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Introduction: Media of Verification

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The introduction takes the EU AI Act as a recent contemporary example of 'media of verification' and gives a brief outline of the issue and a syllabus of the contributions.

Keywords: verification, apparatus, infrastructure, consensus making, journalism, open-source intelligence, digital forensics, media practice, testimony, art, aesthetics

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Introduction

On December 8, 2023, the European Union announced the *AI act*, the world's first comprehensive law on the regulation of artificial intelligence. "Deal!", posted the European Commissioner Thierry Breton, responsible for the negotiations.¹ The draft law was preceded by all-night negotiations at which representatives of the three legislative bodies of the EU – the Commission, the Council, and the Parliament – debated the key points and details of the law. For a law, the *AI act* is well-timed. First negotiations took place years ahead of the hype around *Chat GPT*, which was made available to the public in November 2022. One of the key issues of the *AI act* addresses the risks and dangers coming from general-purpose AI systems.² These are the systems possibly used to produce deepfakes and to spread mis- and disinformation on a large scale. Now, companies and governments, including the executive branch, are faced with new rules of transparency. The *AI act* follows a risk-based approach assessing the capacities of AI systems to "cause harm to society."³ In short, a core issue of the *AI act* is the transparency of the use of AI systems, therefore, allowing for their verification along the value chain.

The *AI Act* demonstrates two things: regulations can be utilized to verify systems capable of automatically generating images, sounds, and texts on a large scale at the click of a button. This is a response to the dangers posed by deepfakes created by generative AI for ideological purposes i.e. by right-wing extremists. Verifying deepfakes presents its own challenges and necessitates specific tools that must be evaluated by experts since they are not always reliable. The industry still needs to reach a consensus on a standard, such as watermarks or metadata information, for both images from trusted content creators and those generated by generative AI.

The *AI act* also shows that this deal by itself followed a ruled-based system of protocols, negotiations between different stakeholders, making use of instruments to verify the validity of the negotiating parties while also using identification mechanisms, like the account of Thierry Breton on *X*, formerly *Twitter*, or the website of *European Counsil* issuing the press release with time and date, signed with the personal information of the press contact on a HTTPS website using encryption to allow for a secure communication of untampered messages. What almost goes unnoticed touches upon key features in a digital society to build trust. Once the issued message is verified as valid, provable, authentic, and untampered, it is further processed by journalists, placed in a

¹ Thierry Breton [@ThierryBreton], "Deal! #AIAct [Https://T.Co/UwNoqmEHt5](https://T.Co/UwNoqmEHt5)," Tweet, *Twitter*, December 8, 2023, <https://twitter.com/ThierryBreton/status/1733254586561888306>.

² Council of the EU, "Artificial Intelligence Act: Council and Parliament Strike a Deal on the First Rules for AI in the World," accessed December 12, 2023, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/12/09/artificial-intelligence-act-council-and-parliament-strike-a-deal-on-the-first-worldwide-rules-for-ai/>.

³ Council of the EU.

broader context, and then published on a verified platform, which in turn, employs mechanisms to ensure the integrity of the messages.

'Media of verification' is introduced here as a theoretical framework to gain a better understanding of trust in a digital society. The *AI Act* serves as a prominent contemporary example, showcasing the multiple layers of 'media of verification' involved in current regulations of online life. The purpose of this issue is to demonstrate that verification is not merely an abstract concept of logical deduction, nor is it solely a reduction of journalistic and scientific practice to proving sources or facts. Despite the tendencies towards automation, verification, as the contributions related to journalistic practices indicate, heavily relies on critical thinking and is not always transparent in itself. This is why verification needs to be viewed as a hybrid epistemic practice. While all forms of verification are rooted in evidence and facts, verification is far from independent of other epistemologies, even exposing an epistemic crisis. Positioned as a defense against disinformation, fake news, alternative facts, and conspiracy narratives, verification distinguishes truth from lies, false claims, and alleged alternative truths. However, in doing so, it tends to obscure other epistemologies such as testimonies and aesthetic practices.

In this issue, verification is framed as a media practice. The contributions within this context focus on verification in various domains, including journalism, digital forensics, (cyber-)security, accounting, supply chains, epistemology, and art. Verification media lie across disciplines and social systems such as politics, science and business. They can be found everywhere and are an integral part of a digital society. Nevertheless, trust is not reduced to verification, even though trust between anonymous trading and discussion partners is unlikely to occur without verification. Since trust as a social act depends on individual situations (usually, we do not trust everyone with everything in every situation), specific verification techniques are also required. This is shown in this issue with contributions on various examples from different disciplines.

Contributions

In *Media of Verification: An Epistemological Framework for Trust in a Digital Society* I introduce 'media of verification' as a framework for a comprehensive understanding of the role of media in trust relationships. Elaborating on four modalities – *verification in media, apparatus of verification, verification as consensus-making, infrastructures of verification* – I show that different phenomena, practices, and techniques bridging the digital and physical realms are indeed part of the same epistemological framework. In this way, various phenomena such as notation systems, stamps, protocols, signatures, and seals become visible as part of the same paradigm of circumstantial evidence. Similar to the 'semiotic drift,' I argue for a 'verifying drift.' The establishment of trust as a social category in a symbolic system

relies heavily on references to reliable sources, facts, and evidence. These, in turn, gain their trustworthiness and credibility through further references that authenticate them, forming a web of interrelated references necessary to turn mere signs into a coherent narrative. However, I argue that ‘media of verification’ reveal various meanings of trust. In this sense, trust is not understood as an inter-human socio-ethical category but as dependent on facts, tools, rules, and reliable transmissions. Therefore, there is a certain ambivalence to ‘media of verification’: on the one hand, it is based on a symbolic system and epistemic paradigm of evidence and facts; on the other, it depends on particular value systems, including those disregarding truth, evidence, and fact. ‘Media of verification’ can encourage trust by creating a coherent narrative, but this narrative can also obscure underlying interests. In this sense, trust and verification never fully coincide.

In *Journalism and Fact-Checking Technologies: Understanding User Needs* Laurence Dierickx and Carl-Gustav Lindén elaborate on fact-checking tools that emphasize the professionalism and reliability of journalistic practices. In contrast to the verification of sources prior to publication, fact-checking involves analyzing the validity of public claims or contents and employs evidence-based forms of publishing. The task is labor-intensive and often occurs under time pressure, necessitating efficient tools to expedite the process. Beginning with a “fitness-for-use principle” Dierickx and Lindén delve into commonly used fact-checking tools among well-established news media and fact-checking organizations in Northern and Western Europe. They identify the requirements of such a tool and still unmet needs. Adopting a theoretical approach that focuses on a human-centered understanding of a tool’s adequacy in the context of human needs and values, they evaluate semi-structured interviews with professional fact-checkers. These interviews do not directly address the tools; instead, they focus on the working environment of fact-checkers, their personal values, routines, relation to technology, and their user experience with these tools. One notable finding is that automation should be viewed as an enabler, not a solution, as the workings of the tools are not always transparent, and a great deal of critical thinking is required. Even fact-checking tools need verification. Considering recent developments in generative AI tools, this might pose a challenge for developers and fact-checkers.

The contribution *Evidence and Transparency in Open Data Journalism: A Case Study on British and Brazilian news agencies* by Claudia Miranda Rodriguez, also addresses the need for trust in digital news media. Efficient tools and transparent practices for proof of evidence are essential. Here, Rodriguez elaborates on open data journalism (ODJ) within three news agencies conducting investigative journalism (*The Bureau of Investigative Journalism*, *Gênero e Número* and *Agência Pública*). Following the scientific method paradigm, she emphasizes that her approach and the methodology of investigative journalism adhere to “rule of transparency,” leading to evidence and reliability. Rodriguez views science and journalism equally as disciplines operating with the means of verification.

Transparency of sources, their verification, and the potential for true or objective narratives, in her opinion, are key features facilitating trust in media. Using a mixed-method approach of content analysis and sixteen in-depth interviews with data journalists, she sheds light on the varying degrees to which these news agencies document sources, evaluate evidence, and allow for verification. Among her findings are the necessity of hyperlinks for source verification and differing levels of transparency among the three agencies. Her article demonstrates that journalism and science share the epistemological paradigm of circumstantial evidence, and the verification process in media itself requires validation in terms of reliability and transparency by other verification methods presented here.

Stefka Hristova explores artificial intelligence as an apparatus of verification in her article *Seeing Double: Machine Vision, Difference, and Repetition*. Here, she delves into the motif of the doppelganger, highlighting current approaches in art and popular culture to find look-alikes, soulmates, and twins. Using Gilles Deleuze's concepts of difference and repetition as a theoretical framework for understanding doubles, Hristova discusses the art project *I am not a look-alike* by François Brunelle and Adam Harvey's *MegaPixel*, connecting the insights gained to the issue of surveillance. She argues that resemblance is at the core of verification processes, leading to the counter-intuitive idea that verification is not about identify but difference. Since doppelgangers tend to conceal differences, they can pose a threat to verification systems. According to Hristova, the projects like those by Brunelle and Harvey illustrate that identities have become distributed through DNA datasets, biometric data, and data doubles. As these datasets become the object of platforms, she observes a shift of agency and trust from interhuman relations to technological assemblages.

In his article *Factuality and Testimony: 11 Theses on Fakes and Verification*, Dieter Mersch opens up a media-philosophical perspective by shifting the focus from verification to the social category of testimony. He argues that verification, as a form of rationalization, serves as a means to discriminate truth from fake. What is disregarded, however, is the eyewitness with the testimony, which establishes a social epistemology by itself. In contrast to verification, faith as well as trust in the testimony are social categories that do not rely on any further authentication, "because in trust only confidence can be placed." Mersch raises awareness about the negligence and destruction of the social function of testimonies in the face of the dissemination of fake news, lies, and alternative facts. By highlighting the epistemological significance of testimonies, the author emphasizes that the juridical system and the accompanying regulations, framed by laws, are based on the testimony as a social institution. If this social epistemology is hurt, corrupted, neglected, or destroyed, sociality itself, he argues, becomes impossible. He therefore argues for the recognition of the social background of the testimony as a key ethical condition for trust.

Laura Lotti and Penny Rafferty moderated a *Roundtable on the Aesthetics of Trust with Ed Fornieles, Sarah Friend, Paul Seidler, and Sam Spike*. The talk took place in early 2023 against the backdrop of an ongoing bear market and ‘crypto winter.’ All the artists invited to the table work with blockchain as a medium for artistic inquiry. The artists not only present some of their projects, but the talk is structured around specific topics. The section on “Oracles as Frameworks” discusses the oracle problem (how to bridge real space and cyberspace in a verifiable manner) as an epistemological issue regarding data origin and verification. Trust serves as the foundation of a system supposedly focused on the verifiability of each transaction on a distributed ledger. The section on the “Aesthetics of Trust” explores the need for a specific context for trust and the corresponding aesthetics that emerge from it. The “Curation and Incentives” section delves into the concepts of care underlying the consensus protocols of blockchains and the collective management of an art collection. Vitalism is also regarded as a potential concept for further exploration of blockchain-based art forms. The “Community and Contracts” section highlighted the diverse art markets, both online and offline, as contexts for art production, with their respective communities and literacies in social media and galleries. An essential factor for art buyers is their participation in a community. The roundtable is accompanied by a comment from Frances Liddell, who emphasizes the importance of aesthetic approaches to blockchain for exploring and evaluating trust relations.

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While this issue does not aim to provide an exhaustive presentation of the ‘media of verification’ and their aesthetics, it brings to light the contours of an epistemological paradigm, along with its difficulties and limits. Crucially, the ambivalence of this paradigm should not be overlooked. The necessity and strong positivism of verification rely on an epistemological paradigm of evidence but tend to neglect other epistemologies that foster trust, such as testimonies and aesthetic practices. Furthermore, it is threatened by a value system that ignores and neglects evidence, thereby undermining verification itself. As a bulwark against misleading interpretations, false news, alleged alternative truths, lies, rug pulls, scams, hacks, deepfakes, and other attacks on facts, both online and offline, ‘media of verification’ ensure security and reliability along the way. They may also acknowledge other reliable social and aesthetic epistemologies that would otherwise be neglected altogether.

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