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Special Issue: Interfacing public communications in the digital economy

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Editorial

Public organizations tasked with the delivery of universal service in communications (e.g. broadcasting) and social welfare (e.g. health services) have been redesigning their service delivery through digital transformation for almost two decades now. Digitalisation increasingly brings together public and private/privatized service provision, from transport to health and social care, with policy domains traditionally associated with communications such as news, publishing and entertainment provision via broadcast media.

At the centre of these systems and processes are digital interfaces, which enable the flow of information and data between organisations and their ‘publics’ or ‘customers’ and access to services for end users, and generate data on service use(rs). Originating in engineering to describe a face of separation between substances (Bottomley, 1882), and, later, places or surfaces where two bodies or systems come together (OED, 1990; McLuhan, 1962), the concept of the interface enters common use in new media studies at the turn of the century to denote mediations between human and computer, between computers, or between humans.

We can think of interfaces as technical devices / objects with inscribed affordances (e.g. a website), as processes and as conceptual spaces of intersection. In digital communications the word ‘interface’ denotes the software and hardware that conditions the interaction between computers and between computers and humans as well as the interweaving of information and forging of connections that is directed through digital code. Interfaces have the power to shape communication and information access (Gane and Beer, 2008), structure the choice of users and make normative claims about the purposes and appropriate use of content (Andersen and Pold, 2014 Stanfill, 2015).

As digital communications increasingly intersect with other areas of public policy the study of communications and of communications policy, both as line of enquiry and as knowledge produced, needs to develop beyond disciplinary boundaries in order to contribute towards providing an empirical basis for articulating policies, and conceptual frameworks to assess their impact.

The special section of issue 10.3 includes three contributions that use the concept of interface to examine interrelationships and interactions between organisational and policy legacies, digital platform design, service software and socially situated digital media/service use. These articles contribute conceptual, critical and normative perspectives to the study of the ‘digital transformation’ of organisations and services and the cultures underpinning these processes. Topics in this section range from a transport app patent to digital by default social care information provision and digital public service media in transitioning democracies.

Christopher Cox and Maria Sourbati & Eugène Loos’s articles approach the interface as both an object (i.e. a graphical user interface) and a process of user inducement. Conceptualised

as processes that make possible modes of interactivity and enable access to services interfaces allow us to examine their design and affordances, their capacity to structure sociality and interaction, to impart meaning, with consequences in including or excluding user groups.

The central role visuality and iconicity play in digital interface objects, is highlighted in the empirical investigation of both Cox and Sourbati & Loos, who examine cultural commonsense and popular, stereotypical abstractions at work in the visual aspects of the interface. Simplicity and clean design, currently mandated for all public sector websites in e.g. the UK, the focus in Sourbati and Loos's study, and familiar in all successful commercial platforms, such as Uber's app analysed by Cox, facilitates access while creating a sense of transparency.

Cox's 'Automatic from the People: Uber's Iconic Interface and the Automation of Sociality' focuses on dynamics of revealing and concealing played out in the simplified interactions in UberPool's interface, taking a close reading of Uber's carpooling patent. This critical essay approaches the interface as a 'juncture for abstractions' (read: power asymmetries) between the manifestations of movement and social interactions as designed to appear in the Uber app and the company's motivations to shape, structure and induce on its customers its conception of sociality. Cox shows how the key values of aesthetic familiarity and simplicity in the Uber GUI are mobilised in the patent to construct an abstraction of sociality based on social media data, generating an idea of proximity 'along lines of social and economic capital sought from online friending'. Cox argues for a need to reflect on the market imperatives or 'circumstances giving rise to these prescribed forms of sociality', ie based on social media data promoted through car sharing.

In their article ‘Interfacing age: Diversity and (in)visibility in digital public service’ Sourbati and Loos use the concept of *interface* to examine questions of diversity and inclusion, traditionally core values of public and welfare service, from the perspective of old age, a commonly neglected dimension of social identity in policy and research. Sourbati and Loos look into how public service websites render older populations visible or invisible through imagery and how this imagery may reflect cultural perceptions of age. In ‘digital by default’ public services visual representations do not necessarily translate to social inclusion/exclusion through digital service access. The latter is a job of interface simplicity; for example, text-based GUI which can facilitate user access but obfuscate identity. Sourbati and Loos conclude that digitally interfaced public services challenge legacy normative frameworks of media diversity through representation and call for age relations to come to the centre of debates on social inclusion.

Masduki’s case study investigates both objects (digital platforms) and process of connection in ‘transitioning’ regimes, demonstrating the limits of innovation (or of the models we use to study innovation). “In this paper, ‘digital interface’ refers to a platform (technology and space of participation) that conditions and mediates interaction between the broadcaster, as a public service provider, and the general public. The platform assumes a key function (as an interface) of communication in the digital economy between the public broadcaster and the audience. In connection with the broader theme of the special issue of this publication, this paper positions digital interfaces as innovative efforts of PSBs in post-authoritarian states”. What happened ‘behind’ the interfacing is the focus of Masduki’s study of digitalisation of public/state media in Indonesia’s transitioning democracy. Masduki points at how macro-political processes in creating legal regulatory vacuum for the digitalisation of state/public media in the world’s third largest democracy (and one of the largest digital

social media markets) underlining path dependencies (the role of political-cultures and policy-legacies of democratic participation.

As a conceptual perspective, interfaces point at the centrality of interactions and intersections, which empirical policy analysis take as transparent, rendering power asymmetries invisible, e.g. between prescribed modes of interaction and privileged modes of user engagement. Public service webpages and social media feeds demarcate appropriate modes of engagement, privilege certain content options, require user competencies and deploy user characteristics shaping the production of user data that can be co-opted by powerful interests. These areas of emerging power asymmetries are the subject of ongoing policy debates about the crisis in public information ('fake news') and the necessity for regulatory intervention enforcing platform responsibility and supporting media literacy.

In his article, 'Accountability and Media Literacy Mechanisms as Counteraction to Disinformation in Europe', Andrei Richter explores the role of long-established news media and online media in addressing disinformation. Institutional and corporate structures in Europe are reviewed with particular attention to the contribution of professional practices, self-regulation and media literacy in strengthening media accountability and counteracting disinformation. Richter argues that 'there is a lack of conclusive evidence that any currently available instrument to counteract disinformation [...] has worked to prevent false news'. The article goes on to conclude with recommendations centred on improving the skills of media users, enhanced professional standards, training and working conditions for journalists, supporting media self-regulation, instilling public trust in the media, and raising awareness.

In the second article looking at Indonesia in transition, Dina Septiani evaluates the significance of social media in the country's democratisation. At a junction point between Masduki and Richter's contributions the capacity of new communication technologies to facilitate certain modes of interaction echoes at a macro-level discussions of affordances. These strategies of exclusion/inclusion, inherent to interfaces mediating between individuals and institutions, are seen to depend on their historical and social context, and can support legitimate political engagement or polarise. Septiani situates the rise of the internet and social media historically with reference to key moments in the political history of the country since 1998. She argues that the internet has been promoting political engagement but in more recent political campaigns social media have been foregrounding divisions, often fuelled by discrepancies in digital literacy and access, fake news, and more aggressive targeting of voters.

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