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Digital Culture & Education

Special Issue
"Differences and the Digital -
Practices and Politics of In/Exclusion in Knowledge Cultures"

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The digital can be understood as both the precondition for as well as the functional principle of a specific media technology founded on difference-based and difference-producing computing operations carried out by machines. It is thus always already the product of marking difference, with the analog colloquially positioned as its Other. The difference inherent in the binary duality at the heart of computing technology is not the only decisive factor in this context; rather, digital cultures are constituted by a matrix of differentiations that inscribe themselves on different levels (technical, political, material-discursive, interactive, etc.) in profiles, databases, and network structures, on (social media) platforms and services, and that include the socio-technical practices associated with them. Differences are thus not only dissimilarities, but they can also be understood as powerful processes of demarcation that order, classify, and hierarchize. At the same time, the production of difference opens up horizons for the possibility of politicizing these very differences, a process which becomes visible both on the level of the medium as well as in the socio-cultural context. The analysis, reconstruction, deconstruction, and diffraction of such processes can make the multifaceted and intertwined markers of difference and their social and cultural settings visible and negotiable. This leads to the following key questions guiding the Special Issue: Which differences are amplified or even created by efforts to make meaning and matter machine-readable? To what extent does the digital also draw into question and (re)configure meaningful differentiations and differences? To discuss these topics, the Special Issue focuses on three dimensions of the relationship between difference and the digital.

A) Algorithmization

In digital cultures, algorithms increasingly affect everyday life through the automation of rule-governed processes, the use and evaluation of large amounts of data, and the profiling of their users (Amoore 2020). At the same time, they are designed to function as 'black boxes' and thus remain necessarily opaque (Galloway 2010; Franklin 2015; Amoore 2020). Contrary to the cyberfeminist utopias envisioned during the rise of the Internet in the 1980s and 1990s, it is now apparent that the automation of data collection and processing is grounded in real-world classification schemes and predictive assumptions about the user's traits and behavior. Algorithms 'learn' with datasets, thus in the context of real-world inequalities and power relations, and together with us. Rather than a mere computational procedure, then, the algorithmization of (hierarchized) difference is about how rules are used to govern the ways in which assemblages of people, non-people, knowledge, and practices relate to each other (Amoore 2020; Cellard 2022). Additionally, digital infrastructures with their history of colonial exploitation of resources are perpetuated as 'digital/electronic colonialism' (e.g. Couldry 2019; Benjamin 2019). Against this backdrop, it is important to ask how we imagine and shape social relations with (rather than against) algorithms:

- How and to what extent do historical differences shape algorithmized relations of people to themselves and the world as well as the infrastructures, aesthetics, and practices of these relations?
- To what extent do algorithmic assemblages form powerful differences?
- Which knowledge about algorithms is made relevant, and which, in turn, is made invisible, how and in which contexts?
- To what extent are notions of what algorithms are and how they work involved in processes of demarcation?

B) Digital public spheres/platforms

Digital platforms and digital public spheres are increasingly coming into focus as sites of mediatized violence, as habitats of sexist and misogynist aggression, and as manipulated and manipulative publics. At the same time, however, new visibilities and opportunities for participation are emerging that question and subvert relations of power and domination, for example in new forms of activism that are articulated on the streets as well as in digital environments (e.g. Black Lives Matter; #metoo). However, digital environments always implement a politics of difference that produces practices of inclusion and exclusion. Binary gender differences become effective here, negotiating exclusion and participation in digital public spheres. Recently, we have also observed differentiations within platform ecologies that are closely related to notions of masculinity and sovereignty (e.g. Musk/Twitter). This facilitates the formation of digital publics defined by misogyny, but also by anti-Semitism and racism. At the same time, decentralized platforms such as Mastodon are becoming more relevant, raising new questions about the production of difference. In addition, there are debates about the legal regulation and criminal prosecution of mediatized violence, which could be discussed in the context of the recently enacted Digital Services Act. Central questions in this regard are:

- How are processes of platformization (Poell/Nieborg/van Dijck 2019) related to processes of producing difference?
- To what extent do infrastructures, features, aesthetics, and practices of digital platforms and publics promote the production of difference as well as processes of inclusion and exclusion?
- To what extent do digital platforms and publics open up spaces in which the politicization of difference is possible?
- What effect does the current differentiation of digital public spheres have on negotiating difference? Are these trends to be regarded as problematic reinforcements of power relations or as new possibilities for alternative interventions?

C) New Negotiations? Methodological challenges

Digital phenomena are entangled in complex relations, which necessitates the development of methods and methodologies that can focus on the production of difference as well as on critical inquiry into differences. Differences, however, should not merely be reproduced, rather they should be viewed from readjusted perspectives. For demarcation processes simultaneously create spaces where it becomes possible to move and negotiate other markers of difference, to shift them beyond binary definitions and divisions (Haraway 1991). In these arrangements, digital technologies are by no means solely the objects of research: algorithmic feeds assist in the search

for 'pertinent' material, configuring what attracts our attention, touches us, and may or may not be of concern. We are thus not just confronted with digital phenomena of difference production, but (more or less) entangled with them. This raises methodological challenges:

- How can the fundamental relationship between digitality and difference be empirically conceptualized/operationalized? Which methods and methodologies are appropriate and why?
- How are digital media involved in their own historiography and theorizing?
- To what extent is the research process determined by entanglements of research subject and object?
- What challenges in analysis (reification, recording, storage) can be identified and how are they to be met?

Submission

To submit your paper, please send the **full manuscript**, with a length of **6000 to 8000 words**, including the title, abstract (maximum 200 words), and a brief bio with your contact information to julia.wustmann@tu-dortmund.de; jennifer.eickelmann@fernuni-hagen.de and felix.raczkowski@uni-bayreuth.de by **September 1st, 2023**. We kindly ask that all papers be presented in single-spaced format, preferably using Garamond font (size 12) and Harvard referencing style.

Please also **provide a separate "blind" version** of your paper with all identifying information removed in addition to the full paper. Lastly, we ask that authors recommend **three potential reviewers** for their submission.

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