

Decoding Media Impact and Datafication in Diverse Cultural Media Contexts

After the launch of ChatGPT in November 2022, the discussion on the current effects and future potentials of datafication and artificial intelligence (AI) in media and communications has become more relevant than ever. The algorithmic revolution profoundly changes the media environment and the related social systems, and it seems there is no escape. The generative AI techniques combined with machine learning and predictive analytics are now – or will soon become – the focus of policymakers and researchers worldwide. Regarding media and communications studies, the critical questions are not only about the changing media (and newsroom) work practices, business models, and management structures of established media, including online-only strategies typical for the ‘Going Digital’ age. The era of generative AI and datafication further calls for understanding (and predicting) the long-term social changes in our democratic societies (see, for instance, Couldry, 2020; Møller Hartley et al. 2023). In other words, how will the AI revolution affect the behaviours and experiences of media users alongside power relations in our societies? How can media and communications scholars react and engage with the new socio-technological revolutions?

The challenge of capturing the importance of data techniques (and researching them!) in the media and their social environments is complex and highly multi-layered. On the surface, it juxtaposes the lenses of high technologies and coding skills with paradigm shifts in media production and delivery. So far, the core drivers and conceptualisations have been understanding data analytics and datafication, regarded as a paradigmatic shift (Fisher & Mehozay, 2019; Mathieu & Jorge, 2020) that revolutionized media’s way of measuring and analysing media users’ behaviour (and related profits). Datafication coupled with AI tools has created immense opportunities for media to address users’ needs, including public service media and social entrepreneurs of the high-tech and creative industries. Still, at the same time, it has also raised several ethical concerns about data surveillance and privacy, not to mention the pitfall-related scenarios of how AI can take over human beings (Haenlein et al., 2022; John-Mathews et al., 2022).

Moreover, exploring how new technologies change the media landscape is affected and conditioned by the specific cultural and sociopolitical contexts, including the researcher's perceptions, experiences, and systems. Individuals, groups and organizations of the country or local specific cultural and sociopolitical communities and contexts develop their own worldviews and knowledge structures to help make sense of reality and filter and process information about the surrounding environment (Walsh, 1995). These knowledge structures are deeply rooted in the behaviors of actors, and therefore, they are a challenge to measure and change. They may even become a source of inertia, leading to such behaviours and societal phenomena as polarisation and the emergence of filter bubbles and hate speech. This is naturally a challenge and raises the question of how media – with its AI tools – could increase the value of mutual understanding and societal diversity, pride, and inclusion (Trattner et al., 2022; Porlezza, 2023).

This issue presents the Spring 2023 “Central European Journal of Communication” (CEJC) insightful studies and papers that can be addressed as more general questions of decoding the impact of media and the power of datafication and AI tools in different cultural contexts. Looking at the papers holistically, they might provide powerful examples of challenges in media studies regarding misinformation, political worldviews or methodologies placed in various researchers' socio-technological contexts. Overall, they look at the media's normative roles about critical societal issues (societal inclusion, health, wellness) and the ability to address the information needs of minorities and trustworthy and reliable information. In addition to the studies on media organizational responses and strategies, the articles offer examples of advanced computational research methods showing how to process and analyse vast amounts of digital data available, such as social and fact-checking media (see, for instance, Lomborg et al., 2020).

Two articles in this CEJC issue provide insightful conceptual and theoretical frameworks to understand the current media and AI revolution phenomena. Firstly, Göran Bolin emphasises the role of data in “contemporary data capitalism” as a source of power redistribution. Bolin argues that today's media power is redistributed to those with access to data and the capability to make sense of the data, with several question marks on the societal impact(s) and how to interpret the potential empirical data. Bolin's methods and concepts paper also highlights the role of social values and activities in the datafication processes by arguing that “data, which is the main aspect in data capitalism, needs social activity in digital space to come into existence”. In other words, social activities are still ‘the raw material’ for generating data, something of potential value for future media and communications research.

A conceptual contribution to datafication media realities is also observable in the interview with Peter Gross. The discussion highlights the importance

of incorporating (and adjusting) cultural elements in analysing media and their current socio-technological changes and systems. Through reviewing the traditional media-political and economic-centric approaches, Peter Gross argues for the media culture kaleidoscope prisms to be placed in the discussions on the cultural path-dependencies and imagined media futures. The cultural kaleidoscope prism – as adopted from the Romanian media case studies – highlights the importance of cultural specificities and elements to understand the differences and similarities of media systems between countries, regions and media organizations (the organizational culture perspective) — another potential way to move the media research forward.

Looking at the Spring 2023 CEJC issue table of contents, one might ask: Why and how do the media systems in Central and East European countries differ from those of Western Europe? The empirical studies of this issue relate from assorted perspectives to the themes raised by Bolin and Gross: the intertwining of datafication with social values and activities and the importance of the cultural context to understand differences between media systems. The cultural differences help to understand differences, for example, in technological implementation, media usage behaviour and the researchers' findings and conclusions on the media's role in society wellness and pride.

The study of Mihhail Kremez explores the attitudes of Estonia's Russian-speaking minority to Russian-language media in Estonia. Based on the analysis of semi-structured interviews, the “study challenges the view that Estonia's Russian minority lives in an isolated infosphere of Russia”. According to the results, the interviewees representing the Russian-speaking minority in Estonia have diverse media references. They are critical media users, trust Estonian Russian-language media (especially Estonian Public Service Broadcasting) and can recognise the foundations of fake news and information disorder. As for practical implications, the study calls for more attention to information quality and information needs of the Russian-speaking minority in Estonia.

Mato Brautović and Romana John look at the challenges and efficiency of fact-checking in combatting misinformation about COVID-19 spread in social media. The study analyzes the fact-checks of Croatian Faktograf.hr. The analysis compares the reach of debunked and misinformed versions of the same story using computational methods and content analysis. The study shows that the current use of fact-checking websites for debunking campaigns is insufficient, for example, too long correction times. Despite the results, the authors conclude that fact-checking “should still be conducted because it defends the culture of truth.”

The study of Arben Fetoshi and Remzie Shahini-Hoxhai is also related to COVID-19 pandemic but in a very distinct context. The study focuses on the effect of media on voters during the election campaign in Kosovo in a political

crisis after the overthrow of the government. The case provides an excellent setting for analyzing the role of media for political parties and political communication because any other kind of campaigning was limited by the COVID-19 pandemic movement restrictions, and lockdown measures. Based on media monitoring and survey results, the study shows that the media did not have a defining role in the election campaign. This implies that political opinions and preferences are shaped through a long-term process and cannot be easily altered.

Scholarly paper by Ömür Talay and Hasan Cem Çelik analyzes the user behaviour of the app called “Google Opinion Rewards” (G\$OR) which is a tool to collect data in market and academic research. The personal data is collected via voluntary participation in short surveys in return for rewards. The study focuses on the motivations and counter-surveillance strategies of users. The data for analysis is collected by creating a test account for the study and conducting in-depth interviews with participants for deeper insights. The study shows that despite some security concerns most GOR users are ready to share their information recklessly. The study also recognizes a smaller group of active users who aim to maximize their earnings and develop effective strategies against surveillance.

The study of Hugo J. Bello, Nora Palomar-Ciria, Elisa Gallego, Lourdies Jiménez Navascues and Celia Lozano highlights the role of media in society in shaping public awareness of high-relevance societal topics. The study, juxtaposing social researchers’ experience with the experiences of researchers employed at the medical academies, looks at media in addressing gender-based violence (GBV), with the case study of Spain. The authors use advanced Big Data techniques such as web scraping, Natural Language Processing and Neural Networks to extract a significant amount of news from the Spanish digital news media, uncover the underlying themes related to GBV and analyze the relationship between GBV news and public awareness.

Finally, Katarina Fichnová and Lucia Spálová examine the role of creativity in participatory art marketing. The study aims to analyze whether creativity is a significant factor in user-generated content (UGG) success in marketing communication. The study is related to promoting cultural institutions, and is based in the context of a Getty Museum Campaign in Los Angeles. The analysis aims to determine whether there is a significant correlation between the creativity of the adverfact and their sharing on Twitter. The correlation analysis shows that creativity does not play a significant role in the success of UGG products, but creativity is highly relevant in designing attractive communication strategies to attract and engage with potentially relevant arts and creative communities (citizens and media users).

We welcome all the Spring 2023 CEJC contributions to share the culturally related knowledge on datafication, the fabric of generative AI – with

an overall question of the potential ways to media and communications scholars moving forward. With this CEJC issue, we showcase the diversity of research around datafication, asking for an overall understanding of the societal and cultural factors. Overall, this issue can serve as a good starting point for discussing (and exploring) the interplay of the Cultural Kaleidoscopes and related AI technologies.

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