Infrastructures of Autonomy

An International Conference in Berlin, Germany

23-25 November 2022

Call for Contributions (by 20 June 2022)

HIIG Berlin, ZeM Potsdam

Autonomy has been a multifaceted term for centuries that was and remains a key concept in discussions about individuals and societies alike. More recently, autonomy has gained a renewed relevance and additional meanings in the context of technical innovation, where it is ubiquitously employed in variations of “autonomous systems”. It is often associated with independently moving or self-controlling machines such as drones, vehicles or robots, or more generally with a wide range of automation processes. In this broad understanding, 'autonomous' becomes an attribute for (artificial) intelligence or (machine) learning and is used synonymously with self-determination or adaptability. At the same time, the term invokes (at least) one other meaning: a relational understanding of autonomy that denotes individual and collective processes that are embedded in infrastructures and conditioned by them. It is only in relation to and in the context of media, rules, norms, laws, practices, architectures, materialities or machines that the idea of autonomy acquires any meaning at all.

Against this backdrop the *Infrastructures of Autonomy* conference’s main objective is to address said conditions, structures and relations that constitute both human and machine autonomy. This also entails the various interpretations of the concept of autonomy.

In particular, papers are invited that address the following core themes:

- **Conceptual aspects:** This core theme reflects on the historical and philosophical roots that shape today’s debates on autonomy and automation. We pick up on the feminist discourse of “relational autonomy” that established the irreducibility of interdependence and relatedness for normative theories of autonomy. We posit that there is a troubling tension between industrial and digital automation that benefits consumerist subjects and the struggle for autonomisation that is dependent upon the suspension of automatic responses made by moral subjects. This struggle has always relied on external means of suspension and establishing new habits. For example, what is the contribution of technical,

economic or public infrastructures to the normative claims and ethical or political practices of autonomisation? How does the extended conception of rationality that explicitly includes artefacts relate to the findings of infrastructure studies? Is autonomy always "scaffolded"? What can automated data capture and processing contribute to the struggles for autonomisation? Or does this automation of so many aspects of life rather interfere with these struggles? Lastly, if autonomisation depends on uncovering and suspending habits in the sense of dis-automatisation, how can the conspicuous tension between this dis-automatisation and the automatisation of infrastructures be conceived without falling back into a simple opposition?

- **Technologies:** This core theme is primarily driven by the idea of so-called "autonomous systems", a term often used to describe a degree of (machine) agency without human oversight or control. These phenomena necessitate a reflection of agential hybrids – intricate human/machine networks of distributed agency and responsibility – and lead to questions on the varying degrees of automation and the contexts and structures of human/machine relations and interaction. What are the conditions of autonomy in "autonomous systems" – from planning and implementation to interaction with them; is it conceivable at all to make autonomy programmable? Which concept of learning is applied in "self-learning systems"? We are also interested in exploring the configurations of machine autonomy, may it be enacted or prescribed to these technical objects, and understanding its relationship(s) to human autonomy in the varying contexts that exist today.

- **Bodies:** The third core theme focuses on the somatic aspects and cognitive requirements of (human) autonomy. This refers to those premises of autonomy that are associated with socio-cultural constructs of human dis/ability, but also includes the role of affects, non-conscious cognitions and 'automatic' habits that counter the prevalent idea of the conscious and autonomous mind. The material dimension of technology plays an important role in these considerations, namely in settings of human-machine interaction, leading to questions of interface design, the 'bodily' presence of machines and the complex aspect of their potential to enable or constrain human agency and autonomy. We are interested in discussing how infrastructures in interaction with bodies shape, enable or prohibit autonomy; what performances of bodily autonomy might look like; and how this entanglement and enactment changes with new mechanical and digital infrastructures. In particular, we would like to address how the practice of care for one's own and other bodies is changing under the conditions of a computerised world.

All these major themes are to be understood as highly interconnected with the effect of mutually constituting dynamic infrastructures of autonomy.

We believe the discourse on infrastructures of autonomy is highly relevant beyond a theoretical perspective, since it touches upon issues with high stakes and severe consequences, such as:

- autonomous weapon systems
- robotics and smart technologies in the field of care work
- health care applications and technologies
- autonomous systems in the field of machine learning
- smart housing and smart cities
- …

We welcome contributions from scholars of diverse disciplines, such as the arts, cognitive science, computer science, cultural studies, design studies, literature and film studies, media and communication studies, philosophy, psychology, political science, science and technology studies or sociology. Interdisciplinary approaches (e.g., those combining social, cultural and technical perspectives) are particularly encouraged.

Submission process

- **Abstracts** of approximately 300 to 500 words in length (excl. references) should be submitted no later than **20 June 2022** to autonomy@hiig.de
- Speakers will be notified by **30 July 2022**

It is planned to publish selected papers.

If you have any questions, you can contact the conference organisers via autonomy@hiig.de. For more information, visit our website at hiig.de/en/infrastructures-of-autonomy/.

Alexander von Humboldt Institute for Internet and Society (HIIG)

Thomas Christian Bächle & Theresa Züger

Brandenburg Center for Media Studies (ZeM)

Bernd Bösel & Jan Distelmeyer