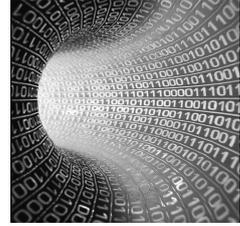


**Call for Papers for Special Issue
in *New Media and Society***

Deadline for Abstract Submission: June 15, 2022



**Automating Communication in the Digital Society:
Contexts, Consequences, Critique**

Special Issue Editors

Christian Katzenbach (Centre for Media, Communication and Information Research, University of Bremen;

Alexander von Humboldt Institute for Internet and Society, Berlin)

Christian Pentzold (Department of Communication and Media Studies, Leipzig University)

Automation has momentum. Automation is a defining feature of today's societies. Automation converts the production of content, the distribution of information and messages, the curation of media use, and the governance of our networked lives into machine operations. All of these areas are increasingly shaped by algorithmically-driven processes and automated agents. They help to automate the selection and filtering of news feeds and search engines, they attribute relevance and popularity, perform content moderation and fact-checking. Automated agents like social bots participate in organizational communication such as customer service and, as a potential force of manipulation, also seem to intervene in election campaigns. As of today, innovations in smart companions and artificial intelligence are driven by ambitions to delegate physical motoric functions, cognitive processes, decisions, and evaluations to increasingly autonomous and capable technology. This is not a one-way transfer from humans to machines. Rather, we also witness environments where people come to act in an automatic fashion, where human contributions feed into processes of automation and help to improve them.

In consequence, the special issue of *New Media & Society* aims to study how subjectivity, autonomy, agency, and empowerment become defined and reconfigured in these novel human-machine encounters. We invite contributions that take issue with the conditions and consequences of automation and offer critical perspectives on the transition of human activity into machine operations.

Because automation, and the related processes of digitization, datafication, and algorithmization, are set to redefine most if not all sectors of society, they have become a research interest across the academy. We are especially interested in submissions that shed light across these themes:

Contexts: The ideology, infrastructures, and procedures around automatisations have a long history of mechanical inventions that implicate expectations of efficiency and enhancement but also engender fears of alienation and inexorable domination. What are the dominating sociotechnical imaginaries around automation? Inquiries into automation open up a broad array of topics from the history of ideas around human capabilities and machine capacities via political or economic arguments about the implications of automation on prosperity or democracy up to ethical, legal, and technological challenges. Hence, possible questions are: Can there be alternative visions for automation? What is to be learned from historical moments of people protesting and refusing the automation of labor and life?

Consequences: Automating communication affects and involves a variety of actors: when algorithms produce content this changes the effort and role of journalists. So we for instance ask: How do media actors engage with algorithmic content production? How does automated communication affect media use and media effects? 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 (“fauxtimation”)? New and (semi-)automated actors such as trolls, connected activists, and social bots alter the strategies of campaigning and the way parties and other organizations plan their activities. Who are these actors, and are they actors at all? Who can be held accountable for automated communication? Does automated communication cause dissonance and disrupt public spheres, and if so, how is this happening and can automation be a cure as well? What are challenges and possible solutions for regulation and media policy?

Critique: The story of automating communication can be told from two perspectives: the few who are shaping, designing, programming and implementing automation technologies, and the many who are using and become part of 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 can automation provide meaningful answers to social problems? 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 sections? What is the role of datafication for automated and automating communication?

Studying automated communication often involves computational methods and trace data. But qualitative methods such as ethnography, interviews or observations can also help us to understand how automation comes about 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 and research ethics.

Timeline

1,000 to 1,500 word abstracts should be submitted by June 15, 2022 via the submission form at <https://forms.gle/3Kxrf2wNrpqVaGno8>. The abstract should articulate: 1) the issue or research question to be discussed, 2) the methodological or critical framework used, and 3) the expected findings or conclusions. Feel free to consult with the Special Issue Editors about your article ideas and potential angles or approaches.

Decisions will be communicated to the authors by September 15, 2022. Invited paper submissions will be due March 1, 2023 and will be submitted directly to the submission site for *New Media & Society*: <https://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/nms> where they will undergo peer review following the usual procedures of *New Media & Society*. Please note that the invitation to submit a full article does not guarantee acceptance into the special issue.

Contact

Christian Katzenbach, katzenbach@uni-bremen.de
Christian Pentzold, christian.pentzold@uni-leipzig.de