Automating Communication in the Networked Society:
Contexts, Consequences, Critique

Annual Conference of the German Communication Association's Division "Digital Communication", November 6-8, 2019 in Berlin

A defining—yet understudied—feature of digital communication is automation: the production of content, the distribution of information and messages, the curation of media use and the governance of content are all increasingly shaped and influenced by automated processes and automated actors.

Algorithms automate the production of content, algorithms operate the selection and filtering of information in news, news feeds and search engines, they attribute relevance and popularity, perform content moderation and fact-checking. Automated actors such as social bots participate both in organizational communication such as customer service and, as a potential force of manipulation, in election campaigns. While communication scholars have focused their attention on algorithms in diverse areas of the field, they can be studied as a means of the broader process of automating social relations and public communication.

Because automation takes place in hybrid media systems, automation is not restrained to social media platforms or apps, but also plays a role in journalism and legacy media, as well as in interpersonal communication. Algorithms write simple news articles, rank most-read articles, and shape what journalists find relevant or newsworthy. Networked societies rely on permanent connectedness, all of which takes place in strongly automated, curated environments of data gathering, sharing, liking, commenting: monitoring complex actor-networks, self mass-communication, or organizing protest through connective action.

The story of automating communication has two sides: the few who are shaping, designing, programming and implementing algorithms and other technologies, and the many who are using and are impacted by automated communication. In this regard, automation raises questions of power and power relations. Automating core features of democracy such as the assignment of relevance and legitimacy to issues, actors, and specific content, based on data and algorithms controlled and operated by a few private companies, challenges notions of transparency, due process, and legitimacy. What are the regulatory measures to curb this power? And are automation, algorithms, and artificial intelligence really meaningful answers to social problems?

Submissions may cover one or several of the following aspects:

1. Theoretical innovations

The process and consequences of automating communication challenge theoretical concepts. Are bots actors? Are algorithms institutions? Are software developers communicators? Does automated communication cause dissonance and disrupted public spheres, and how? Are concepts around consonance and deliberation really "out of touch with reality" (Pfetsch & Bennett 2018)? How does automated communication affect media use and media effects? How can we theoretically model automated communication?

2. Dynamics of communication

Algorithms are at the core of automation, because automation works through algorithms. But how do they change and challenge the dynamics, the processes, and structuration of communication? How do search engines impact on public communication and information retrieval? How does the curation of news feeds work and how do they affect how media users receive information? What causes and influences the viral distribution of content? How do hate speech and "fake news" travel in networks of social media platforms and legacy media? Do algorithms cause filter bubbles and echo chambers? What is the impact of the increasing automatic detection of content deemed illegitimate (e.g., hate speech, copyright violation, nudity) in social media and comment section? What is the role of datafication for automated and automating communication?

3. Actors and strategies, accountability and governance

Automating communication affects and involves a variety of actors: when algorithms produce content, this changes the effort and role of journalists. How do media actors work with algorithmic content production? Are journalists "gaming" the algorithms of platforms, and how? Who creates the tools and affordances that automate communication—and under which conditions? What happens when low-wage employees execute highly automated tasks, partly in order to mimic algorithms and artificial intelligence ("fauxtomation")? New and (semi-)automated actors such as trolls, connected activist, and social bots alter the strategies of campaigning and the way parties and other organizations plan their activities. Who can be held accountable for automated communication? What are challenges and possible solutions for regulation and media policy?

4. Methods and critical reflection of methods

Studying automated communication often involves computational methods and trace data. But qualitative methods such as ethnography, interviews or observations can also help to understand how algorithms are created, platforms are shaped, and actors use or make sense of automated communication. Particularly research focusing on social media platforms faces severe challenges of data access and data management nowadays, dealing with data protection regulation, privacy issues, and proprietary data. Analyses of automated actors, such as bots, rely on black-boxed tools and call for interdisciplinary approaches. We thus also invite submissions with a critical perspective on research methods, revisiting research ethics and quality standards.

5. Open call

In addition to topic-specific submissions, there is an open call for current research on digital communication. We also welcome submissions that are not directly related to the conference theme but address pertinent issues of the research field. This must be noted in the submission.

Submissions
Extended abstracts (4,000 to 5,000 characters, exclusive bibliography and any appendices) can be submitted by **16 June 2019** in electronic form (*.docx, *.rtf or *.odt; not *.pdf) as e-mail attachments to submissions@digikomm2019.de The abstracts must be made anonymous by means of a separate cover page and the removal of all identifying information from the text and document settings.

All submissions will be evaluated in a peer review according to the following criteria customary in the German Communication Association: theoretical foundation, relevance of research questions, method/procedure, novelty/originality, clarity and conciseness of presentation. The results of the review process will be announced by mid-August 2019.

Organization
The conference will take place from November 6-8, 2019 in Berlin. The event is hosted by the Weizenbaum Institute for the Networked Society (FU Berlin) and the Alexander von Humboldt Institute for Internet and Society. More information will be added on the website, such as location, program, and social events: www.digikomm2019.de

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