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Democracy in Flux

Order, Dynamics and Voices in Digital Public Spheres

Digital Practices

Whose voices are we hearing?

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Recently, it came as a surprise to learn that many tech companies are turning to humans to transcribe and analyze audio recordings in order to improve their speech assistance systems. This case is remarkable, not only because it has sparked debate over privacy issues, but also because a hoodwinked public has rediscovered the human practices at the heart of what is supposedly digital—a narcissistic injury afflicting socially overestimated notions of technological performance.

This case illustrates one of the many challenges that digitalization poses for sociological theory: the question of the capacity to act. Do workers act like algorithms or do the algorithms perform actions? What potential for action does the digital have? The concept of action in methodological individualism, with its restriction to the rationally acting and meaning-seeking individual, seems to be reaching its limits in the face of complex interlinkages between human and nonhuman elements.

In the paper, I propose to analyze (1.) digital culture proceeding from the concept of practice. The sociological theory of practice (with its roots in American pragmatism and Ludwig Wittgenstein's late philosophy, shaped by Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens, and now systematized into a theoretical movement) offers an alternative research program to established sociological concepts. In contrast to the concept of action, practice theory decenters the acting subject: The subject's ability to act is due to historically preexisting practices that have shifted in time and space and are taken up and repeated by the subject. In the process, artefacts are also brought into focus as participants in action. Thus, practice theory enables an analytical consideration of nonhuman elements; however, it reserves the concept of practice for humans, since its focus so far has been on physical performance and embodied knowledge.

On this basis, I develop (2.) a modification of the theory of practice that places its focus on the repetition and identification of patterns of practice—a potential that is also available to digital programs, so that we can also speak of “digital practices” and carry out a symmetrical analysis of human and nonhuman elements.

As described in the call, the debate on digitalization often oscillates between promises of salvation and cultural pessimism, with the extent and consequences of digitization often being either over- or underestimated. Starting from a praxeological perspective, I develop and interrelate (3.) two hypotheses with each other: The strong hypothesis that algorithms and software themselves have the capacity to act will be complemented by a relativizing hypothesis, according to which they only have this capacity in the context of human practice: a) Algorithms repeat or replace practices such as calculating, comparing, and evaluating, b) they do so because of programming that reproduces

social power relations, c) they are only relevant by entering into human practices, by being programmed, used, and received and by changing the form and intensity of previously nondigital practices. At this point, a particular achievement of the digital is also highlighted, which explains its rapid and widespread dissemination: the ability to interlink and reconfigure practices.

Finally, I will demonstrate (4.) the analytical benefit of a shift from actions to practices and, within practice theory, from physical performance to repetition and identification via selected case studies such as the one described above. The symmetrical description of human and nonhuman elements of practice can open up sociological questions for consideration, such as: What difference does it make for participants whether a human, a bot, or an algorithm “acts”? What consequences does this have for the attribution of responsibility? What effects does this have on society's perception of digitalization?