

Historicizing Media and Communication Concepts of the Digital Age

Friday 2 July 2021 (1.30 pm - 4.00 pm)

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Several of the most known and discussed concepts of the digital age predated the digitalization itself and have been previously used in the “analogue times”. Other concepts were coined for the digital society but have transformed and are continuously transforming over time. This panel selects some of these concepts, which are directly related to the core topics of ToE (e.g. infrastructures, networks, history of technology and innovation, technology and societal challenges, etc.) and invite the audience to a time travel through their history, heritage and reinvestment in media and communication studies. By shedding light on media and technologies, agency and politics, multi-stakeholders and practices in a *longue durée* perspective, this allows to complexify the narratives of the digital age and to investigate the continuities, paths, failures, disruptions as well as tensions in the history of media and technology.

Chaired by Anne-Katrin Weber (Unil, Lausanne, Switzerland), the panel will be introduced by Nelson Ribeiro (Universidade Católica Portuguesa, Lisbon, Portugal) who will present the project at stake (a collective book whose idea was born within the ECREA Communication History Section), its approach and theoretical framework. Six concepts which are of interest for the ToE community, as they strongly rely on some challenges and topics that ToE identified as key, will then be analyzed (in 15 minutes each): Networks by Massimo Rospocher and Gabriele Balbi; Global Governance by Francesca Musiani and Valérie Schafer; Telepresence by Jérôme Bourdon; Amateurism by Susan Aasman, Tim van der Heijden and Tom Slootweg; Data(fication) by Erik Koenen and Christian Schwarzenegger; Artificial Intelligence by Simone Natale, Paolo Bory and Dominique Trudel. By connecting these notions with the history of urbanism, infrastructures, geopolitics, telecommunications and media, governance institutions, and many other historical fields or topics, these presentations aim to stimulate a final discussion with the audience on the multiple roots of the digital age and notably its European roots, the tensions as well as media and societal transitions at stake.

Networks by Massimo Rospocher (The Italian-German Historical Institute, Trento, Italy) and Gabriele Balbi (USI, Lugano, Switzerland)

In Ancient Rome, transportation networks were built and maintained to link a dispersed and immense empire. Postal networks were crucial in the early modern period to foster communications and acted as a premodern info-structure. Electric telegraphy, telephony, and then wireless allowed instantaneous communication from the nineteenth century, acting as info-structure for nascent train and plane systems. This presentation aims to historicize and deconstruct the arguments surrounding networks in a long-term perspective focusing on two dimensions: networks as infrastructures and networks as socio-cultural tools to build communities.

Global governance by Francesca Musiani (Center for Internet and Society, CNRS, France) and Valérie Schafer (C²DH, University of Luxembourg)

History is relevant for the concept of global governance for at least two reasons: to historicize the concept in itself through the Internet/digital age (the evolution and enrichment of the notion in the past 30 years, with key turning points such as the creation of ICANN and WSIS) and to flesh out continuities through time with other “global media” or “global issues,” such as international standardization, multi-stakeholderism and communication rights.

Telepresence by Jerome Bourdon (Department of Communications, Tel Aviv University, Israel)

From the mid-1970s, new terms (social presence, telepresence) have been coined to refer to synchronous communications at a distance, through telecommunications or computers, with specific affordance: feeling present in a remote space, interacting with faraway humans or machine: a tradition empirical and theoretical research was soon born. This presentation enlarges the meaning of the term to include previous historical forms of presence at a distance, resorting to “poor” technologies (classic broadcasting, the telegraph, newspapers, correspondence, certain forms of painting) and allowing connection with a variety of creatures, both humans, and non-humans, but always, in some ways, humanized. It shows that the experience of human agents was not less rich and complex with “poor” past technologies than with contemporary “rich” ones.

Amateurism by Susan Aasman (University of Groningen, The Netherlands), Tim van der Heijden (C²DH, University of Luxembourg) and Tom Slootweg (University of Groningen, The Netherlands)

In the current digital age, media amateurs seem to have revised traditional hierarchies between professionals and amateurs. This development has been characterized as a form of “mass amateurization,” or even “mass cultural production.” To explore the multiple meanings of amateurism, this presentation demonstrates how a media historical approach helps to better understand the full complexity of the concept.

Data(fication) by Erik Koenen (University of Bremen, Germany) and Christian Schwarzenegger (Augsburg University Department of Media and Educational Technology, Germany)

This presentation traces the pre-digital roots of the concept of datafication of communication and society. Data and datafication produced already long before the digital revolution exclusive arrangements of infrastructures, and knowledge orders and can hence be seen as building blocks of culture and society. We first provide a glimpse on the beginnings of datafication in ancient times. We then present data as early social science instruments in the modern welfare states since the mid-19th century used for social control and to grasp facets and consequences of social modernization. Thirdly, data were also crucial in the service of oppression during the National Socialist era, in which cutting-edge data technologies contributed to the planning and implementation of the Holocaust. Finally, there is a shift of data from the numerical to the digital information age in the second half of the 20th century.

Artificial Intelligence by Simone Natale (University of Torino, Italy), Paolo Bory (Politecnico di Milano, Italy) and Dominique Trudel (Audencia Business School, Nantes, France)

Four key aspects of the long-standing relationship between communication, media and Artificial Intelligence are discussed: the cross-history of communication theory (especially cybernetics) and AI, the early development of AI and human-computer interaction, the relevance of media and science fiction narratives in AI research and imaginaries, and the role of games in shaping interaction with AI software as communication between humans and machines.