulated experiments on humans (Carmi 2021; Zuboff, 2015). These practices have been authorized and legitimized by the tech industry's promises to self-regulate themselves. This project aims to provide future practical solutions for industries that have acted unaccountable for, and unregulated so far.

The medical industry had its own reckoning moment after the atrocities of WW2, where horrible experiments were made on humans. The lessons of these harmful experiments made people realizing that these procedures need to be regulated. That resulted in the 1947 Nuremberg Code which pioneered the need for consent of participants and the protections of their rights. Following from that came the 1964 Helsinki Declaration which is a set of ethical principles regarding human experimentation developed by the World Medical Association.

In 1996, the International Conference for Harmonization of Technical Requirements for Registration of Pharmaceuticals for Human Use (ICH) issued Guidelines – The Good Clinical Practice (GCP). The GCP is an international ethical and scientific quality standard for clinical trials in all of its procedural stages: from the design, conduct, performance, monitoring, auditing, recording, analyzing and reporting (Vijayananthan and Nawawi, 2008).

Arguably, we are at a similar moment in time with the adtech and AI industries and the way they harm people and democracies across the world. However, so far these industries have avoided any repercussions thanks to inefficient voluntary self-governing instruments. Similar to the goals of GCP, the Human Data Good Practice (HDGP) aims to create an international ethical and scientific quality standard for designing, conducting, recording and reporting computational procedures that involve the data extracted from human subjects and their online behaviors.

Research Question: What can the tech industry (specifically adtech and AI) learn and unlearn from the human clinical trials standard GCP?

Methodology: I will be conducting semi-structured interviews with practitioners in human clinical research to identify the opportunities and challenges of their everyday practices. The first round of interviews were conducted in Autumn 2024 and the second round will be conducted in Summer 2025. The purpose behind the interviews is to translate the procedural pathways of human experiments and implement good clinical practice guidelines within the tech industry.

Shaping the future governance of information ecosystems: Insights from disinformation research and policy implementation

Flavia Durach

In recent years, scholars in media, communication and other relevant disciplines focused their efforts on clearly delineating the contribution of the media and information ecosystem to the troubles and challenges experienced by democratic societies. Both at the scholarly and policy levels, we note different interpretations of the role of mis/disinformation and the digital platforms in aggravating distrust, the fragility of legacy media, and other negative phenomena affecting the national public spheres. This diversity of perspectives led to the implementation of a diverse array of remedies and governance responses across the Globe.

By looking at the state-of-the art research in media, politics and trust, at the intersection with the cross-cutting theme of mis-/disinformation, we discuss how research insights from both the Global North and the Majority World can inform – and improve in the future – existing governance approaches of the information ecosystem. More specifically, we look at regulation, legal approaches and other measures to counter mis- and disinformation, with an emphasis on the challenges for defining and implementing these remedies.

The proposed discussion is based on the work of the Observatory of the Forum on Information and Democracy, which launched its first meta-analysis in January 2025. The report, co-authored by Flavia Durach, provides a critical assessment of the role of information ecosystems in the Global North and Global Majority World, focusing on their relationship with information integrity (the quality of public discourse), the fairness of political processes, the protection of media freedoms, and the resilience of public institutions. The conclusions of the report result from a meta-analysis of more than 1600 academic publications and scientific reports, selected among a total corpus of over +2700 resources aggregated.

Research indicates that countries across the Globe are at different stages of implementing legislation and enforcing regulations, and that research-based evidence of their effectivenessis uneven. Furthermore, legislation and regulation do not translate automatically into effective enforcement of measures for preventing or mitigating harms brought by information disorders. In this context, providing a thorough assessment of the scientific evidence is critical to: a). understand what is the nature of the problem (i.e. the contribution of information disorders to troubled democracies); b). what we know and do not know about the effectiveness of current governance approaches and mis-/disinformation countermeasures; c). how governance approaches of the information ecosystem can be improved in the future; d). what are the research priorities to fill in the gaps in knowledge and evidence.

Panel

Visions, Ideologies, and Ecologies: Reimagining Media Futures in the Age of AI and Data

Chair: Christian Schwarzenegger

Towards an ecology of planning media

Jens Schröter, Jan Groos

Given the multiple crises of our time and the apparent inability of current social, political, and economic modes of organisation to successfully address these crises, a renewed debate around democratic economic planning has emerged in recent years. It argues that democratic control over how society reproduces itself is a precondition for solving key challenges of our time. While this renewed planning debate had initially been sparked by the argument that advances in digital technologies, coupled with increases in processing power, would form the necessary technological basis for scalable postcapitalist planned economies, the debate's outlook has shifted in recent years. Now, many works focus on the political aspects involved in economic planning, accompanied by a growing thematic focus on ecological planning. Our presentation picks up on both of these strands and merges them from a media theoretical perspective. It argues that if we want to bring about alternative futures by democratising planning we will need an ecology of planning media to do so. On the one hand, the use of locally distributed technologies like mobile media, RFID-tagging and a variety of sensors that are embedded in our environments will be needed to collect the locally distributed information that the Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek saw forever out of reach of every conceivable planning mechanism. On the other hand, planning media will be needed in order for democratic planning to be democratic and not technocratic.

The democratic element not only presupposes ways of communicating complex information in a way that is understandable for a variety of different actors, but it also includes the need to develop planning media that allow everybody to meaningfully engage in processes of collective democratic planning.Such a call for the development of ecologies of planning media is, at the same time, a call for developing alternative cultures of experimentation around data production and simulation. If „Raw Data" is an Oxymoron (Gitelman, 2013) it follows that we need to engage with the role that the creation and interpretation of data plays within our societies. If we imagine our collective futures to be reliant on a multiplicity of data then the work of creating and interpreting data is an essential part of world-making that needs to be reflected. However, if we want to socialize data production as part of collective processes of democratic planning many questions pop up: Who decides over the variables that form the basis of a given algorithm? Who has the power to overrule certain data and why? What alternative ownership structures can be developed and how can they be governed? Questions like these are all the more important given the growing influence that tech-oligarchs assert on political discourse. To counter these influences we will need broader visions of transformational change, such as those formed around the democratic coordination and planning of our societies. Such a vision will, we argue, crucially depend on an ecology of planning media.

Controlling robots: Generative AI and the evolving sensemaking of the web

Stefan Baack

The competition among AI companies like OpenAI, Alphabet, or Meta to collect as much data as possible to train generative AI models has led to what Longpre et al. (2024) call a crisis of consent regarding web data accessibility. Decades-old technical standards for governing the automated collection of web data via crawlers are increasingly seen as inadequate because they place a significant burden on data owners and do not allow more nuanced forms of access management, which increasingly becomes unsustainable given the new challenges introduced by generative AI. As a result, new technical and non-technical approaches to govern crawlers are emerging that change the conditions under which applications and services relying on web data are developed. By extension, this will affect how we navigate and experience the "web," with implications for fields like research or journalism.

To date, both AI companies gathering training data and data owners governing access primarily rely on the robot.txt protocol, a loosely defined technical standard that manifested a handshake agreement: website owners allow crawlers (e.g. from search engines) to collect their data in exchange for visibility (Schellekens 2013). Most generative AI products, however, do not promise more visibility, which increases the desire of website owners to control automated data access. Yet robot.txt requires them to configure access for each crawler individually, a task that becomes increasingly difficult because it requires constant monitoring of an ever-growing number of crawlers employed by AI companies. Moreover, robot.txt can only grant full or no access with no further nuances. Faced with these shortcomings, website owners increasingly seek to govern crawlers via terms of use and exclusive licensing deals with AI companies, sometimes in ways that conflict with their robot.txt settings (Longpre et al. 2024). This creates uncertainties and makes developing applications and services relying on web data more difficult, including web archives or attempts to build new search indexes for alternative search engines.

To respond to these challenges, new technical standards to govern crawlers are being developed, as well as ways to embed licensing and consent information as metadata throughout the web.In this paper, I first discuss the state of web crawler accessibility based on my own empirical work on the web archive Common Crawl, as well as recent research literature (e.g. Longpre et al. 2024; Fletcher 2024). Next, I showcase emerging technical standards to govern crawlers and discuss their implications, e.g. by analyzing the discussion on the related mailing list of the Internet Engineering Task Force or at projects like ai.txt. The paper aims to demonstrate that research on communicative AI should pay close attention to the evolving conditions for AI development, as it has consequences for the transformation of social communication that go beyond changing dynamics caused by AI applications themselves.

Austro-Hungarian ideology: Deconstruction of californian ideology

Nikola Mlađenović

For Stewart Brand (1999:112) “the greatest futurist of the twentieth century” is Peter Drucker, the founder of modern management. For Brand’s associate Howard Rheingold (1985/2000:67) “the most influential thinker of the twentieth century” was John von Neumann, Hungarian polymath, whom Ray Kurzweil (2005:10) once described as “the legendary information theorist”. The editor of the Wired magazine Kevin Kelly (2008/1994:106) knew it was Friedrich von Hayek that got a Nobel prize for economics of information. Brand (1987:166) believed Fritz Machlup was also very influential in the area of information society.

The focus on countercultural molding of deep mediatization has neglected the fundamental role of the techno-cultural figuration of Austro-Hungarian academics positioned beyond Californian ideology. I argue that Austro-Hungarian neoliberal doctrine is a complex sociotechnical imaginary with its own set of myths, that are fundamental for Californian ideology itself.

1. Myth of ‚them‘. Myth of ‚us‘ implies a corporate narrative about freedom of the users, a “natural collectivity” (Couldry 2015). It is “based on business models of generating revenue from users’ data” (Hepp 2020:117). The myth of ‘them’ is based on the power-holders’ view of humans as merely behavioural systems (Schelling 1978), information processing insects (Simon 1996), cluster of gnats (Popper 1972), that could be “nudged” by paternalistic alterations and AI (Thaler & Sunstein 2008). Myth of ‘them’ replaces human agents with artificial simulations in computerized economic models.
2. Myth of knowledge. There is an assumed God-view behind colonial datafication (Couldry & Mejias 2019) or “perfect knowledge” (Zuboff 2019), the myth of big data’s deep insight into the human world (Hepp 2020:119). Actually, for neoliberals there is no Queen of knowledges (Drucker 1993, Hayek 1960), “so-called scientific knowledge” (Machlup 1980). Knowledge is understood as “what people think they know”, their desires, feelings and mental states, turned into data (Machlup 1980:150). Austro-Hungarians are not organizing knowledge (as big data or Wikipedia), but “organizing our ignorance” (Drucker 1996:28)
3. Myth of social automata. Instead of “total algorithmic control” (Couldry & Mejias 2018:346) and utopia of certainty (Zuboff 2019), there is no command economy of the digital automaton but persistent disequilibrium (Kelly 2008), chaos theory (Drucker 2004) or automata’s self-reproduction through random error (Neumann 1995). It is not technodeterminism, a mere automatic regulation of social interactions, a technical optimization of social order, but the introduction of disequilibrium that will be dealt by users themselves, through self-regulation and production of a new level of complexity. It is a question of cybernetic black and white box (Wiener 1948/1961).
4. Myth of the “singularity of economics” (Mises 1996:862). Economics as a branch of sociology that is applicable to all human behaviour (Mises 1996, Becker 1976), so that it provides analytical tools for everybody. Economics will determine the purpose of technological change and innovation because they are “economic events” (Drucker 1969:138). It is Nobel Economic Prize Winners that should explain datafication and digitalization. Deep mediatization is related to academic achievements in connected fields of economics, cybernetics and computer science. Singularity of economics is its “governing mode” (Couldry & Mejias 2019:190).

Mining and recombining? Visions of media, data and society to 2050

Leah A. Lievrouw

In 2011, many colleagues and I were invited to give talks at the Oxford Internet Institute to celebrate their tenth anniversary, on the theme of "A Decade in Internet Time." OII was (and is) a creature of the 21st century digital media and communication environment, although even then "the internet" was over 40 years old. I decided to take both a retrospective and prospective view in a talk entitled "The Next Decade in Internet Time." The paper was subsequently published in Information, Communication & Society (Lievrouw, 2012).

I was also a guest speaker at ZeMKI in 2016, so this 20th anniversary celebration of ZeMKI's founding offers me a special chance to revisit the issues and scenarios I identified in 2011, and especially to take another look forward, to the mid-21st century. Some issues from 2011 still seem pressing now; some have remained unaddressed or under-studied. Some have been exacerbated by technological and social/cultural developments in the interim (e.g., the enclosure of access to information, big data and "datafication" that feed generative AI; the accelerating rate of environmental spoliation, disasters, and immiseration met by inadequate or indifferent institutional/media responses; extremist, authoritarian politics that destroy social solidarity and trust; unhindered global flows and concentration of data and capital superimposed on increasingly criminalized movement of people and populations). If there is any overarching throughline of this moment for communication and media study, it seems to be a pervasive decline (perhaps the deliberate destruction) of the quality of and equitable access to human communication and common knowledge.

In the 1960s the French social theorist Alain Touraine, who coined the term "post-industrial society," argued that the nature of work, knowledge production, and even workers' own subjectivities had become principal sites of contestation and change in such societies — what he called struggles over the "totality of cultural patterns." More recently he has contended that these struggles have become increasingly post-social and totalizing, where groups segregate themselves into increasingly smaller, exclusionary, and self-interested "communities" that foster their specific experiences and knowledge, with little incentive to compromise, find common interests, or to coexist in ways that have characterized society in modernity (Touraine, 2013). Under such conditions of "de-modernization," he fears that "society no longer exists" (Touraine, 2014[2010], p. 54; emphasis in original). Such a vision obviously implicates prevailing communication and media practices, institutions, and technologies. We might ask, can authentic, trustworthy human communication and media systems be recovered or cultivated under such conditions? What would be their role in envisioning, advocating, and supporting "good societies" or exploring what defines such societies in the first place? Are communication and media reduced to merely "mining and recombining" existing corpora of recorded culture to fabricate imitations of reality crafted to "influence" solipsistic consumers? Or might communication and media scholars imagine new visions based in a communication ethics (Lipari, 2017) of fairness, equity, authenticity, trust, and the possibility of a "social contract," broad-based collective action, or society in Touraine's sense?

Panel

Contested Futures: Identity, Belief, and Belonging in the Digital Transformation of Culture

Chair: Andreas Hepp

The refiguration of cyberspace

Hubert Knoblauch, Silke Steets

The paper will present some general results of a research project on the material infrastructuration of the internet conducted within the Collaborative Research Center on the Refiguration of Space (CRC 1265) and attempt to extrapolate its findings in terms of the "figurations of the future" (Hepp in print).

Starting with the current debates on the fragmentation and instrumentalization of the internet, we want to demonstrate how important it is to acknowledge the specific spatiality of its infrastructuration. While focusing our research in the last phase on a particular level of the stack, we can demonstrate that its dynamic refiguration is particularly driven by the different spatial logics, which include the network logic, territorial but also trajectorial logics and the logics of place. These logics are not only spatialized in the material infrastructure; they are also exhibit a vertical level which is often referred to as Stack. In addition to its technical meaning, we want to show how the spatial logics of the levels of the stack are linked to social, organizational and governance forms which need to considered in w way which we shall try to outline as 'social stack'. On these grounds, it seems in fact that we can observe the refiguration of the internet into new forms of networked centralization, macroregionalization and its incipient decoupling from participatory patterns of governance linked to the network model. As part of this refiguraiton, we can see that that the imaginary of the network remains a relevant directive idea ("idee directrice") for the governance of some levels of the social stack. By way of conclusion, we need to ask if the massive expansion and growing relevance of satellite internet however constitutes a challenge to its current logics and thereby dare a look into the possibly somehow dystopian refiguration of the future.

Extended capitalism versus symbolically negotiated self realization: The digital transformation between utopia and dystopia

Friedrich Krotz

The digital transformation is based on the programmable computer. As with any change based on a new technology, it can therefore lead to both utopian and dystopian conditions.

• The economy is currently leading to dystopia, as it is controlling this technology and its use more and more comprehensively. The accompanying narrative promises an ever better life for everyone: the AIs organize the world so perfectly that even democracy is no longer of interest to anyone, according to Tegmark (2019). However, the historical reconstruction of the development of technology suggests a new form of capitalism. This is because the computer developed by Babbage from 1830 onwards was created by mechanizing a ‚human computer' that the mathematician de Prony organized around 1793: his employees had to perform the same calculation thousands of times in a predefined order to produce volumes of tables for science and practice. To do this, he applied Adam Smith's idea of the division of physical labor (2022), which then made capitalism possible, to the division of intellectual labor. Babbage (1832) propagated the advantages of a division for investors throughout Europe.(Krotz 2022).

• In fact, anyone who uses a computer shares their intellectual work with this machine. And if you are forced to do so, you then have to provide intellectual input for the apparatus. This the only way to establish a workable theory of digital transformation (Krotz 2024). However, it also reveals a utopian version of digitization.

• Cassirer (2007) describes humans as Animal Symbolicum that lives in a symbolic world of communication, thought and interpretation. Today, the computer is increasingly intervening in this symbolic world through its participation in intellectual work. This cooperation actually contains the utopian potential of digitization for humanity, if it is not controlled by economics but is geared towards freedom of communication and a symbolically represented and secured self-realization of people, in which social action is grounded. According to Bloch (1974), every vision of the future must contain a utopian image of humanity because, as a utopia, it must be humane.

This requires a new understanding of communication as symbolically mediated action and its central significance for humans: with Lasswell (1948) and Shannon/Weaver (1949), traditional communication science was more of a science of information transport, still important for democracy today. The mediatization approach (Krotz 2017) understands communication as a fundamental human practice in a symbolic world and invites a communication science of digital transformation. This does not go together with colonization processes such as datafication and automated AI, which manipulates and pushes people into a corner. If an AI were to actually do something independently, industry would shut it down immediately.In this way, people in a digital future world are behavioristically reduced because computers have no idea of meaning and significance, overrun people by technology and influence them by symbolic violence (Bourdieu 2005) to adapt. At the same time, however, utopian resistance will also develop against this, rooted in the symbolic action and communication of the people that Bloch described. Otherwise, capitalism alone remains.

Re-enchantment 2.0? AI and the technological future of the religious past

Stef Aupers

Over a century ago, Max Weber formulated his classical and much debated thesis about a "disenchantment of the world" – allegedly spearheaded by science and technology and underpinned by the modern logic of instrumental rationality. Modern media-technology and the world of magic and mystery are considered opposing forces in this view and sociological assumptions about secularization.

Building in part on my 'old' fieldwork in Silicon Valley in 2001 studying the convergence between digital technology and religion – e.g., around 40 interviews with Internet pioneers, VR-designers and programmers – and academic work, I will investigate the elective affinity between AI and re-enchantment, now and in the nearby future. On the one hand, magic has always been instrumentalized in Silicon Valley, amongst CEOs and tech-journalists as an ideological trope to signify the superiority of technological innovation, legitimate technological solutionism and frame tech-companies and their products as a capitalist fantasy story. In addition to this ideological framing of technology in Silicon Valley as a 'marvel', 'magic' and 'mystery', I will argue that (particularly) AI motivates a more fundamental form of re-enchantment. Three ontological aspects of AI are discussed in this respect: 1) the opacity of AI (its invisibility, black box characteristics for lay people and, in part, experts) 2) the autonomy of AI (its emergent, self-learning and self-reproducing nature) and 3) the omnipresence of AI (embeddedness in institutional infrastructures, invasion of life-worlds). Overall, it will be argued that AI may be man-made, but is in fact often experienced as 'Alien Intelligence' (Harari, 2024) that disrupts instrumental rationality and is part and parcel of a technological re-enchantment. As one designer of VR in Silicon Valley dramatically stated in 2001: "The future will look very much like the way our ancestors thought their world looked like (..) Artificial Intelligences: those will be our spirits".Based on the analysis it will be discussed if and how AI will motivate worldviews and experiences in the 21st century that resonate strongly with magic, animism and re-enchantment. Theoretically, these are often explained as the result of experiences of 'human impotence' vis-à-vis a complex natural life-world (e.g., Freud, Malinowski). Is our AI-induced technological environments fundamentally different? Moreover, we will return to 'grand' sociological theories about modernization and alienation (e.g., Weber, Mannheim, Marx). Whereas the latter scholars, theorized that modern 'rationalized' institutions will be experienced as alienating and meaningless, I argue that it is exactly such (AI-induced) alienation that brings new form of meaning-making and re-enchantment in the 21st century.

Mediaseeds: The future of media, religion, and spirituality in a fragmented world

Gregory Price Grieve

In the face of escalating global crises—climate change, geopolitical fragmentation, and rising authoritarianism—speculative fiction offers a crucial lens for examining potential futures and the role of media, religion, and spirituality in them. This submission explores how dystopian narratives, particularly Octavia Butler's Parable of the Sower, Kim Stanley Robinson's The Ministry for the Future, and Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale, illuminate media's role in fostering resilience and hope. By analyzing these works, we can identify „media-seeds"—concrete media and spiritual practices that may endure through societal upheavals and help communities rebuild.

Butler presents a fractured America devastated by climate disasters and economic collapse. The protagonist, Lauren Olamina, creates Earthseed, a belief system centered on adaptation and resilience, where religious narratives become a tool for collective survival. Earthseed's survival relies on oral storytelling and sacred texts, demonstrating how spirituality, when tied to media practices, can unify and sustain communities in crisis.

Robinson envisions a world on the brink of collapse due to climate catastrophe. The novel highlights how decentralized, grassroots media—such as local radio stations and newsletters—disseminate crucial information and mobilize action. These platforms serve as a modern counterpart to religious institutions, which have historically preserved knowledge and provided spiritual guidance during periods of upheaval.

Atwood depicts an authoritarian theocracy that weaponizes religion to justify oppression and censorship. Yet, resistance emerges through clandestine networks like „Mayday," which rely on covert communication—whispered prayers, hidden writings, and sacred gatherings—to sustain hope. Throughout history, spiritual traditions have preserved forbidden knowledge, offering an alternative to dominant power structures through underground religious communities and esoteric texts.

From these dystopian visions, we can extract „media-seeds"—enduring media and spiritual practices that sustain communities in times of upheaval:

1. Preserving Libraries and Sacred Texts – Religious institutions have long safeguarded knowledge, preserving texts that offer historical, moral, and spiritual guidance.
2. Samizdat Practices – Underground religious and philosophical movements, from the early Christians to Soviet dissidents, used clandestine publishing to keep suppressed ideas alive.
3. Community Radio, Sermons, and Newsletters – Just as religious leaders have historically spread messages through sermons and oral teachings, decentralized media offer guidance and solidarity.
4. Covert Communication Networks – Hidden symbols, coded prayers, and secret gatherings have long allowed persecuted spiritual communities to survive.
5. Archival Practices and Religious Memory – Maintaining sacred traditions, rituals, and oral histories ensures cultural and spiritual survival.
6. Skill-Sharing and Ritual Gatherings – Religious and spiritual gatherings serve as centers for education, healing, and social organization.
7. Zine and Pamphlet Culture – Throughout history, religious tracts and underground pamphlets have spread dissenting spiritual ideas beyond mainstream institutions.
8. Mesh Networks and Mystical Knowledge Transmission – Decentralized systems, like those

used by mystical traditions, preserve esoteric wisdom in times of suppression.

9. Public Art, Symbolic Resistance, and Religious Icons – Murals, sacred imagery, and iconography communicate spiritual defiance in censored societies.
10. Guerilla Theater, Rituals, and Performative Storytelling – Spiritual ceremonies and reenactments keep sacred narratives alive when written or digital media are restricted.Speculative fiction reveals the vital role of media, religion, and spirituality in overcoming collapse. These „media-seeds“ not only preserve knowledge but empower individuals and communities to envision and create a more equitable and resilient future.

Harnessing masculine identity as suicide prevention - the intersection of mediatised cultural dissonance: Men's (mental) health in the barber shop, the community support group, and the bedroom.

Scott A. Ellis

"Straight men, what's the strangest thing you've been told not to do because 'that's gay'?"

"Some dude just called me a pussy for putting on sunscreen. Imagine thinking you're tougher than the sun? The fucking sun?" (LaConte 2020: 1)

Men in the west are troubled. Societal norms of masculinity, power, and men's health, driven by mediatised agendas, are diverging and, for some, degrading. The space is brimming with contradictions and tensions. Young men are having less sex, are drinking less socially, and complain about their (self-inflected) social isolation. We have a proliferation of men's peer support groups, grounded in media spheres, that provide space simply enabling us to 'be'. In a post-Covid, digital world, we depend on facilitation to communicate meaningfully.

Popular media have us in sight. Esquire magazine chose Black History Month to promote the marginalisation and confusion of young, white, middle-class men in the rural Midwest. An angst-filled discussion with a high schooler about the systemic deconstruction of his identity and power was a startling repositioning of conceptual inequity. It reflects the dissonance between how men feel and how they are perceived.

There is an untruth, beneficial to religious and political groups, that we cannot improve men's health and restructure their power more equitably and inclusively without reversing the hard-won equivalencies in women's movements. The influence of such thought means health and grassroots interventions have not slowed the destabilisation of men's feelings of meaning and place. This may reflect the imbalance of power between media and political agenda setting and the problems men embody simply by being. Despite such negativity, there is evidence men are quietly subverting the discourse. Threading an intuitive belief that men inherently, if unknowingly, hold the power to address inequities, this paper presents voices captured using an accidental ethnographic framework. It amplifies the experiences of men in ordinary settings and the importance of rejecting the destructive mediatised noise calling for a singular, toxic masculinity.

Panel

Activism Reimagined: Digital Personas, Propaganda, and Political Expression in the Platform Age

Chair: Patrick Zerrer

Feminist influencers on Instagram: Redefining digital activism and political engagement

Alessia Pensabene

In the evolving media landscape, digital platforms have facilitated new forms of activism, blurring the boundaries between political engagement, personal expression, and influencer culture. This study examines feminist influencers on Instagram in Italy and the UK as a new hybrid political actor, distinct from traditional feminist movements. While not always formally affiliated with established organizations, these figures have gained significant visibility, particularly among younger generations, leveraging social media to shape feminist discourse, mobilize communities, and promote social change.

This research investigates how political action and digital activism are redefined through feminist influencers on Instagram. It focuses on their communication strategies, platform dynamics, and their role in the political landscape. The study also explores the extent to which their online activity fosters collective action, analyzing the themes and narratives that dominate their digital activism. By bridging feminist counterpublics and mainstream audiences, these influencers act as cultural intermediaries, shaping the accessibility and visibility of feminist discourse within digital environments.

Using qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews and social media content analysis, the study identifies the strategic use of personal branding (Duffy & Hund, 2015; Marwick, 2015) and disintermediated storytelling (Abidin, 2015; Casaló et al., 2020) as key tactics for fostering authenticity and engagement. While this individualized model of activism reflects broader neoliberal trends, the findings reveal a complex reality: beyond personal narratives, many influencers integrate intersectional and community-focused themes, expanding feminist engagement beyond individual expression.

The study also examines the crossover between online and offline activism, highlighting how these influencers use Instagram to drive real-world initiatives, from grassroots campaigns to collaborations with activist networks. This process aligns with connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013), where mobilization is facilitated through digital networks rather than hierarchical structures. By leveraging platform affordances, feminist influencers engage audiences in interactive activism, merging political discourse with participatory culture.

At the same time, the platformization of activism introduces tensions between advocacy and market-driven logics. Instagram's algorithmic structures and visibility economy encourage influencers to navigate branding pressures, balancing authenticity with the demands of professionalization. This raises critical questions about the sustainability of social media-driven activism and its implications for the future of feminist engagement.

Through a comparative analysis of feminist influencers in Italy, the UK, and potentially the U.S., this research explores how digital activism is reshaping political and social participation. By examining content strategies, audience interactions, and the interplay between digital visibility and activism, this study offers insights into the evolving relationship between media, data, and society.

As media and communication research looks toward the future, understanding how influencers negotiate activism within algorithmic and economic constraints is crucial for anticipating long-term shifts in digital political engagement. This research contributes to broader discussions on platform governance, activism, and the evolving role of influencers as political actors, reflecting on the opportunities and challenges posed by social media for feminist and activist movements in the decades to come.

Microcelebrified politicians and image-centric platforms: Future of political persona and leadership?

Mehmet Sebih Oruc

In an era dominated by digital media, the construction of political personas has evolved from traditional branding to becoming deeply intertwined with social media dynamics, particularly Instagram. Politicians, as increasingly microcelebrified figures, have adopted the aesthetics and strategies of influencer culture to engage audiences, shape narratives, and influence political participation. This paper introduces the concept of microcelebrified politicians—those who build and maintain their political personas through digital practices resembling those of social media influencers and celebrities. It explores the key features of this emerging phenomenon and argues that understanding its implications is essential for anticipating the future of digital media and politics.

The phenomenon of microcelebrified politicians has become a global trend, evident across diverse political landscapes. Figures such as Zarah Sultana in the United Kingdom, Elly Schlein in Italy, Sanna Marin in Finland, Jacinda Ardern in New Zealand, Gabriel Attal in France, and Nayib Bukele in El Salvador demonstrate how politicians worldwide are adopting image-centric, digital strategies to connect with voters. These figures represent a new generation of leaders who understand the importance of cultivating a strong digital persona. Through strategic authenticity, performed intimacy, and direct engagement with followers, these figures blur the boundaries between political and personal life. These tactics are embedded within the capitalist frameworks of social media platforms, which prioritise engagement for profit. Politicians, on both the right and left, commodify their political messages and personal brands, transforming political engagement into a spectacle. While this creates an impression of accessibility and authenticity, it is, at its core, a marketing strategy that converts political discourse into consumable content.

Populism, both right- and left-wing, thrives on image-centric platforms by leveraging their ability to craft accessible political narratives that resonate emotionally with audiences. Populist discourse often positions politicians as champions of the „common people“ against a corrupt elite, which aligns well with platforms that emphasise personal connection and visual identity. They complex political issues to simplistic, emotionally charged narratives, in line with populist messaging. By focusing on imagery and emotional appeal, populist leaders commodify their political messages, turning them into marketable products for mass consumption.This paper argues that the microcelebrified politician, while increasing user engagement, reinforces a capitalist dynamic in which political engagement is filtered through consumerism and marketability. The growing importance of digital platforms in political communication suggests that future leaders will emerge from these commodified structures, relying on their ability to engage and entertain rather than purely on policy expertise. As digital platforms become more central to political discourse, understanding these figures is crucial for comprehending future political transformations. This paper calls for closer attention to the evolving strategies of microcelebrified politicians, whose roles will be pivotal in shaping the political landscape in the coming decades. By analysing this new political persona, the research contributes to the broader discussion on the future of digital media and its impact on societal and political structures.

Reimagining the global south political propaganda in the future: Case of AI-powered visual propaganda in Indonesian presidential election 2024

Harry Febrian

Election is considered one of the quintessential qualities and an integral part of democracy (Kaufmann & Teo, 2022; Gu, 2024). While various forms of propaganda have existed as an unavoidable excess throughout the history of elections (Tapsell, 2021; Baulch et al., 2024), the use of Generative Artificial intelligence has just recently gained traction. Democratic countries such as India and Pakistan utilized deepfakes of their deceased leaders to gain voters‘ sympathy (Salabi, 2024). Tokyo gubernatorial election in Japan saw the candidate use an AI avatar to interact intensively with voters, while AI-generated calls were used for political manipulation and interference in the 2024 US Election (Schneier & Sanders, 2024; Yan et al., 2024).

While most scholars agree that we are still in a very early phase of AI usage in an election, and the real impact of AI in elections is still debatable (Jungherr et al., 2024; Simon et al., 2023 & 2024; Wei et al., 2024) the exponential growth of AI capability–and unavoidable future usage–warrant a further examination.

This research uses the Indonesia Presidential Election in 2024 as a case study to understand how AI-powered propaganda is being used to shape the political discourse surrounding the election. More specifically, it focuses on examining visual propaganda–an important yet less studied form of propaganda (Peng et al., 2023) using the framework of visual authority (Febrian, 2024).

To achieve that, this article collects, analyzes, and compares AI-powered visual propaganda material on X, Instagram, and TikTok, Indonesia’s three most popular social media platforms. Social media has long become an integral part of Indonesian society, permeating many levels of society, and is central to electoral politics (Lim, 2024). This research then combines computational visual analysis and discourse analysis to investigate visual modality and the dominant online discourse surrounding AI-generated visual propaganda.

As the third largest democracy and the most populated Muslim country in the world, Indonesia is a crucial laboratory for understanding the entanglement of politics, digital media, and technology (Postill & Epafras, 2018), including AI in the Global South. The findings from this research extend our scholarly discussion on the future of AI and its potential role in future media environments.

Upholding authority: Memes in the hands of fandom nationalists

Dier Tan

Memes are widely recognized for their dual role in political discourse—either as grassroots tools for resisting dominant power or as instruments of top-down manipulation. However, an emerging phenomenon demonstrates that memes can also be voluntarily employed by the public to uphold authority. This paper explores the function of nationalist memes through the lens of „fandom nationalism“ in China, focusing on viral memes featuring actor Wu Jing. While memes have traditionally been associated with polyvocality and subversive engagement, this study argues that fandom nationalists actively produce and distribute memes to reinforce state narratives rather than challenge them. Utilizing the framework of network media logic, which examines the production, distribution, and usage of digital media, this paper demonstrates how fandom nationalists leverage their media literacy and cultural skills to create and disseminate content that aligns with the government's ideological stance. The findings suggest that the intersection of digital participatory culture and nationalist sentiment in China has facilitated the emergence of a new form of political engagement—one that blurs the boundaries between fan culture, digital activism, and state-endorsed nationalism. This study contributes to the broader discourse on the political implications of meme culture and the evolving dynamics of digital nationalism in authoritarian contexts.

Keynote 4

Chair: Andreas Hepp

On the Sustainability of Games and Play

Alenda Y. Chan

Video games were once trumpeted as the paradigmatic media form of the twenty-first century and increasingly, their narratives and gameplay mechanics have become rich sites for environmental inquiry. At the same time, it has become clear that alongside global supply chains and other media infrastructures, the game industry must do more to reckon with changing climatic realities. This talk considers what we might gain, or lose, when we examine the slippage between what we might term ecologically minded games and sustainably developed games. After all, are games invested in environmental design or storytelling less impactful than those whose manufacturing inputs have been minimized? Are green thematics toothless without quantifiable changes in industrial practice? Perhaps sustainability is better understood as including but extending beyond production to players themselves, the games they embrace, and those they refuse to play.

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