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– Call for Papers –

Autonomy in the Digital Age:
Rethinking Relationships between Humans, Technology, and Society

An international Conference of the Research Group
"Autonomy and autonomous Systems"
of the Universities Bonn & RWTH Aachen

20th – 22nd of November 2022

University of Bonn/Germany (and online)

Autonomy, originally a core concept of the Enlightenment epitomizing aspirations of modernity, has become one of the central and particularly high-profile concepts in debates on digital transformations.

The discourse figures of this debate mostly comprise a polarizing perspective that oscillates between the restrictive or dangerously uncontrollable effect of digital technologies, such as facial recognition, surveillance or 'autonomous weapons' and the liberating, autonomy-enhancing function ('smart home', 'assisted living'). Contexts of application include e.g. administration, military and police, social and health-related services, medicine and education, and not to forget, the digital economy with its diverse challenges regarding the future of work. Today, in times of digitalization, datafication, and an increasing influx of artificial intelligence into many sectors of society, the concept of autonomy needs re-definition and reflection under contemporary technological conditions.

Our starting point for the reflections on understanding of autonomy in the digital age is a conceptual sensitivity that asserts the possibility of autonomy for both personal-subjective and collective-social relations. On both levels, conditions for autonomy are subject to rapid change. Outlining the distinction between autonomous and automatic systems, different degrees of autonomy can be distinguished - from weak forms, in which it is a matter of gradual absence of external control, to strong forms, in which the respective 'autonomous' entity is able to set its own laws (rules).

With the development of Artificial Intelligence (AI) systems and the increasing use of robots in everyday life technological transformations have come along with social changes and new conflicts. Questions of privacy and data use, the future of work or the subsequent dawn of a 'post-capitalist' society, as well as the discussions about the consequences of autonomously acting combat robots and the ethical regulation of warfare are just a few examples of the present challenges and those still to come. Meanwhile, discourses of technological autonomy address an array of issues concerning the future of democracy. Global digital dependencies, the delegation of authoritative power and the rise of global platform companies challenge the political autonomy of democratic states and their technological sovereignty. On a cultural level, the integration of autonomous systems into society launches a discussion about a technologically induced crisis of humanist values and question the ideals of the enlightenment for today's socio-technical practices. Studies related to trans- or posthumanism construe technologies as an opportunity to improve or even overcome the human condition. Visions of human enhancement, virtuality, cyborg-societies mingling with autonomous machines and artificial superintelligence might sound utopian today, but perhaps not anymore tomorrow. The reasoning in both optimistic assumption and skeptical anticipation illustrates the urgency of re-defining not just our idea of personal autonomy within the digital, and datafied society but also the need to theorize and analyze new forms of autonomy to understand the next phase of digital society. Interdisciplinary research on the concept of autonomy is

needed in order to substantiate our normative, functional, and epistemic claims on the development of the relationship between humans and technology in the future.

The conference "Autonomy in the Digital Age: Rethinking Relationships between Humans, Technology, and Society" aims to encourage a conversation among all disciplines interested in issues concerning 'Autonomy and Technology', allowing for diverse and interdisciplinary perspectives. We intend to explore the significance of autonomous living in our digital societies, to question the humanist concept of autonomy itself in our technological reality and to analyse the implications of our interaction with (semi)autonomous systems.

Submissions from all social sciences, humanities and technology disciplines related to the following topics and questions are highly welcomed, but do not need to be limited to these:

Section 1: Theoretical approaches & interdisciplinary perspectives:

How are digital data practices in public and private life enabling or hindering informational self-determination? How do we reconfigure notions like privacy and surveillance? How will the growing influence of autonomous systems affect social structures, political systems, labour and governmental control measures?

Section 2: Contexts:

How are (emerging) modes of (technical) autonomy and agency reshaping societies and personal life-worlds? Which different puzzles of "autonomy" emerge in practical contexts and fields from art, medicine and political institutions? Are we as a digital society at the beginning of a cultural opposition of humanism and technicity? How can cultural and systemic differences in technology policy be reflected and specified on the basis of the innovation of autonomous systems?

Section 3: Norms and ethics:

Which (post-Eurocentric) epistemologies and vocabularies question/enrich the debates about "autonomy" and Humanism in the new digital reality? Are agens/patiens ethics suitable as a theoretical framework for ascribing moral status (person and actor status) to autonomous systems? Should autonomy be understood as an intrinsic quality or as an effect in a relationship characterized by power relations? What normative requirements must autonomous systems and infrastructures meet in an ethically engaged digital society?

Section 4: Conversations:

How to conceptualize Human-Machine Interaction and machine-machine interactions in social sciences? Are individualistic or collectivistic designs of the digital society the vanishing point of technical autonomy issues? What is the status of the idea of autonomy in a digital society in which mutually autonomous interactions between humans and technology have become a reality?

Section 5: Systems and machines:

What degree of autonomy do we ascribe to robots? What synergies arise from the collaboration between humans and autonomous systems in different contexts? What role do autonomous robots play in hybrid decision-making-processes? Can autonomous robots be conceptualized as part of an automated process? Which criteria guide the human-centered design of autonomous systems?