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EDITORIAL

The Weizenbaum Journal of the Digital Society

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Welcome to the first issue of the *Weizenbaum Journal of the Digital Society*. This journal aims to become a vibrant forum for interdisciplinary research on the social implications of digital societies.

The *Weizenbaum Journal of the Digital Society* is an open access journal, and we wouldn't want it any other way. That's because we see digitalization as a process that changes traditional forms of communication and collaboration and thus raises questions about control of data, information, and knowledge. We look forward to contributions about the conditions, forms, and consequences of the digitalization of society and its subsectors, such as politics, business, science, labor, the public, civil society, law, and culture. The digitalization of society has many facets: It includes the widely observed disruptive transformation of the world of work, new forms of learning and the restructuring of educational systems, the transformation of public space through digital media and platforms, changes in how democracies work, and massive challenges for the legal system and for the planning and design of technical infrastructures. In light of these many developments, which often imply profound social transformations but can lead to resistance to change or incremental modification, this journal intends to serve as a discursive arena for discussions

of how social actors can shape the digital transformation while protecting the foundations of individual and societal self-determination.

Research about the digitalization of societies has been evolving for many years in various disciplines, such as computer science, information science, economics, sociology, science and technology studies, history and philosophy of science, legal science, and others. The dialogue between and integration of these research fields, which are seeking to understand the same phenomenon, are, however, in their early stages. While the various disciplines that scrutinize digital technologies and their social implications differ in their conceptual scope and main interest, digitalization acts as a bridging concept and as a common focal point of interest and relevance attribution.

One of the main aims of this journal is to foster such an inter- and transdisciplinary integration of research disciplines and areas. Understanding digitization as the translation of analogue signals into digital – and digitalization as the associated social phenomena – it is evident that technical and social practices and structures shape each other. This has most notably been studied at the level of organizations, where the transformative effects of digital technologies are most visible and where we observe that organizational norms and social expectations in turn also heavily shape digital technologies.

The digital is particularly malleable because it offers a multitude of affordances that are, in turn, accessible to a multitude of actors – albeit in different roles and in varying power relations. This is what generates the enormous heterogeneity and ongoing dynamism of the digital. Several driving forces distinguish digitalization from older technologies: One is user participation in digital practices, as is apparent in user-generated content, in social media, and in co-creation. Another dominant feature is the widespread and often sophisticated degree of automation, as in big data and machine learning. Other important affordances of digital technologies include their adaptivity and highly granular ways of influencing human behavior.

To grasp the consequences of digitalization for society, it is also necessary to account for the spatial and temporal development of societies: In the temporal dimension, we realize that in the short run, some digital technologies do not diffuse, while in the long run, many “general-purpose technologies,” such as machine learning, are emerging and continuously transforming various social domains – for example, industrial production and communication. In the spatial dimension, digitalization is certainly a driving force behind an increased global connectivity, but local contexts nevertheless play a significant role in how digital technologies are appropriated and adapted. While digitalization encompasses all areas of life, it is important to specify how digital technologies interact with different societal subsystems and follow their own logics and functions, as, for example, in politics, the economy, science, and the media. The digitalization of societies demonstrably also yields different patterns

with regard to social strata and various dimensions of inequality, famously epitomized in the phenomenon of the “digital divide.”

A major impetus for this journal is to address the need for and challenge of inter- and trans disciplinary research, which also needs to intersect with other societal subsystems. Such an approach is in line with various trends in science research and policy, which postulate that science and society need to develop a closer relationship to address the major societal challenges of today. Concepts such as “mode 2” knowledge production, transdisciplinarity, “grand challenges,” the “great transformation,” the “anthropocene,” or “responsible research and innovation” argue that complex global problems such as climate change, migration, or the COVID-19 pandemic (and the specific role of digital technologies in these matters) can only be understood and meaningfully addressed through high-quality interdisciplinary research that is conducted in close exchange with civil society, politics, and industry. There is no doubt that digitalization is also one of these important societal challenges and opportunities.

The *Weizenbaum Journal of the Digital Society* aims to help develop this programmatic approach and aid its implementation in research practice. Socio-technical systems can only be understood and shaped in an interdisciplinary way, through the interplay of computer science, social sciences, humanities, and law. Digitalization research is sometimes driven by specific societal needs or by technical developments and often follows short public attention cycles. Consequently, this journal specifically aims to publish interdisciplinary basic research about digital societies. In addition, the journal will foster academically grounded discussions about timely matters of public interest.

Joseph Weizenbaum, the German-American computer pioneer (1923–2008) whose name the journal bears, was one of the first prominent critics of digital technology. He rose to prominence in 1966 for the ELIZA program, which could communicate with people in natural language – apparently, anyway. Through this experiment, Weizenbaum wanted to demonstrate how readily people accept the computer as an interlocutor and overestimate its capabilities. His book *The Power of Computers and the Powerlessness of Reason* (1977) is therefore an appeal not to surrender to the machines and to renounce self-determination.

The *Weizenbaum Journal of the Digital Society* is open for innovative research in all areas of the digitalization of society and to all scientific disciplines. We particularly invite contributions based on interdisciplinary research that breaks new ground by bringing together different research approaches, methodologies, and disciplinary traditions. However, we also welcome innovative discipline-oriented studies as long as they focus on the relationship between digitalization and society and are not merely aimed at a specialist readership. We also look forward to contributions that reflect on the development of digitalization research itself. Such studies may concern theories, methods, and the state of research on selected issues, interdisciplinary cooperation, and the dialogue

between science and society. We also welcome contributions that critically examine the digital society in the spirit of Joseph Weizenbaum. The *Weizenbaum Journal of the Digital Society* has been established by members of the Weizenbaum Institute but is not intended to serve as its mouthpiece; rather, it should constitute an international venue for research discussion. We thank all members of our [International Advisory Board](#) for supporting us on this journey.

In this issue, we present interdisciplinary contributions to current and socially highly relevant debates in digitalization research that combine scientific disciplines and methodologies in an innovative way. Eugenia Mitchelstein, Camila Giuliano, and Pablo Boczkowski combine communication research with political science and a methodological mix to reveal differences in political talk across social media platforms – accounting for both practices of political talk *and* user perceptions. Eva Kocher’s article combines legal and sociological perspectives and uses organization research to further develop the regulation of labor platforms. Sandra Fredman, Darcy du Toit, Mark Graham, Aradhana Cherupara Vadakkethil, Gautam Bhatia, and Alessio Bertolini also draw on legal and social science perspectives to suggest an international framework for the regulation of platform work; their article also relies on participatory research methods and stakeholder expertise. In the last contribution, and inspired by communication and social science research, Thomas Friemel, Tobias Frey, and Alexander Seifert develop a multilevel model of digital inequalities to explain internet use among older adults.

There will be several issues of the *Weizenbaum Journal* a year and we invite everyone to subscribe to the journal’s newsletter on our website. We wish you a good read of the first issue and look forward to your feedback.