Ethical Issues in Media, AI and Digital Transformations: Algorithmic Power in Society

Instructor

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Summary

Artificial intelligence and digital technologies have fundamentally transformed society. They are increasingly implemented in journalistic and political communication (e.g., automated journalism, micro-targeting), social systems (e.g., for hiring processes or health resource allocation), or surveillance. These transformations of socio-technical systems raise significant ethical implications, for example with respect to fairness, discrimination, and power in society.

In this course, we (a) examine how digitalization transforms different segments of society, (b) discuss the ethical issues that arise from these transformations, and (c) explore solutions for addressing them. Throughout the course, we critically analyze exemplary cases from areas such as journalism, political communication, the labor market, or the health system, and evaluate how different approaches (e.g., technical fixes, human oversight, and regulation) can help address these challenges. Students will participate in presentations, create a case study poster, and take a final exam.

Learning goals

- Students can define and explain key concepts such as artificial intelligence, digitalization, ethics, and fairness.
- Students can apply these concepts to summarize exemplary cases of AI in different segments of society (e.g., journalism, political communication, the labor market, or the health system) and to critically evaluate their ethical implications.
- Students can summarize and critically evaluate approaches for addressing ethical issues (e.g., human oversight, explainable AI, policy governance).
- Students are able to engage in objective and well-informed discussions. They can communicate their knowledge in a clear and structured manner, both orally and in writing, individually as well as in group settings. In addition, they are capable of working collaboratively in groups, resolving potential conflicts, and organizing their own work effectively.

Workload & Evaluation

The course awards **4 ECTS credits**. In this course, a total of 100 points can be earned. The assessment consists of three components:

- Assessment 1: Active attendance (20 points)
- Assessment 2: Group case study via poster (30 points)
- Assessment 3: Written final exam with own or loaned CULT device (50 points)

The evaluation is based on the following grading scheme:

- **Insufficient:** 0 to 50 points
- **Sufficient:** 51 to 62 points
- **Satisfactory:** 63 to 74 points
- **Good:** 75 to 86 points
- **Very Good:** 87 to 100 points

Assessment 1: Active attendance
Participation includes active involvement in the sessions as well as the timely submission of assignments between sessions (e.g., abstract, brainstorming board). Participants who miss the first two sessions are automatically excluded from the course. Participation is assessed individually. It accounts for 20% of the grade.

Assessment 2: Group case study via poster
The case study consists of a poster presentation for one of the pre-defined case study questions (see syllabus). Your case study may build on the recommended core readings but should include additional literature. The case study is done in groups of up to four students. It accounts for 30% of the final grade. The poster presentation takes place in Session 3 on May 19th. Please upload an abstract describing your idea by April 3rd and a digital copy of your poster by April 24th. Poster submitted later than that cannot be printed via the course instructor.

Assessment 3: Exam
The 90-minute digital exam includes open and closed questions. Students cannot bring additional material to the exam. The exam is taken individually. It accounts for 50% of the grade and takes place on June 18th 2026.

Guidelines for the use of AI:
The use of artificial intelligence (AI) for active attendance and the group case study is permitted but must be fully disclosed. AI is not allowed for the exam. Students bear full responsibility for the content of their assignments. If there is suspicion that AI was used without disclosure, students will be invited to an oral follow-up discussion to verify the originality of their work. The unauthorized use of AI carries consequences: it will be treated as an attempt to cheat, the assignment will receive a failing grade, and any attempt at cheating will be reported to the Vice-Rector for Teaching. For exam-relevant assessments, this means that the course can no longer be passed successfully and must be repeated. Consequences may extend up to exclusion from the program (in accordance with §19a, Part B of the regulations).

Overview of Term Dates

Date	Room	Session	Tasks & Deadlines
March 27th, 2026 (11:45 am to 4:45 pm)	N.1.43	Session 1: *Introduction*	Input: Introduction & formalities Group session: Definitions, group assignment poster Assessment: Abstract (by April 3rd), Poster (by April 28rd)
May 12th, 2026 (10 am to 3 pm)	HS9	Session 2: *Ethical Issues*	Input: Ethical frameworks Group session: Preparation of poster presentations
May 19th, 2026 (3:15 pm to 6:30 pm)	HS4	Session 3: *Mini-conference & poster*	Input: Guest talk, mini-conference Assessment: Poster presentations, peer-review (by May 22nd)
June 2nd, 2026 (11:45 am to 4:45 pm)	HS3	Session 4: *Can we fix it?*	Input: Social and technical solutions Assessment: Brainstorm board upload (by June 5th)
June 9th, 2026 (1:30 pm to 4:45 pm)	Z.1.09	Session 5: *Summary & exam preparation*	Input: Summary of the seminar, exam preparation
June 18th, 2026 (09:30 am to 11 pm)	HSA	Written exam	

Case study questions

Key question 1: How does AI change and challenge journalistic news production?

Core reading:

1. Simon, F. M. (2024). Escape Me If You Can: How AI Reshapes News Organisations' Dependency on Platform Companies. *Digital Journalism*, *12*(2), 149–170. https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2023.2287464
2. Thäsler-Kordonouri, S., & Koliska, M. (2025). Journalistic Agency and Power in the Era of Artificial Intelligence. *Journalism Practice*, *19*(10), 2189–2208. https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2025.2480238

Keywords:
Automated journalism, computational journalism, data journalism, deep fakes

Key question 2: How does AI change and challenge polarization in society?

Core reading:

1. González-Bailón, S., Lazer, D., Barberá, P., Zhang, M., Allcott, H., Brown, T., Crespo-Tenorio, A., Freelon, D., Gentzkow, M., Guess, A. M., Iyengar, S., Kim, Y. M., Malhotra, N., Moehler, D., Nyhan, B., Pan, J., Rivera, C. V., Settle, J., Thorson, E., … Tucker, J. A. (2023). Asymmetric ideological segregation in exposure to political news on Facebook. *Science*, *381*(6656), 392–398. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.ade7138
2. Haim, M., Graefe, A., & Brosius, H.-B. (2018). Burst of the Filter Bubble?: Effects of personalization on the diversity of *Google News*. *Digital Journalism*, *6*(3), 330–343. https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2017.1338145

Keywords:
Polarization, filter bubbles, echo chambers, selective exposure, recommender systems

Key question 3: How does AI change and challenge elections?

Core reading:

1. Jungherr, A., Rauchfleisch, A., & Wuttke, A. (2026). Artificial Intelligence in Election Campaigns: Perceptions, Penalties, and Implications. *Political Communication*, 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2025.2611913
2. Hirsch, M., Binder, A., & Matthes, J. (2026). A "drop in the ocean"? Emerging adults' experiences and understanding of targeted political advertising on social media. *New Media & Society*, *28*(3), 1037–1062. https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448241306455

Keywords:
Digital campaigning, algorithmic targeting, micro-targeting, deep fakes, disinformation campaigns

Key question 4: How does AI change and challenge the judicial system?

Core reading:

1. Linna, E., & Linna, T. (2026). Challenges for generative AI in legal reasoning. *Discover Artificial Intelligence*, *6*(1), 170. https://doi.org/10.1007/s44163-026-00902-3
2. Socol De La Osa, D. U., & Remolina, N. (2024). Artificial intelligence at the bench: Legal and ethical challenges of informing—or misinforming—judicial decision-making through generative AI. *Data & Policy*, *6*, e59. https://doi.org/10.1017/dap.2024.53

Keywords:
judicial system, law, legal decision-making, fairness, transparency

Key question 5: How does AI change and challenge health care?

Core reading:

1. Chustecki, M. (2024). Benefits and Risks of AI in Health Care: Narrative Review. Interactive *Journal of Medical Research*, 13, e53616. https://doi.org/10.2196/53616
2. Cross, J. L., Choma, M. A., & Onofrey, J. A. (2024). Bias in medical AI: Implications for clinical decision-making. *PLOS Digital Health, 3*(11), e0000651. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pdig.0000651

Keywords:
clinical decision support systems, diagnostic AI, algorithmic bias, health disparities, patient safety

Key question 6: How does AI change and challenge science?

Core reading:

1. Bail, C. A. (2024). Can Generative AI improve social science? *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *121*(21), e2314021121. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2314021121
2. Branda, F., Ciccozzi, M., & Scarpa, F. (2025). Artificial intelligence in scientific research: Challenges, opportunities and the imperative of a human-centric synergy. *Journal of Informetrics*, *19*(4), 101727. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joi.2025.101727

Keywords:
Scientific discovery, generative AI in research, reproducibility crisis, research integrity, epistemic authority, peer review

Key question 7: How does AI change and challenge hiring decisions?

Core reading:

1. Chen, Z. (2023). Ethics and discrimination in artificial intelligence-enabled recruitment practices. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, *10*(1), 567. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-02079-x
2. Lambrecht, A., & Tucker, C. (2019). Algorithmic Bias? An Empirical Study of Apparent Gender-Based Discrimination in the Display of STEM Career Ads. *Management Science*, *65*(7), 2966–2981. https://doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.2018.3093

Keywords:
Algorithmic hiring, job ads, recruitment, human resources (HR), labor market, discrimination, profiling, automated decision-making, data-driven recruiting

Key question 8: How does AI change and challenge surveillance and policing?

Core reading:

1. Lee, Y., Bradford, B., & Posch, K. (2024). The Effectiveness of Big Data-Driven Predictive Policing: Systematic Review. *Justice Evaluation Journal*, *7*(2), 127–160. https://doi.org/10.1080/24751979.2024.2371781
2. Minocher, X., & Randall, C. (2020). Predictable policing: New technology, old bias, and future resistance in big data surveillance. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, *26*(5–6), 1108–1124. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856520933838

Keywords:
Predictive policing, algorithmic surveillance, facial recognition, datafication, privacy, civil liberties, forecasting