

Critical Thinking: The Future of Judgment

Responsible: Prof. Dr. Dieter Mersch (Zurich University of the Arts), Prof. Dr. Simon Grant (University of St. Gallen)

Venue: Zurich University of the Arts, Toni Campus. Pfingstweidstr. 96. CH 8031 Zürich

30th November and 1st December 2017.

Keynote: Prof. Dr. Fred Turner, University of Stanford (30th November)

Background

Critical Thinking: The Future of Judgment is part of a series of events including various strategy workshops on “digital culture” that Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK) has been offering for the past two years. Beginning with *Smart Curating* between humans and technology and *Social Hacking* as a method of interrupting and undermining institutional processes, the event explores the future of the democratic public sphere, of critical thinking, and of the power of judgment in the age of social networks. It is also informed by a looming legitimization crisis of the internet and digital networks. The key words of this crisis include the diffusion of “alternative facts,” information bubbles (which are increasingly taking on a life of their own), the “dark net,” the erosion of the social dimension in communicative media (“Hate Speech”), the disappearance of discussion cultures, and the one-sided economic transformation of networks by Big Data’s new power structures.

As early as 1961, Jürgen Habermas spoke of a “structural transformation of the public sphere” in a book investigating the changes of the bourgeois public sphere since its instantiation by the Enlightenment and its relationship with a functioning democracy. Since the 1970s at the latest, a utopia of a counterpublic became apparent, borne by alternative movements “critical of the system” and supported by the technological developments of new media, which Fred Turner has analyzed in his book *From Counterculture to Cyberculture* (2006). Ever since, the process of digitization has been associated with a hope for direct democracy and the free exchange of information, which is available to everyone at all times. Further, the internet is considered the instrument of equality and of the unimpeded, uncensored expression of opinion. Following its widespread,

indeed comprehensive, implementation in the 1990s, we have since been experiencing a second and more radical structural transformation of the public sphere, whose path has not been paved by the Enlightenment and rationality this time, but is driven by technology, networks, and algorithms. The major internet platforms, foremost among these Google, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, etc., expressly celebrate the freedom of exchange through “smart” algorithmic processes. So while digitization was associated with a series of social utopias, such as virtually unlimited, technically feasible participation from the outset, the concept of the public sphere, and thus the notion of democracy, was simultaneously redefined, universalized, and globalized.

However, the hopes pinned on technology have been almost completely dashed, at the latest during the last five years. Witnessing this unprecedented disillusionment, we are experiencing a radical deterioration of the great promises of freedom and democracy. This decline comes with a number of critical deliberations on both the foundations and the future of the internet. And it raises various key issues: *First*, whether a discourse of power, and thus of a counterpower, perhaps dominated the theorizing of the internet (its control by state power) for too long. For many years, *secondly*, the right to anonymity was considered a widespread right to freedom in using the internet, despite its abuse in the shape of anonymous posts. *Thirdly*, the immateriality of communication and its possibilities of unlimited connectivity without material barriers were hailed as one of cyberspace’s great achievements, regardless of the danger that the disappearance of bodies threatened the disappearance of presence, trust, and responsibility. *Fourthly*, the problems of regulating excessive, internet-based communication, which tends towards deregulation, were underestimated. For instance, we might need to ask whether the rise of populist tendencies, along with rudeness, uninhibitedness, and hate speech in the internet is directly linked to the forms and formats of the digital public and signals increasing anti-socialization.

Each of these four issues raises a far deeper problem: the appropriate restitution of democratic and thus of political judgment, in an attempt to avoid the erosion of facts and knowledge; this also requires us to ask whether the concept of the social does not suffer from communication resting exclusively on the directives of decisioning logic and mathematical formalization and thus risks losing its meaning and shape — by reflection being replaced by reference, justice by participation, trust by accessibility, and so on. In the 1980s, Jacques Derrida revealed the asymmetry of the “gift” as an indispensable basis of sociality, Emmanuel Lévinas privileged the — equally asymmetrical — principle of alterity over any possible form of relationship, and Jean-Luc Nancy spoke of the *désœuvrement* of the

social realm, that is, its “inoperativity” or “ineffectiveness”: Derrida, Lévinas, and Nancy prompt us to ask whether the technological conditions of digitization and the “cyberculture” derived therefrom do not in fact eradicate precisely these dimensions.

It is not a question of an excessive critique of technology, but rather of the drawbacks and downsides of a particular thought principle and their association with digitization. The drawbacks and downsides already mentioned concern general boundaries, which need to be identified more precisely. They can be associated in particular with a dialectic between the dissolution of boundaries, truth, and moderation, which can be observed time and again in the history of freedom. Two historical cases may serve as examples:

First, with the rise of the ancient Greek city-states, sophistry flourished and transformed rhetorical technique into a means of enlightenment; this, however, contributed just as much to the indifference between conviction and persuasion, by allowing, as the Socratic critique of sophistry put it, “to turn the bad thing into a better one.” Consequently, the power of speech outstripped the power of reason, insofar as almost anything could now be claimed. Also deeply felt was the scandal that both the truth and the lie could be asserted and expressed with one and the same matter, without any binding criterion for their separation. By way of reaction, this prompted the emergence of the great, classical period of Greek philosophy, with Plato and Aristotle as its key proponents, which eventually employed the Logos (i.e., logic, sense, order, and the critique of sophist fallacies) as an internal principle of language.

The second exemplary case is early modern knowledge culture and its invention of the printing press, from which grew a new knowledge culture, whose individualization seemed to set no limits to publication. The loss of belief systems, as Gilbert K. Chesterton later mocked, did not mean people no longer believed anything, but everything. In response to the rampant doubts and eroding confidence in secured bodies of knowledge, the sciences introduced the repeatability of experiments and the public verifiability of their results (exoterism). On the other hand, Diderot and d’Alembert established the major encyclopedias as a social education project and as corrective knowledge. Finally, Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* attempted to put a stop to the too liberal and boundless application of rationality by considering its “critique” as “restricting its use and its scope of application.” Once again, philosophy offered an answer to the threatening dispersion of truth and freedom, in order to set both in appropriate relation.

Transposing these two exemplary historical cases onto the current “digital cultures” requires us to ask whether a new “critique of algorithmic reason” is not needed at all — “critique,” once again, in the Kantian sense of a limitation of validity claims. Not merely the conquest of highly diverse areas of knowledge and social processes by digitization processes is striking — ranging from material testing laboratories through medical expert reports to mathematical evidence and jurisprudence, from controlling financial flows to the automatic generation and qualification of knowledge, to mention just a few examples. The problem seems to involve a twofold challenge: First, the determination, judgment, and the propositional content of a statement becomes entirely a “matter” of calculation and mathematical calculation — often by means of statistical procedures (“big data”; “brute force”), which makes judgment a question of large numbers and accordingly leads to the average of diverse applications. Second, the algorithmic code is totalized and employed even when it fails: for instance, in relation to moral decision making or adjudication based on judiciousness and taking into account individual fates, but also in the semantic analysis of “true” or “truthful” statements over against explicit lies, pretences, or false statements to the point of irony and caricature. This is so because verification cannot be left to probability theory calculations alone. Rather, ever new, divergent, and well-founded positions and creative answers are found. These are able to initiate paradigm shifts, which cannot, however, be covered statistically because they do not comply with the norm. This also holds true for the alternative beliefs or opinions emerging from the echo chambers of “social media.” Today, digitized solutions are provided for the problems confronting the digital public. Thus, global IT companies tend to use exclusively algorithmic, that is, mathematical procedures for the evaluation and deletion of “fake news,” “alternative facts,” or “agitation. This tends to produce circularity, a self-referential digital echo chamber, which leaves the drawing of boundaries entirely to algorithmic programming.

Our event — *Critical Thinking: The Future of Judgment* — seeks to raise these and similar questions, not just in order to flesh out solutions, but first and foremost to lay the foundations for the demanded “critique of algorithmic reason.” One crucial issue in this respect is whether core areas of democratic constitutions do not resist every possible algorithmization: justice, interpersonal relations, the singularity of others, trust, creativity, art, and the like. In order to answer these and similar questions, we first need to take stock of and analyze the current situation, so as to adequately formulate the actual need for action. The workshop comprises four sections:

- Questions about the relationship between culture and digital networking;
- Questions about the change of sociality, the economy, and ecology under the condition of digital technologies including what might be called digital subjectivation (submission, *sub-iectum*, the self under a totalized scheme of digitization);
- Questions about possible sites and conditions of another “culture of discussion” and public, as well as about a restitution of judgment and critical thinking under the condition of what can be understood as “algorithmic rationality” — a form of “reason” that transfers problem-solving exclusively onto continuous algorithmization and digitization;
- Finally, questions about the “digital” conditions of participation and democracy and their relationship with law and justice.

Confirmed participants:

Fred Turner (University of Stanford)

Elena Esposito (Bielefeld)

Stephan Madoff (New York)

Serge von Arx (Frederickstat)

Florian Klinger (University of Chicago)

Simon Grant (University of St. Gallen)

Emmanuel Alloa (University of St. Gallen)

Kathrin Passig (Berlin)

Ludger Schwarte (Kunstakademie Düsseldorf)

Sascha Lobo (Berlin)

Michael Hagner (ETH Zürich)

Mirjam Schaub (Kunsthochschule Halle, Burg Giebichenstein)

Katerina Krtilova (Karls-Universität Prag / Bauhaus Universität Weimar)

Michael Mayer (University of Konstanz / ZHDK)

Fréderic Martel (ZHdK)

Christoph Weckerle (ZHdK)

Ruedi Widmer (ZHdK)

Dieter Mersch (ZHdK)

Format: Lectures and presentations in English; 30 minutes followed by discussion. Including students from the participating universities.