

**Concepts and Data: A Workshop on Precision and Uncertainty in Data, 30th October, 9 am to 12 pm
and 31st October 9 am to 12pm**

(Cohosted by Viral Conjunctions)

This interdisciplinary workshop will bring together scholars from the fields of anthropology, philosophy, political science and computer sciences, to explore a range of questions regarding the epistemological and social consequences of digitalization, big data, techniques of visualization, and legitimacy of measurement.

Jocelyn Benoist, Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne/CNRS).

Given to No One

In relation to this theme of 'big data', the first question that comes to my mind is, of course: what makes these so-called 'big data' 'big'? In asking this question, I do not claim to be original. It is the natural question to ask and I am aware that a lot of people asked it already, with better resources to address it. It seems to me that the specific interest of the question of "data" today is precisely linked to the phenomenon of big data, which is not a simple extension of it. Big data were probably made possible by the existence, which preceded them, of an epistemology and a practice of data. However, with the institution of big data, a threshold has been crossed. This raises specific problems, which are perhaps of such a nature as to change the very meaning and value of the notion of "data," as we inherit it from the epistemology and social uses that have been those of modernity.

Veena Das, Johns Hopkins University

The Givenness in Question

Responding to the movement of anthropological concepts such as those of segmentary lineage systems to the field of economics to explain variation in the duration and intensity of conflicts in the Horn of Africa, this paper explores the implications of what it means to measure relation between entities such as strength of agnatic ties that much later research in anthropology shows to have been produced as a response to colonial governance in this region. I argue that the strong effects that economists find of the effect of lineage organization on conflict raise important epistemological issues by rereading the texts from which the data on lineage

organization is extracted to show that most statements taken to be true were offered by informant in relation to hypothetical questions and how that abstracts were mistaken to be concrete instances of facts on the ground. The paper shows an interesting symmetry between the way anthropologist such as Evans-Pritchard evacuated the real colonial violence that was before their eyes and substituted it by abstract models and the way economists are blinded to the way geopolitical processes produce not only local effects but also theories that explain away the role of transnational actors in the production of violence.

Juliet Floyd

In his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein conveyed the idea that ethics cannot be located in an object or self-standing subject matter of propositional discourse, true or false. At the same time, he took his work to have an eminently ethical purpose, and his attitude was not that of the emotivist. The trajectory of this conception of the normativity of philosophy as it developed in his subsequent thought is traced, with an eye on the perspective on ethics he came to develop in his later thought.

It is explained that and how the notion of a ‘form of life’ (*Lebensform*) emerged only in his later thought, in 1937, earmarking a significant step forward in his philosophical method, helping him to reject the notion of “culture” [*Kultur*] as a fundamental concept. I argue that the concept of *Lebensform* represents a way of domesticating, localizing, and making dynamic logic itself, the very idea of a claim or reason. *Lebensformen* supplement and deepen the more well-known idea of a ‘language game’, as Cavell showed in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (1969) and *The Claim of Reason* (1979). As Cavell also later argued, “forms of life” have both a biological and an ethological dimension. The point so vividly illustrated today is that these dimensions are moveable, fluid and dynamic. “Forms of life” get us beyond reliance on an unhelpful, rigid notion of “culture”, which I shall reject as a less-than-useful concept or locus for thinking about concepts and the given data in our present world.

What is needed, rather, is a reconceptualization of the very ideas of logic and ethics in a world of rapidly evolving, fragmenting, and sometimes oddly congealing forms of life. I take Wittgenstein’s spring 1937 ‘domestication’ of the nature of logic to articulate a deep response to Alan Turing’s epochal 1936 paper, ‘On computable numbers, with an application to the *Entscheidungsproblem*’, pointing to the ineliminable role of evolving everyday phraseology – the embedding of words in forms of life -- in the foundations of logic. This “ordinary” phraseology may appear fragile, and certainly we are constantly adapting our perspectives on our own lives and activities in light of the words of others, often in ways that slip and break prior “meanings”. What is fascinating is that Turing’s founding document of AI, “Intelligent Machinery” (1949) imbibed this fundamental lesson from Wittgenstein. This conjunction points us toward ways we may approach the very ideas of “ethics” and “data” in our computationally-driven world.

Sandra Laugier, Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne/CNRS).

Data for Ethics? TV Series experience and moral education"

My presentation will address the relation between digital humanities and popular culture as "data". I am starting from Stanley Cavell's observation about the movies that matters to us:

"The question what becomes of objects when they are filmed and screened has only **one source of data** for its answer, namely the appearance and significance of just these objects and people that are in fact to be found in the succession of films, or passages of films, that matter to us. To express their appearances, and define those significances, and articulate the nature of this mattering, are acts that help to constitute what we might call film criticism" (Cavell, "What becomes of things on film", *Themes out of school*, 183).

Philosophy and aesthetics have not yet adequately observed or analyzed the democratization of art in the digital age, nor has it addressed the blurring of the distinction between amateur and professional in certain artistic settings and practices. This is because philosophy has lacked the necessary analyses and theoretical tools and has not clearly grasped the pragmatic shift of culture toward the public space. Thus, it is essential to use new analytical tools to examine the democratization of art and, conversely, the emergence of cultural data as resources for renewing democratic forms of life.

In 1939, Walter Benjamin reflected on the consequences of new techniques of mechanically reproducing visual and musical works of art. A change is underway in the field of culture and its hierarchies, and it is marked e.g. by the change in attitude towards television series, which are now digital spaces where artistic and hermeneutic authority can be re-appropriated and where viewers can be re-empowered by constituting their own experiences. This is what the critic Robert Warshaw had in mind when he wrote in *The Immediate Experience* (1962) that "Culturally, we are all 'self-made men': we constitute ourselves in the particular choices we make within the dizzying array of stimuli that offer themselves to us." May the democratization of artistic production promised by Romanticism be realized in the new artistic forms and modes of participation and interaction that digital technology allows, opening the way for new forms of subjective authority?

Ruoyou Li, Johns Hopkins University

Data Visualization and Multiple Media

Data visualization (DV) is neither a new technology nor novel phenomenon. Visualizing invisible viruses and their impacts has also always been part of the effort to contain viral spread and mitigate damages. Yet what captures my curiosity is now DV is so prominent and prevailing in understanding and responding to the current COVID-19 pandemic. Graphs and maps are no longer confined within academic meetings of medical researchers or policy-making process of administrators. Rather, DV appears in news, TV reports, online stories,

and social media platforms that circulate among a much wider audience. It even manifests in ordinary language such as “flattening the curve” meaning slowing COVID spread and “returning to zero” meaning having no new cases. Given its prominence, DV constructs or at least influences people’s experience of this pandemic. I thus hope to explore the phenomena of DV: what does it do and how, in the terms of its influence on making sense of an overwhelming event like COVID, its specific construction of time, temporality, memory and etc, as well as its authorization of certain policies and discourses (in the U.S. at least).

Moreover, understanding DV is also an investigation into the conditions under which it could be possible and comprehensible. In fact, DV requires the viewers to have certain knowledge of statistics, trust in data, and conception of linear models. It also “cites” to other visual forms such as the world map, photographs, and scientific images which are themselves already loaded embodiments of historical, social, and cultural contexts (for instance, the international map of the world is an icon made possible by the infrastructure of cameras, an international “agreement” on standard of measurements, a historical visual artifact born during and after WWII, and an manifestation of the rise and dominance of national-states). With these requirements and citations, DV mobilizes certain ways of seeing, thus training, habituating, and disciplining the audience to a particular usage of their eyes. The prominence of DV is not only a “triumph” of data technologies or a new trend of tools at our disposal. It also manifests an ongoing construction and becoming dominance of one way of “seeing” and “sense-making” against the larger background of “big data era” and “surveillance states.”

Alvitta Ottley

Developments in data visualization research have enabled visualization systems to achieve superb general usability and application across various domains. These advancements have improved people's understanding of data and the general understanding of people themselves and how they interact with visualization systems. In particular, researchers have gradually recognized the deficiency of having one-size-fits-all visualization interfaces. They have shown that a visualization's effectiveness depends on the user's experience, personality, and cognitive abilities. In this talk, Dr. Ottley will show why it is critical to consider the visualization consumer and how individual traits can have significant implications for visualization designs that support reasoning and decision-making with data. We will also discuss how different designs can create, reinforce, or mitigate biases related to risk perception. Finally, Dr. Ottley will highlight significant roadblocks and future directions for creating useful and practical visualization tools.

Links to relevant papers

1. Spatial Ability can impact medical visualization (<http://visualdata.wustl.edu/files/bayes.pdf>)
2. Supporting prostate cancer decision-making (<http://visualdata.wustl.edu/files/proact.pdf>)
3. A survey of individual differences in visualization (<http://visualdata.wustl.edu/files/id-survey.pdf>)
4. A poor visualization can elicit risky behavior (<http://visualdata.wustl.edu/files/lets-gamble.pdf>)

