

Special Issue

Frictions

Conflicts, Controversies and Design Alternatives in Digital Valuation

edited by Marcus Burkhardt, Jonathan Kropf,
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Digital technologies are widely considered to be drivers of innovation and solutions for small and grand challenges alike. From this perspective “the digital” appears to be problematic only because there is still too little of it: insufficient broadband infrastructures, too few digital services in public administration, too little digital transformation *in* and *of* organizations, insufficient digital learning and teaching, too few skills to make meaningful use of the potentials offered by digital technologies etc. Consequently, policy makers, technologists, and businesspeople alike frequently call for more digitization. The capacity to accumulate, analyze and utilize data is seen as a key factor in leveraging the potentials of digital innovation, e.g. in the context of artificial intelligence and the rearticulation of services as well as business models as data-driven or data-based. Data is often hailed as the new oil in such contexts whereas critics seek to expose this metaphor as a “capitalist-colonialist fantasy” that sustains “the myth of perpetual economic growth” (Taffel 2021).

The success of many of today’s most valuable companies (according to market capitalization) is based on the intensification of data “capture” (Agre 1994) and its economic exploitation. Google effectively turned the web and its users’ behavior into data, Facebook datafied social interaction, and Amazon drove the datafication of consumption to name just a few prominent examples. With the proliferation of smart devices such as smartphones, smart watches, and smart speakers as well as the ongoing push toward smart cities humans, technologies, and environments got entangled in ever more complex yet seemingly frictionless infrastructures of datafication and data-based as well as machine learned computation. This absence of friction has become a defining yet problematic characteristic of our present socio-technical condition. It conceals the contradictions, power asymmetries, and polarizations with which digital cultures are imbued. Unlike in industrial societies in which workers directly faced those contradictions in factories and mining plants, human actors are unlikely to directly sense the wielding power of the digital regime (Agre 1995). It therefore only seems consequential when Shoshana Zuboff in her seminal *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* calls upon users: “Be the Friction” (2019). However, to counter corporate digital domination it is of equal importance to identify and carefully analyze the ongoing conflicts, crises and controversies as well as to envision alternative designs of the digital.

The special issue *Frictions: Conflicts, Controversies and Design Alternatives in Digital Valuation* seeks contributions that critically engage with the contradictions and ambivalences *in* and *of* digital cultures. It is based on the premise that the material, practical, and semiotic frictions occurring in the socio-digital realm can be understood as value conflicts that may or may not come up to the surface of discursive attention and treatment. The special issue seeks to explore how these clashes are provoked by (the interfering of) processes of

valuation (Dewey 1939; Heuts/Mol 2013; Mau 2017; Kropf/Laser 2019; Nicolae et al. 2019; Srnicek 2021) that operate on various, analytically distinguishable, layers:

- *Practices of self-evaluation and evaluation directed by others (e.g. self-tracking, liking others, ranking services, scoring objects etc.)*
- *Inscription of values into infrastructures (e.g. like buttons, privacy settings, automated decision making, citizen scores etc.)*
- *Value creation (e.g. digital marketing, ad-auctions, end-to-end-measurement, assessment of data value, business modeling, functioning of data markets etc.)*

It is of utmost importance to note that the processes and layers in empirical practice occur in an entangled, interlaced, and fused fashion. It is precisely for this reason that they are prone to produce value clashes, for in empirical practice there are always different, sometimes incompatible or even incommensurable, "economies of worth" (Boltanski/Thévenot 2006) in operation. Couched beneath the impression of frictionlessness are therefore conflicts (material-practical contradictions between processes of valuation) and controversies (discursive articulation of contradictions between processes of valuation) that indicate viable alternatives to design the socio-digital world (reconciling or dissolving conflicts by privileging specific processes of valuation instead of others).

We would like to call for contributions that theoretically discuss and empirically unpack the frictions that pervade digital cultures. Paper proposals may address the following questions (without being limited to these):

- How do processes and practices of valuation intersect, act together, reinforce each other, counteract, clash etc. in empirical practice?
- In which empirical fields are value conflicts to be identified and how do they play out and manifest, within as well as between the different layers?
- How are value conflicts being made visible, accounted for, and negotiated in controversies, who does and who does not participate in these controversies or is even excluded from the discourse, and what is the impact of these controversies?
- Which concepts, theories, and/or methodologies can be used to fruitfully investigate into and analyze value conflicts and controversies?
- Which design alternatives are and have been tested? Are there already established alternative modes of conciliating value conflicts?
- What are the conditions that need to be met for alternative design models to be successful?

When submitting an abstract, please specify under which of the following categories you would like to submit your paper:

1. *Field Research and Case Studies* (full paper: 6000-8000 words). We would like to call for articles that discuss empirical findings concerning practices of valuation, the way they entangle, the conflicts they produce, the controversies they encite, and the design alternatives they elicit.
2. *Methodological Reflection* (full paper: 6000-8000 words). We would like to call for contributions that reflect on the methodologies for the investigation into conflicts and

controversies of valuation, as well as into design methodology. These may include, for example, critical evaluation of methods and concepts, field reports of projects implementing design methods etc.

3. *Conceptual/Theoretical Reflection* (full paper: 6000-8000 words). We would like to encourage the submission of contributions that reflect on the conceptual and/or theoretical dimensions of valuation, value conflicts, controversies, and design alternatives. As our general interests lies in the entanglement of different varieties of valuation, we are particularly interested in concepts and theories focusing on the interplay of practices of valuation.
4. *Entering the Field* (2000-3000 words). This experimental section presents initial and ongoing empirical work. The editors have created this section to provide a space for researchers who would like to initiate a discussion about emerging (yet perhaps incomplete) research material and plans, as well as methodological insights. Please feel free to suggest experiments.

If you are considering the publication of a paper in the special issue this is the procedure to follow:

Schedule

- Initial abstracts (max. 300 words) and a short biographical note (max. 100 words) are due on: 30.04.2023
- Authors will be notified by 31.05.2023, whether they will be invited to submit a full paper
- Full papers are due on: 31.10.2023
- Notification to authors of referee decision: 15.01.2024
- Final version due on: 29.02.2024
- Final notification: 31.03.2024

This issue is edited by Marcus Burkhardt, Jonathan Kropf, Carsten Ochs, and Tatjana Seitz. Please send your abstract and short biographical note directly to [**frictions@sfb1187.uni-siegen.de**](mailto:frictions@sfb1187.uni-siegen.de).

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