

Conference „Scraping the Demos“: Political Epistemologies of Big Data

Organizers: Research Group Quantification and Social Regulation (Weizenbaum Institute for the Networked Society), DVPW Working Group "Digitalization and Politics" and WZB Berlin Social Science Center.

Date: 8 to 9 July 2019 (lunch-to-lunch)

Conference location: WZB Berlin Social Science Center, Reichpietschufer 50, 10785 Berlin, Germany

Responsible: Dr. Lena Ulbricht demoscraping-weizenbaum@wzb.eu

Registration (no conference fee): <https://tickets.weizenbaum-institut.de/weizenbaum/Demos/>

The conference explores political epistemologies of big data. Political epistemologies are practices by which societies construct politically relevant knowledge and the criteria by which they evaluate it. Big data is the practice of deriving socially relevant knowledge from massive and diverse digital trace data. Practices such as “big data analysis”, “web scraping”, “opinion mining”, “sentiment analysis”, “predictive analytics”, and “nowcasting” seem to be common currency in the public and academic debate about the present and future of evidence-based policy making and representative democracy.

Political elites see digital technologies as sources of new and better tools for learning about the citizenry, for increasing political responsiveness and for improving the effectiveness of policies. Political parties and advocacy groups use digital data to address citizens and muster support in a targeted manner; public authorities try to tailor public policy to public sentiment measured-online, forecast and prevent events (as in predictive policing, preemptive security and predictive healthcare), and continuously adapt policies based on real-time monitoring. An entire industry of policy consultants and technology companies thrives on the promise related to the political power of digital data and analytics. And finally, academic research engages in digitally enhanced computational social sciences, digital methods and social physics on the basis of digital trace data, machine learning and computer simulations.

Scholars from various disciplines will carve out the political epistemologies and practices underlying the use of big data and related phenomena such as algorithms, machine learning and artificial intelligence in political contexts. They will point out interpretive conflicts with regard to the knowledge produced and legitimized by digital technologies and provide reflections from historical perspective. Finally, the democratic implications of digitally mediated political epistemologies and regulatory approaches will be discussed.

The keynote will be held by professor Daniel Kreiss, the author of a seminal book about the use of data-related practices in political campaigning (“Prototype Politics” 2016). The conference will also include artistic interventions and a lab and will be video-recorded. The organizers will offer childcare upon request, please send a message to demoscraping-weizenbaum@wzb.eu

Monday, 8 July 2019

2.00 p. m. Welcome address by Dr. Lena Ulbricht

2.15 p. m. Keynote by professor Daniel Kreiss and discussion

3.30 p. m. Coffee

4.00 p. m. Paper presentations I

Orestis Papakyriakopoulos, Technical University of Munich: Constructing the demos from text. Political research in the age of data-intensive natural language processing (NLP)

Florian Eyert, WZB Berlin Social Science Center: Knowledge machines. Computational models from the perspective of a political epistemology of computational social science

Sebastian Berg, WZB: Big data, atomized voices? The civic epistemologies and the status of epistemic authority in the digital formation of political opinion

Discussant: Prof. Dr. Claudia Ritzi, University of Trier

5.30 p. m. Lab and art exhibition (will be open throughout the conference). Art project and presentation "Smile to Vote - biometric profiling of political orientation" by Alexander Peterhaensel

6.30 p. m. Reception

Tuesday, 9 July 2019

9.00 a. m. Paper presentations II

Dr. Francisca Grommé, University of London: Scraping the internet economy: statistics as product?

Luis Aue, WZB: The polity effects of epistemic regimes in international politics

Prof. Dr. Genia Kostka, Jelena Große-Bley, Free University of Berlin: Big data, big change? Digital environmental governance in Shenzhen, China

Discussant: Prof. Dr. Wolf Schünemann, University of Hildesheim

10.30 a. m. Coffee

11.00 a. m. Paper presentations III

Burcu Baykurt, Columbia University: Becoming “data-driven”: The practice of prediction in local governments

Simon Kruschinski, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz: Let the data speak for itself. The evolution, understanding, organization and conduct of political micro-targeting in Germany

Dr. Sven Regel, WZB: Political parties and political representation in the age of social media and big communication data

Discussant: Prof. Dr. Norbert Kersting, University of Münster

12.30 p. m. Roundtable with practitioners

2.00 p. m. Ending