TESTING IN THE WILD

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Publics Practices Infrastructures

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TESTING

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Content

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UNIVERSITÄT SIEGEN   MEDIEN DER KOOPERATION   DFG Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft

The objects, means, and situations of testing have multiplied rapidly in the digital age. Practices of testing have become ubiquitous. They have moved beyond the spatial and institutional confines of scientific laboratories (testing hypotheses), classrooms and exam halls (testing students), consumer organizations (testing products), and inspection agencies (testing systems and protocols) into the wild of everyday digital lifeworlds.

Human beings and technological systems are today both subjects and objects of continuous testing. Paradigms such as A/B testing, machine learning, and test-driven development infuse a logic of testing into the creation, construction and maintenance of digital systems. Digital devices are equipped with ever more sensors that facilitate the monitoring of our health, behavior, and performance, directing our sensibilities towards new modes of data-based sense-making, evaluation, and justification. Platforms incentivise consumers to become critics by testing and reviewing products in public. In parallel, grassroots testing through 'unboxings' and 'teardowns' have become genres of user-generated content in themselves. Away from online platforms, users grapple with products delivered with rudimentary manuals or generic support, and whose functionality is expected to be extendable, adaptable, and fixable in the wild. Variations of updates are rolled out to select publics in order to test their respective acceptance within, or across, targeted demographics. Testing and evaluating digital products and services 'on the fly' has not only become concurrent with ordinary use, but part of it.

Practices of testing commonly rely on data: its collection, processing, circulation, (re)presentation, justification, and analysis. In fact, datafication and testing co-evolve. The proliferation of testing in the wild and associated controversies can be observed at various levels. On the one hand the intentional organization, analysis and discussion of tests and their results based on data remains relevant and has been controversially discussed in recent years, either with respect to the Covid-19 pandemic (Schnelltests, 7-day incidence rates, intensive bed capacity etc.), climate change (ice core tests, gtCO2, RCPs etc.), or financial crises (banking 'stress tests', REAs, leverage ratios etc.). On the other hand the everyday, continuous, and casual capture of data through digital media has led both to practices of self-tracking as well as critiques of a growing and pervasive monitoring and exploitation of users through corporate data practices.

Countering this, initiatives and policy makers test alternative measures, platforms, and standards to develop digital services that offer enhanced and/or protected user experiences, from routing data through secure pathways, ensuring data 'portability', or by restricting data collection altogether. In other respects, the likes of cryptocurrencies and other cryptographic innovations face increasing scrutiny as reckless social, financial and ecological experiments. As the earth system is itself being put to the test by the sum and history of human practices and their consequences, new methods for testing, evaluating, and critiquing the impact of data practices and digital infrastructures are urgently required.

The conference takes place onsite at FoKoS, Weidenauer Str. 167, 57076 Siegen.

CONFERENCE PROGRAM

15:00 — 15:30	*Welcome*

Panel 1

15:45 — 17:15

Testing Alexa:
Practices of Private Users & Third-Party Developers
Chair: David Waldecker

Speakers and Their Attachments:
Frustration Free Through Testing?
Niklas Strüver (University of Siegen)

From Initial Setup to Routine Operation:
Mundane Experiments for Domesticating Smart Speakers
in Private Homes
Stephan Habscheid & Dagmar Hoffmann (University of Siegen)

Repair Strategies in Dealing with Smart Speakers
Silke Reineke & Henrike Helmer
(Leibniz-Institute for German Language, Mannheim)

Keynote

17:30 — 19:00

Perpetual Beta:
Genealogies of Permanent Testing
Markus Krajewski (University of Basel)
Chair: Marcus Burkhardt

19:30	*Conference Dinner*

Panel 2

10:00 — 11:30

Trying Times?
Temporal Orders of Technology Testing

Chair: Philippe Sormani

Remaking Intelligence? Of Machines, Media and Montage

Philippe Sormani (University of Lausanne)

Why Experiment?
Sociologies of Testing, Scenarios of Lifeworlds

Michael Guggenheim (Goldsmiths College, London)

Artificial Fear? Future Pasts Revisited

Lauren Huret & Hunter Longe (Geneva)

Keynote

11:45 — 13:15

Towards the test society:
On the un-doing of experimental accountability

Noortje Marres (Warwick University)

Chair: Carolin Gerlitz

Panel 3

14:30 — 16:00

Slopes, Trails, Air and Streets:
Sharing and Testing Outdoor Environments
in Everyday and Adventure Activities

Chair: Susanne Förster

Cycling & Sensory Media:
Vlogs, Apps & Circulating Practices

Julia Bee (University of Siegen)

Follow-Me:
Drones as semi-autonomous companions
Hendrik Bender (University of Siegen)

Live-tracks/reports in remote destinations
Karina Kirsten (University of Siegen)

Panel 4

16:15 — 17:45

Con-testing Sensing Practices
Co-chairs: Daniela van Geenen, Vesna Schierbaum & Regina Wuzella

Escaping Sensors: A Human "Turn to Sensing"
Anna Berti Suman (European Commission Joint Research Center, Sensing for Justice)

Sensor-Media-Environments as Experimental Systems:
Medianaturecultural Aspects of Putting
 "Nature" to the Test
Sebastian Scholz (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam)

"A Smile Looks The Same On Everyone´s Face" —
Narratives in the use of facial emotion recognition in
market research
Daniel Stoecker (The Brandenburg Center for Media Studies)

18:30 — 19:30

Digital Studies Meets Digital Arts: MGK Walls
MGK Siegen

19:30

Conference Dinner

Panel 5

10:00 — 11:30

Speaking Truth:
Testing Language Technologies

Chair: Marcus Burkhardt

Testing for Faithfulness: Hallucinating Language Models

Susanne Förster (University of Siegen)

"Artificial Journalism"?: How "Communicative AI"
is Making its Way into the News Production Cycle

Wiebke Loosen (Hans Bredow Institut)

Establishing Facts Under Uncertainty:
How Truth is Put to the Test on Facebook

Yarden Skop (University of Siegen)

Panel 6

11:45 — 13:15

"Fake it 'til you make it":
The Economies, Tactics, & Ethics of Synthetic Data

Chair: Sam Hind

Adjacency: Characterizing the Distinction Between
Synthetic and Organic Data

Tanja Wiehn (University of Copenhagen)

Synthetic Data & Post-surveillance Data-intensive capitalism

James Steinhoff (University of Toronto Mississauga)

13:15 — 13:30

Closing Remarks

PANEL ABSTRACTS

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Panel 1

Chair:
David Waldecker

Testing Alexa:
Practices of Private Users & Third-Party Developers

Intelligent personal assistants such as Amazon's Alexa and home-based smart speakers represent a test environment for developers and users alike. Thus, (mostly unnoticed by users) developers test new technologies live in operation and modify them with respect to voice control, service quality and exploitation contexts. To enable test interactions, IPA providers need to cooperate with third-party developers. Negotiating or testing these forms of cooperation provides scientific insight into development paths and potentials. On the users' side, it can be empirically observed that early-stage testing is to establish the user's superiority: Especially in initial setup situations, requests are made and commands are formulated that the systems' language processing fails at, which becomes a cause for the users' amusement. But anyone who wants to exploit the functionalities of the devices in everyday use must learn through mundane experiments to adapt to dialogue structures, service offerings and data protection risks of the systems, which are themselves under constant re-vision. This also includes testing linguistic alternatives when formulations of re-quests and commands fail at the first attempt. Faced with an unfamiliar inter-face – voice instead of visuals and touch – users as well as developers are still coming to terms with its potentials, downsides and pitfalls. This panel in turn will try to come to terms with this interconnected testing environment.

Niklas Strüver
(University of
Siegen)

Speakers and Their Attachments: Frustration Free Through Testing?

Testing practices that third-party developers for smart speakers engage with will be the focus of this contribution. Forms of testing are mandatory to enable a smooth interaction with users, but also open up avenues for alternative de-velopment routes.

Stephan Habscheid
& Dagmar Hoffmann
(University of
Siegen)

From Initial Setup to Routine Operation: Mundane Experiments for Domesticating Smart Speakers in Private Homes

Based on video and audio recordings as well as interviews with members of households, the talk investigates how the communicative use of smart speak-ers is first tested, reflected upon and established in the longer term. With the new technology, private homes and their interconnectedness become a sub-ject of mundane digitalization experiments in the users' perspective.

Silke Reineke
& Henrike Helmer
(Leibniz-Institute
for German Language,
Mannheim)

Repair Strategies in Dealing with Smart Speakers

We investigate which different strategies users apply when a first command is not successful. On the basis of the strategies chosen in the subsequent (differently formulated) command, it can be inferred what the (or a) suspected source of error is from the user's point of view, and which alterations in their formulations of a command they try out in order to achieve success.

Panel 2

Trying Times?
Temporal Orders of Technology Testing

Chair:
Philippe Sormani

In the late 1950s and 1960s, Harold Garfinkel devised a series of disruptive interventions, interventions that were designed to make noticeable and investigable the routine production of social order and which later became known as "breaching experiments". By the late 2010s and early 2020s, the routine production of social order itself seems to have generated its disruptive interventions "from within", including a recent pandemic, climate change, and renewed military aggression. How does the "sociology of testing" (Marres & Stark 2020) fare against the background of this troubling vtableau, if not "post-normal" situation of multiple crisis? To broach this question, the present panel gathers contrasting contributions, all of which probe temporal orders of technology testing, namely how technology testing articulates time in situ, inducing, narrating, and becoming part of distinctive temporal configurations. The interrogative panel title - "Trying Times?" - then stands for both the troubling background and temporal unfolding of technology testing, while begging the question of their connection. In turn, panel contributions offer a differentiated answer to that question, addressing it from a distinctively ethnomethodological (Sormani), experimental (Guggenheim), and/or aesthetic (Huret & Longe) stance, thus also discussing "agonistic design" (DiSalvo 2012) more broadly.

Philippe Sormani
(University
of Lausanne)

Remaking Intelligence?
Of Machines, Media, and Montage

Michael Guggenheim
(Goldsmiths College,
London)

Why Experiment?
Sociologies of Testing, Scenarios of Lifeworlds

Lauren Huret &
Hunter Longe
(Geneva)

Artificial Fear:
Future Pasts Revisited

Panel 3

Slopes, Trails, Air and Streets:
Sharing and Testing Outdoor Environments
in Everyday and Adventure Activities

Chair:
Susanne Förster

The panel examines sensor media in various mobile constellations. Whether in everyday or adventure contexts, sensor media of smartphones, bike computers, action cams or drones play an important role in recording, tracking and sharing one's own mobile activities. While users collect data about their movements, routes or vital functions and share them with others, it is not only the users' body and skills that get tested, but also the outdoor environments. Beyond aspects of mobility, the panel argues that the circulation of sensor data scrutinizes the surrounding landscapes. Whether we deal with footage from recreational drones, GPS live-tracking on GIS platforms, live-reports via social media, or cycling media, digital as well as physical infrastructures are constantly put to the test. When it comes to mobile activities in outdoor environments, the question if sensor media work can only be answered in media res.

Julia Bee
(University of
Siegen)

Cycling & Sensory Media:
Vlogs, Apps & Circulating Practices

The focus of the talk will be on vlogging as a sensory practice and the circulation of sensory images of mobility. I examine how the multisensory quality of cycling and cycling media create feedback loops in between bodies, media and practices, intensified by apps and vlogs. In a car-centric society, cycling necessarily figures as a way to test another mode of mobility. What challenges occur when existing infrastructure is used by bikes? How do the perception of traffic and its assigned space change, when riding a bike instead of driving a car? According to this view on the infrastructural marginalization of cycling, I propose cycling media as a practice of testing mobility on a sensory level.

Hendrik Bender
(University of
Siegen)

Follow-Me:
Drones as semi-autonomous companions

In recent years consumer drones have been increasingly developed as motile cameras designed to autonomously track their users and record their activities. The talk focuses on testing practices of users, who trial the capabilities of so-called follow-me drones in different settings and environments, adapting their own activities to the skills of the flying camera.

Karina Kirsten
(University of
Siegen)

Live-tracks/reports in remote destinations

Niche outdoor events such as the Red Bull X-Alps make increasingly use of social media platforms and GIS services to be able to offer fans GPS live-tracking and audiovisual live-reports of the race. Both features face two main obstacles, remote alpine terrain and the athletes' constant movements, which complicates the transmission of (sensor) data. The talk discusses how outdoor races become testing events, making (geographical as well as virutal) obstacles visible while creating future infrastructures.

Panel 4

Con-testing Sensing Practices

Co-chairs:
Daniela van Geenen,
Vesna Schierbaum &
Regina Wuzella

As sensor technologies and their data proliferate, civic actors have begun to appropriate sensing practices for producing counter-data that test and contest official or state knowledge. At the same time the creation, processing, and analysis of this sensor data-based counter-knowledge builds on the same scientific principles and computational approaches as official measurements. This panel explores this epistemological tension by interrogating the involved modes of producing, testing, and contesting data-based evidence. It sheds light on different scholarly approaches to con-testing sensing practices in mundane settings and situations. Moreover, as a managerial technology networked sensing devices and algorithmic techniques are mobilized by (local) governmental actors – often in cooperation with commercial parties – to not just monitor, but also predict, anticipate and govern citizens' activities, raising concerns over ubiquitous surveillance and media control. Here sensing practices become environmental as part of sensor-enabled technological infrastructures and media ecologies, posing questions of suitable modes of critical engagement.

Anna Berti Suman
(European Commission
Joint Research
Center, Sensing
for Justice)

Escaping Sensors:
A Human "Turn to Sensing"

Anna Berti Suman will frame the pristine drive of every human to use their own senses to produce counter-data for resisting official monitoring patterns, especially in the environmental and climate field. She will reflect on how 'pure' sensing - without technology mediation c- an (1) re-build our pristine interaction with nature (and reverse an ongoing 'loss of experience'); (2) make sensing less dependent on technology access; and (3) avoid that institutional actors (including courts) dismiss sensed data based on the quality of the sensors used.

Sebastian Scholz
(Vrije Universiteit
Amsterdam)

Sensor-Media-Environments as Experimental Systems: Medianaturecultural Aspects of Putting "Nature" to the Test

Ubiquitous and pervasive micro-technologies of sensing have become one of the dominant yet vastly under-researched media of knowledge production, inserted in oceans, forests, cities and domestic spaces, attached to animals, plants or human bodies. Sebastian Scholz discusses the importance of understanding sensor-technologies as media in a broad conceptual sense, i.e. beyond their mere instrumentality and technical affordances.

Daniel Stoecker:
(The Brandenburg
Center for Media
Studies)

"A Smile Looks The Same On Everyone´s Face": Narratives in the Use of Facial Emotion Recognition in Market Research

Automated sensing practices promise new potential for market research. In particular, the idea of automated facial emotion recognition is appealing to researchers and companies as they hope to transform the customer's affective reactions into data-based knowledge about new products. However, this affirmative attitude towards the use of facial emotion recognition needs to be contested critically. Based on a participant observation in an international market research institute the use of emotion recognition outside the laboratory context will be the focus of this input.

Panel 5

Speaking Truth: Testing Language Technologies

Chair:
Marcus Burkhardt

In light of the proliferation of fake news on social media platforms on the one hand and the rapid development of AI models for natural language generation on the other, the issue of testing the truth of statements as well as the truthfulness of underlying technologies has become a widely recognized challenge. Against this background the panel engages with practices of testing the truth in diverse areas such as Meta's third-party fact-checking program and the standardization of test procedures for language models in an attempt to prevent model hallucination.

Susanne Förster
(University of
Siegen)

Testing for Faithfulness: Hallucinating Language Models

Susanne Förster explores the phenomenon of hallucination of large language models - a technical term used to demarcate factually incorrect and non-sensical statements generated by such models - and discusses how notions of language, speech, and truth are expressed and operationalized in the field of natural language generation.

Wiebke Loosen
(Leibniz Institute
for Media Research |
Hans-Bredow-
Institute)

"Artificial Journalism"?: How "Communicative AI" is Making its Way into the News Production Cycle

Wiebke Loosen engages with the rapid appropriation of (more or less) AI-driven technologies in the field of Journalism. Her talk introduces the concept of "Communicative AI" (ComAI) and explores the role of ComAI in the news production cycle. In doing so, it will show how the "four Ps" - projects, products, prototyping, and projections - are changing journalistic practices and thinking.

Yarden Skop
(University of
Siegen)

Establishing Facts Under Uncertainty: How Truth is Put to the Test on Facebook

Yarden Skop presents her work on Meta's third party fact-checking program in collaboration with the IFCN (International Fact-Checking Network). She discusses how fact checkers evaluate truth on the platform based on longstanding professional standards combined with ML recommendations, and how they negotiate the inconsistencies while working with opaque platform policies and technologies in a project aimed at establishing public trust.

Panel 6

"Fake it 'til you make it": The Economies, Tactics, & Ethics of Synthetic Data

Chair:
Sam Hind

"Fake it 'til you make it" has long been a motto of start-ups trying to survive, but machine learning's (ML) voracious hunger for training data, as well as the ethical, and practical, pitfalls of acquiring such data, have given birth to a new tendency. This is the emerging phenomenon within AI and the wider tech world, of synthetic data. Those in the business of synthetic data provision emphasize the cost efficiencies of acquiring synthetic data (more than 90%), the relative speed of generating it (days not months), and the inherent flexibility of being able to tailor the volume, and parameters, of the data(sets) desired. At the same time, interventionist practices are emerging alongside this commercial work, seeking to expose the vulnerabilities of systems through generating synthetic data. By looking at how synthetic data is used productively or disruptively, the panel highlights the precarious relationship between ML models and physical environments which is constantly being put to the test.

Tanja Wiehn
(University of
Copenhagen)

Adjacency: Characterizing the Distinction Between Synthetic and Organic Data

Data extraction has long been a contested subject in big data environments. Advances in the production of synthetic data have given rise to new discussions around data ethics and politics. Synthetic data promises to bypass controversial aspects in data use, such as data anonymization and breaches as well as complement fairness, filling gaps in data sets for the sake of representation. However, there is an urgent need to question the sociopolitical implications of this emerging distinction between organic and synthetic data from critical data studies. This research talk presents critical considerations around the distinction between the real and "fake" in data structures. Drawing on early fieldwork, it provides reflections on the epistemologies of synthetic data, raising questions such as: In what way is the distinction between organic and synthetic the basis for the promising outcome of generated data? How do forms of generative AI potentially perpetuate structures of dominance?

James Steinhoff
(University
of Toronto
Mississauga)

Synthetic Data & Post-surveillance Data-intensive capitalism

Data consists primarily of the recorded actions of people, collected via various means of surveillance. When capitalism becomes data-intensive, incorporating technologies such as machine learning into business processes, data collection gains the same self-justification as capital valorization. Thus, some analyses predict a future of omnipresent capitalist surveillance. However, what if data could not only be collected by surveilling humans, but could instead be created ex nihilo? Wary of losing access to free data via surveillance, data-intensive capital is pursuing a technical means of generating data, rather than collecting it, under the name "synthetic data". In this talk, I describe three different means of generating synthetic data: data augmentation, generative models and simulations. Then I consider some political economic implications of a switch from surveillance to synthesis in data-intensive capitalism. While capital has historically sought to minimize human agency within its circuits, this has mostly taken place in processes of production and circulation. I suggest that with synthetic data, capital hopes to minimize its dependency on humans as sources of data as well. To grapple with this possibility, the theorization of surveillance capital must be augmented with an understanding of how capital seeks to render surveillance an obsolete practice.

TESTING

Registration
& Contact

The conference
"Testing in the Wild: Publics, Practices, and Infrastructures"
takes place in Siegen. Attendance is free of charge. For
onsite attendance please register via email at
info@sfb1187.uni-siegen.de

Safety precautions will be taken according to the current
pandemic situation. Any regulations will be communicated in
advance to all registered participants via email.

Talks will also be streamed online. The link for the
conference stream will be published on the conference website
on the day of the event. Registration for online attendance is
not required.

If you have any questions or would like more information,
please send us an email or visit our website.

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Conference website:
www.mediacoop.uni-siegen.de/en/annual-conference-2022/

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PANELS & KEYNOTES

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