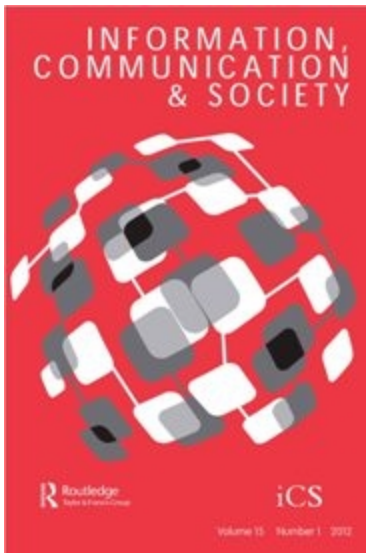

Life (online): an introduction to the #AoIR2020 special

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Abstract
Our contemporary life is an intertwined arrangement of 'Life' with digital technologies. Increasingly, we are seeing the prevalence of automation and machines, predominantly through artificial intelligence (AI), as a means to make sense of our worlds, engage with our employers, understand the political system and interact with our social lives as some of the key methods among a wide variety of other interpersonal communication processes. Not only are these often machine-based activities seen through digital communication itself, but also in the surrounding regulatory systems, the growing concerns of digital inequality, the act of datafication, and the infrastructures that enable and inhibit digital communication. These are some of the key themes that emerged from the selected papers in this special issue emerging from the 2020 Association of Internet Researchers conference, entirely held online and themed around 'Life'. In this special issue, we present seven papers from senior and emerging scholars within Asia, Europe, Africa and North and South America that address and unpack the contemporary moment of communication in our Life. The papers in this special issue discuss chatbots, games, smart lighting, wearables, doorbells, sensors, biometrics, and facial recognition technology - very much everyday technologies that shape many of our lives. They ground our expectations of AI and highlight the importance of context in internet research.

Keywords: Life; internet studies; association of internet researchers; infrastructures; data inequalities

We are pleased to present this special issue of Information, Communication, and Society themed on Life which reflects some of the latest research presented at the annual Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) conference, 2020. For the first time in its history, the AoIR conference took place completely online, and across multiple time zones, due to the travel restrictions caused by the COVID-19 Global Pandemic. Hosted by a programme committee chaired by Kylie Jarrett, (Maynooth University Ireland), and including Caroline O'Sullivan (TU Dublin), Aphra Kerr (Maynooth University) and Eugenia Siaperia (University College Dublin) the team worked closely with the Executive Committee to design an online version of the AoIR conference but also to maintain the lively and generous spirit of the AoIR community. The conference was thus both an experiment in designing a community-focused virtual conference, alongside a critical examination of the current state of Internet Studies.

The month-long AoIR event included specially curated themed YouTube playlists of lightning talks for asynchronous viewing and commenting, early publication of Selected Papers of Internet Research (SPIR), and a host of AoIR-styled social events. The 'core' conference happened from 27-31 October 2020, comprising 30 live events including group themed discussions, a keynote fireside chat, a plenary panel, a doctoral colloquium, social hours for attendees, pub quizzes, dancing and karaoke on various platforms across time zones. The YouTube playlists of presenter videos were discussed in live moderated sessions grouped into four themes - Social Life, Political Life (activism, politics, governance etc), Machine Life (AI, algorithms) and Work Life (labour, play, research practices, ethics). The moderated discussions occurred multiple times to facilitate different time zones. A highlight for many was the customised AoIR2020 Town: a low resolution, pixelated virtual space for socialising, with pubs named after well-known bars in Dublin and the facility for avatar customisation and virtual dancing. Attendees gathered here for book launches, serious discussions and more relaxed hanging out. Even the conference awards were extended to acknowledge the online context and included most creative and experimental videos, most memefied talk, best conference tweeter and best non-human participant. The conference thus maintained the finely-tuned balance between lively scholarly debate and (dis) embodied social activities that has become such a known feature of AoIR. Worthy of note is that over 750 people

participated in the online conference event, watching and debating with the presenters and taking advantage of the online conference formats.

The conference theme was 'Life' which due to the COVID pandemic became Life (Online). Drawing on the 1992 quote by Sandy Stone, "the machines are restless tonight", the conference sought scholarship that looked at the interconnection between our lives and the increasingly automated machines that continue to learn and adapt within our 'life'. These digital technologies are present and engaging in our everyday lives through our political perspectives, our sociality and increasingly our intimate-lived moments. In many ways, the intrinsic intertwining of digital technologies with our everyday lives requires continued critique on the impacts of our political, social and work lives. Critical scholarship helps us to understand the relationships digital technologies have on encoding our class, gender, sexuality and race. Further, scholarship that examines the impact of digital technologies on the environment, our political systems and emerging labour dynamics is crucial to understanding our digital lives. The conference asked, 'what is the life that animates these technologies and how does that inform their sociocultural impacts? What are the implications for human life when the machines become restless?'

The conference theme was core to the conference keynote address, which took the shape of an informal 'fireside' chat. The chat was facilitated by video conferencing software and brought together two scholars located in two different continents at the time. Professor Kate Crawford, Distinguished Research Professor at NYU and cofounder of the AI Now Institute; and Senior Principal Researcher at Microsoft Research New York, was joined by Professor Alondra Nelson, President of the Social Science Research Council and Harold F. Linder Professor at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton to critique and discuss The Pandemic Pretext: Politics of AI After COVID-19. This keynote conversation focused on the shifts in surveillance practices since Covid-19, and the implications for the relationship between bodies, the state, and the technology sector. How is the pandemic used as a pretext for increasingly rapacious data capture and surveillance? Which communities face the greatest risks? And what are the changing material economies of the new data extraction platforms? Crawford and Nelson discussed their longstanding projects at the intersection of technology, society and inequality, including Kate's much-anticipated book Atlas of AI (Yale, 2021) and Alondra's work with the Public Health, Surveillance, and Human Rights Network at the Social Science Research Council that is mapping the risks to rights and privacy posed by the pandemic.

Beyond the keynote address, the plenary panel invited Professor Rob Kitchin of Maynooth University, Associate Professor Seeta Peña Gangadharran from the London School of Economics and Political Science, and Professor Helen Kennedy from the University of Sheffield to address the themes of the conference. First, Professor Kitchin spoke of living well with data, of data justice and data sovereignty. He discussed the individual and collective tactics for taking back control, drawing from his recently co-authored book, Slow Computing: Why we Need Good Balanced Digital Lives (Bristol, 2020). He was followed by Associate Professor Peña Gangadharan who took a critical perspective on optimization and asked when and how we can refuse these technologies in our everyday lives. Finally, Professor Kennedy discussed living with data and our understanding and perceptions of data practices. She identified three core challenges with current data practices related to inequality, trust and fairness. A lively discussion followed including a focus on the contextual variations of data practices and the requirements for researchers to choose methodologies and approaches that are sensitive to conditions on the ground. The discussion also focused on the ethical and practical issues faced by researchers who collaborated with industry and other actors. Both the keynote and the plenary panel helped to highlight core theoretical, methodological and political issues that were further engaged with by the AoIR community across the four days of the conference. The differential impacts of COVID on everyday lives and research were never far from the agenda.

The conference had 366 successful contributions after peer review which included: 215 papers, 45 panels, 6 fishbowls, 12 roundtables and 6 experimental sessions. Of the submitted papers, the most frequent topics related to social media (n=280), algorithms/platforms (n=186) and communities (n=119). From this rich variety of contributions and formats we are pleased to present this curated series of papers. We include seven papers that showcase the work of both senior and emerging scholars on the conference theme, and showcase research conducted in Asia, Europe and both North and South America.

Several common themes emerge from the papers presented here and provide a useful overview of emerging research in the field which deals with AI, broadly construed. A focus on infrastructures emerges as a prevalent theme, taking our attention beyond apps and platforms to the broader assemblages and indeed to the ruins of data infrastructure. The role of institutions is also to the fore, focussing our attention on human rights advocates, legal systems, regulation and policy, governments, and intermediaries. The encoding and implications of AI technologies for race emerged in a number of the papers, and the continued and new forms of inequality and data violence that are emerging. The implications of AI and smart technologies for workers and for researchers was discussed across the conference and again is reflected here in these papers, especially in those papers that engage with the experiences faced by minorities, migrants and those in the Global South. The political economies of infrastructures and data emerges strongly this year, directing our attention towards asymmetries of power and enduring legacies of coloniality. The papers point to attempts to demand more transparency and accountability from AI developers and states, and explore new ways to give agency to citizens. Discourses about AI can obfuscate, misinform, and inflate our expectations - but AI can also provide playful distraction and new avenues for creativity. The papers in this special issue discuss chatbots, games, smart lighting, wearables, doorbells, sensors, biometrics, and facial recognition technology - very much everyday technologies that shape many of our lives. They ground our expectations of AI and highlight the importance of context in internet research.

The first article by Chan and Kwok received the AoIR2020 best student paper award in a conference with many high-quality student papers. The paper adroitly brings a variety of capitalism perspective from political economy and the notion of regulatory entrepreneurship to the studies of platform economies in an examination of how Uber entered and operated both politically and economically in China, Taiwan and Hong Kong. The article introduces the concept of guerilla capitalism to describe how Uber actively exploited legal gray areas in each context and how they harnessed their network power to openly contest and reshape legislation politically. The article demonstrates that, despite the fact that Uber's guerilla growth strategy remained the same, its political playbooks resulted in diverse dynamics within different regulatory regimes and was relatively more effective in democratic contexts. This article brings a non-Western and comparative perspective which carefully delineates how particular firms and platforms evolve under separate and specific political regimes.

In the next article, Breuer and Pierson turn their attention to the potential for citizen engagement and empowerment in smart cities. Inspired by Lefebvre's (1968) work on the *The Right to the City*, the authors critically examine how citizen engagement is enacted in experimental smart city projects across Belgium and the Netherlands. More specifically they explore how data protection rights and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in Europe are encountered and enacted within smart city projects. The results indicate that while GDPR impacts data gathering in public spaces, it is not sufficient to overcome the many barriers faced in terms of incorporating citizens as users into participative design and decision-making processes in smart city projects. The case studies reveal that the decision-making processes in these projects are very much controlled by corporate and legal human

and non-human actors, and data controllers have a crucial role to play in translating and aligning the various actors and competing interests. Citizens meanwhile are often on the periphery, and rarely consulted in advance. The authors make a strong argument for lowering the (literacy) barriers to these discussions for citizens, data controllers and developers, and for adequate incentives to enable meaningful and citizen centric smart cities.

Our third article presents research on game players of the location based mobile game, Pokémon Go, in two cities in the Global South: Rio de Janeiro (Brazil) and Nairobi (Kenya). Pokémon Go requires, and indeed takes for granted, that players can freely move through their local environment, have access to a robust network connection and can afford a mobile smartphone with sufficient credit. To date, most of the existing research on location-based games in general and Pokémon Go in particular, focuses on Global North contexts. While some studies have focussed on the challenges faced by rural and low-income communities in the Global North, this study identifies how players experience difficult mobilities, inconsistent networked connections, and precarious access to internet technologies in two cities in the Global South. They identify how pre-existing social, infrastructural, and economic inequalities shape the interconnections between location-based game play, mobile phone use, and urban mobilities. However, they also identify emergent player practices, including how players collaborate and care for others during and outside gameplay, how players adjust their mobilities to preserve networked connections and how they take advantage of local contingencies in order to play the game. This paper highlights how local contexts and material circumstances influence game players and networked game play, but also how game players create meaningful online practices despite local infrastructural and social challenges.

The next article by Bridges focuses our attention on the impact of connected smart doorbells and data infrastructures upon our lives. Focussing on Amazon's networked doorbell with a camera, Ring, and associated crime reporting apps, like Neighbours, Bridges argues that the promotional videos and materials for the company, and the affordances of the apps, deliberately obfuscate how the infrastructure expands and extends the industrial-police-surveillant-state, and enlists users to surveil and police public and semi-public spaces in the city. Focusing on the use of the technology in the US, the paper carefully walks us through how race and class become articulated through the apps, producing discourses of fear and Othering, and replicating historical forms of community surveillance networks from the 1950s and 1960s in the South of the US. The key thread throughout this article is that users of networked technologies continue to lose control over their datafied lives and that these data infrastructures are leading to commercial arrangements between data providers and third-parties that are not obvious to end users. By examining the potential impacts for citizens, especially people of colour, Bridges calls for infrastructural accountability and new forms of oversight and transparency to address 'asymmetrical power imbalances'.

The next paper by Madianou provides a critical examination of the use of AI in humanitarian operations. Theoretically the paper brings together a decolonial critique of humanitarianism and critical algorithm studies and empirically it draws upon a mixed methods study which includes interviews with a range of stakeholders in the humanitarian sector. Focussing on the use of 'chatbots' in different aid contexts the paper carefully interrogates the intelligence of chatbots and the assumptions underpinning the 'AI for good' phenomenon. Arguing that chatbots foreground communication efficiency rather than intelligence, the paper finds that the chatbots examined produce an impoverished form of communication between affected communities and aid agencies, that lacks cultural and linguistic sensitivity. The paper concludes that AI technologies in aid contexts can be harmful, largely reflect Eurocentric values and represent an 'enchantment of technology' that brings to bear, and reworks, colonial legacies and asymmetries of power in new ways.

The article by Brodie and Velkova explores the notion of digital ruination through a case study of an abandoned Ericsson Data Centre in Vaudreuil, Canada. In contrast to local government and citizen expectations of data centres, the Ericsson case study provides a unique insight into the short life (10 months), abandonment and afterlife of data centres and infrastructures. By highlighting the material and discursive ruins of this once operational data centre, the authors interrogate the taken for granted belief in ever-growing demand for data cloud services, the promise of digital infrastructures and the actual impact that global data infrastructures have on local communities, beyond the thoroughly examined environmental impacts. The authors highlight the perils of local and regional co-funding models and tax incentives that attempt to lure global technology corporations to establish digital infrastructures in peripheral locations in an attempt to create an urban growth machine and positive economic and social externalities. Brodie and Veloka literally walk through the cloud ruins to highlight what remains when global capital leaves and to interrogate the meaning of obsolescence and digital ruins for local economies, communities and cities.

In a playful, yet sobering approach, our final article by Roig and Martorell explores the Twitter parody account, @covidvid19 to highlight the digital narration of an ongoing public health crisis. Using a narrative analysis approach the authors examine this hugely popular Spanish parody account which presents COVID as a fictional character who chronicles the crisis from a first person perspective. While starting as an account that embodies the "dilemma of making fun of important conflict" (Highfield, 2015: 2041), the authors analyse an extensive sample of tweets from the account and interview its (human) creator during the early months of the pandemic, to understand how this character driven narrative shifts and changes, at times receiving significant backlash from its fans and followers, particularly when commenting from a particular political standpoint. They examine how the account is built, the relationship between mainstream media and the parody account, and how other socially connected accounts change and impact on the narrative over time. By creatively unfolding the analysis across several 'chapters', Roig and Martorell demonstrate that a character-based twitter account can humanize the COVID crisis and provide important insights into this evolving form of fictional narrative.

We hope you enjoy this sample of the latest scholarship from the Association for Internet Research and the insights they offer into everyday experiences of data technologies and AI in various locations around the world.

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