

Call for Papers

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4th DFG Symposium in Media Studies on the Topic of “Filters”

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In a society permeated by digital-algorithmic processes, the relevance of filters is evident: Filters regulate access to information (“filter bubbles”), they make huge amounts of data manageable (“big data”), and they control the worldwide transfer of data on a technical level. However, filtering can also be understood as a fundamental condition of media more generally, beyond the networked media and their effects. Filters are not only necessary for media to function in a technical sense; they also create their own aesthetics, for example by determining ranges of visibility or audibility or by shaping the content of media by artefacts. The fundamental medial dimension of filtering leads further to a political dimension, where socio-technical processes mediate access, identities, borders and permissions.

The 4th Symposium in Media Studies addresses the entire range of operations and technologies of filtering within their systematic contexts. The concept of filtering, with its material, aesthetic and political implications, as outlined above, addresses the multifarious approaches and facets of media studies and draws novel connections between them. Further, the concept enables us to take up current public debates regarding digitalisation and to develop robust media studies positions, to be discussed in four sections: (1) the history, materiality and aesthetics of filters, (2) algorithmic filters in digital cultures, (3) the politics of filtering, and (4) media studies as an actor in academic research and the public sphere.

Section 1: History, Materiality and Aesthetics of Filters

Filtering can only be described as an elementary function of media if the historically changing materiality and functionality of filters are addressed. This entails observing the aesthetic effects of filters: they can change or distort sounds; camera lenses create effects like halos, flares etc., that have material causes on the one hand but can become elements of a visual style or an epochal aesthetics on the other. Thus, filters are a part of our perception and are able to direct, amplify or activate certain senses. A history of perception of the filter foregrounds these forms of reception and helps us in assessing the ever-growing array of filtering processes.

Potential questions in this section include, among others:

- How do filters determine the properties of a medium or to what extent do they constitute criteria for differentiating between media? What consequences ensue for the concept of media if we focus on the selective rather than on the productive and integrative capacities of media?

- How do filters contribute to the aesthetics of a medium or a medial style, to generating an epoch in media history (one might think here, for example, of the rotating filters in the Technicolor process)?
- How does material filtering relate to associated issues concerning the social filtering of bodies and things by architecture, spatial planning or gates?

Section 2: Algorithmic Filters in Digital Cultures

Currently, algorithmic filters are often equated with filter bubbles and echo chambers. However, digital technology as a material praxis has been dealing with filters ever since it began to emerge out of electrical and communications engineering. Viewed in this way, filters can be considered a basic operation of electronic calculations. The close links between filtering and digital technology remain throughout their development. For example, technologies in machine learning are applied to filtering from the very start, and spam filters can be regarded as one of the success stories of machine learning. Furthermore, theories of statistical filters (e.g. Kalman and particle filters) are used for pattern recognition. Such algorithmic filtering technologies are entangled with questions regarding the central role of algorithmic technologies in structuring, selecting and contextualising information and agency in digital cultures.

Potential contributions to this section could address the following issues:

- filtering in computer history and computer technologies,
- filtering as an internal logic of and area of implementation for algorithmic technologies,
- medial forms of algorithmic filtering, i.e. media technologies based on users' practices and their metadata, such as geo-apps, news feeds, etc.,
- relationships between algorithmic filtering and the social/affective salience of media content, e.g. the suspicion that automatically selected news emphasises "fake news" and emotionally negative content.

Section 3: Politics of Filtering

Political Framework

Filtering practices are always political practices. For example, they can result in social selection, they become the precondition and the effects of political decisions, and they frame discursive orders, identities and power relations. How are the shifting popularities of filtering intertwined with political orders? Which political conflicts and processes of negotiation structure discourses and practices of filtering? How do filters contribute to the augmentation, control or stabilisation of social differentiation?

Micropolitics of Practices of Filtering

Filters execute demarcations, they group individuals into types, series, sets or populations and have recourse to different media for storing and processing documents and markers of identity. For example, the music provider Spotify turns gender into a sorting criterion for its algorithms in order to "curate" tastes in music. To take a quite different example: border police, secret services and the military develop personalised filters of markers for "people likely to threaten the public order" and "terrorists", with fatal consequences in regimes of control and machines of war. How are the power of filters and corresponding forms of resistance constituted in such contexts?

Opacity and Transparency

Given that filters are a part of technologies of recognising, detecting, identifying, distinguishing and categorising, they need to be discussed in political terms, because the decisions that are inscribed in such processes tend to be naturalised in (semi-)automatic procedures and threaten to become invisible. This is problematic both politically and epistemically. What are the challenges faced in this regard by media studies approaches when they seek to research the politics of filtering?

Section 4: Media Studies as an Actor in Research and in Public Spheres

In the fourth section we want to focus attention in a different and self-reflexive way on the filters that determine and define the status of media studies as an actor in research and in public spheres. Who or what filters media studies? How is its access to public spheres or to research funding mediated? Which social, technical, institutional, conventional and medial practices and conditions play a role in filtering areas of competence and external perceptions?

Using a new concept for this debate, the hope is to generate a certain distance to the established narratives and self-images of media studies. By taking up proliferating debates on the status and understanding of media studies, which are generally given little space in “everyday” academic life, the idea is to support and extend existing initiatives within the discipline. The hope is also that these critical impulses might spark a more profound national and international debate and help us to develop new strategies for transforming and using processes of filtering to renew the agenda and the relevance of media studies.

How to participate:

Submit an abstract (1-2 pages) to tobias.matzner@uni-paderborn.de by **31 August 2019**.

If the abstract is accepted, please submit the final version of your paper by 31 January 2020 (approx. 20,000 characters).

You should be prepared to respond to one of the other contributions at the Symposium.

You should be ready to prepare your contribution for publication in the conference proceedings in a timely manner.

Further Information

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