

Agency in a Datafied Society: Communication between and across humans, platforms and machines

International conference at the **Centre for Media, Communication & Information Research (ZeMKI) / University of Bremen** in cooperation with the Communicative Figurations research network, the Mediated Communication, Public Opinion & Society Section of the International Association of Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) and the Media Sociology Division of the German Communication Association (DGPK)

Bremen, December 02 – 04, 2020

Imagine a life without the apps and digital platforms you use every day: No information on the fastest route to your destination available, no more real-time dietary recommendations or updates on your sleeping patterns, and who will suggest what music to listen to? Platforms and apps play a major role in our everyday lives. By appearing to make decisions for us they just seem to make life much simpler. Critical voices, in contrast, would say that ‘machines’ *act* for us and in this sense, they take away our *agency*.

As a consequence of deep mediatization and datafication the field of media and communications is faced by fundamental questions of agency. Here, agency is understood as what underlines us as humans, what makes us unique. Agency embodies *free will*, *reflexivity*, and *conscious decision-making*. It is for these reasons that agency is an ideal steppingstone from which to not only better grasp human behavior but to also tackle broader levels of social meaning.

But what does agency mean in deeply mediatized societies? How does our understanding of agency change and how will it be forced to change when ‘communication’ is not just about our interactions with one another but also with machines? To what extent do platforms and apps define a new common ground from which humans and machines can engage and establish new forms of encounter? And, on the basis of which theoretical directions do we draw the line between humans and machines?

While the debate about agency has mainly focused on ‘instrumentalist’ and ‘machine’ perspectives, more recent approaches to the topic have argued in favor of a ‘hybrid’ perspective that emphasizes ‘joint agency’. It is in the symbiosis of humans and machines where we are truly able to locate agency in today’s deeply mediatized worlds.

Main objectives:

This conference's central aim is to discuss the idea of agency in relation to recent developments in media and communications.

Possible topics include, but are not limited to:

- *Transformation(s) and Agency:* In light of constant connectivity and the emergence of digital platforms the concept of human agency is less distinct. This leads us to question our approaches to self-determined action in relation to platforms, human-computer-interaction, communicative robots, artificial intelligence, and heteronomy. What is, or who is, an agent when communication is mediated? What does this mean for our understanding of reflexivity and communication?
- *Agency and Power:* Agency refers to the power of making a difference. It leads us to creation and resistance at one and the same time. But, are media doing their work in a catalytic way? Or, do they operate as intermediaries distorting reality and power relations? With these questions in mind we need to approach notions of gender, ethnicity, and class in terms that consider them as agential factors.
- *Collective and Individual Agency:* Agency is not only a concept used to describe (supra-) individuals within social structures that are in constant flux, it also works as an analytical framework for inquiry into social entities. Cross-cultural social activism is one example of how agency is created and how collective practices are shaped. But how does this collaborative agency-building operate in an age of deep mediatization? Do media help build forms of common agency and if so how does that differ from individual agency?
- *Hybrid Forms of Agency:* How can we conceptualize agency in relation to humans and communication technologies if we place more emphasis on the 'symbiosis' of humans and machines? What are the consequences if we do so for empirical research and theory?
- *Subjectivity/Ethics and Agency:* As a consequence of the constant connectivity enabled by platforms and apps users leave behind vast tracts of digital traces. Commercial media companies and other players benefit from these traces in many ways in their large-scale automated analysis of individual user data. How do users reflect on their agency in an age of deep mediatization? How can this tension be addressed in terms of conceptual approaches to agency? What does this mean for communication and media?

Keynote Speaker (confirmed):

- Andrea Guzman (Northern Illinois University)
- Nick Couldry (LSE London)

Submissions:

Please send a 300-word abstract, along with your name, e-mail address, academic affiliation, and a short bio to: agency@uni-bremen.de no later than September 01, 2020. Notifications of acceptance will be sent by September 15, 2020.

For further questions please contact:

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Organizing Committee (alphabetical order):

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