

All Things Optimal, An Interdisciplinary Workshop

Centre for Interdisciplinary Methodologies (CIM)
University of Warwick, Out of Data 2017–18

As a subset of applied mathematics, optimisation focuses on modelling solutions to practical problems or ‘classes’ of problems as contexts for abstract reasoning and the invention of logical methods. With the spread of big data infrastructures, these techniques are increasingly applied to a wide variety of social, cultural and political settings. From corporate logistics and operations research to movements like the quantified self or marketing doctrines on wellness, optimisation appears as a master category for dealing with uncertainty in the twenty-first century. How should we understand methodologies that aim for the optimal? What power relations emerge through their automated ubiquity? How might they be historicised, and how do they frame contemporary onto-epistemological problems?

This interdisciplinary workshop brings together historical, critical, sociological and artistic perspectives to investigate such questions in the era of big data, and to consider the potentials and pitfalls of all things optimal.

Date 25 October 2017
Time 12.00–17.30
Location University of Warwick
Oculus Building, OC106

12.00–13.00	Lunch
13.00–14.00	Introduction, Michael Dieter + Nathaniel Tkacz
14.00–14.15	Break (15 mins)
14.15–15.15	Silvio Lorusso + Emily Rosamond, moderated by Scott Wark
15.15–15.45	Break, Tea & Coffee (30 mins)
15.45–16.45	Celia Lury + André Spicer, moderated by Silvia Mollicchi
16.45–17.00	Break (15 mins)
17.00–17.30	Respondent, Beatrice Fazi (University of Sussex) moderated by Pablo Velasco
19:00	Dinner at Drapers, Coventry

‘Life After Optimization’ Michael Dieter (CIM, University of Warwick)

What is the optimization complex if not a situation where ‘the digital’ has turned masters into students; even poor or confused students, who are given the consolation prize of pursuing their betterment through datafication? This talk reflects on the recent spread of techno-mathematical methods throughout social life enabled by corporate super-platforms like Facebook, Amazon and Google, and considers alternative pursuits of mastery based on ascetic practices of withdrawal or recession. What skills and habits are nurtured by optimization methods, and what collective practices exist, or are yet to be invented, for stepping out of the datastream?

‘Optimal Thought?’ Nathaniel Tkacz (CIM, University of Warwick)

At some point in the middle of the 20th Century, decision-making was given a technical makeover. Decisions become explicitly post-individual, indeed ‘posthuman’, and attained a new procedural quality. A new formalization of decision underpinned the development of a range of technologies dedicated to ‘decision support’. In this presentation, I return to these early decision support systems in order to redirect recent discussions about media and cognition, specifically in the work of N. Katherine Hayles and Mark Hansen.

‘Outbound Optimization, Inbound Optimization’

Silvio Lorusso (Institute of Network Cultures, Amsterdam)

This talk will discuss a series of artistic projects focused on the multi-layered, algorithmic optimization of platforms like Amazon and Google. It highlights the way in which processes of optimization follow two directions: while they are meant to enhance tools and services, they also influence the construction of the subject involved in them. Notions of productivity merge with ideals of psychological well-being. The psycho-cyborg knows no mistake nor regret.

‘Reputation Capital/Reputation Warfare: Two Versions of the Optimal’ Emily Rosamond (Goldsmiths, London)

How is it possible to optimize influence, credit or power by harnessing the logics of online reputation? This paper argues that there has been a recent shift between two conceptions of the optimal in online reputation, which enact opposing attitudes about the relation between reputation and the calculable. Prior to 2016, and made particularly visible with the advent of the so-called ‘sharing economy,’ the predominant online reputation-logic was firmly tied to histories of optimizing private credit. In the lead-up to Donald Trump’s election as President of the United States, however, a more indirect form of reputation-optimization emerged, which capitalized on the systemic uncertainty produced by ubiquitous reputation-calculation. Reflecting on the shift between these two versions of the optimal can tell us much about the new political alignments of online reputation, as politics moves away from what Tariq Ali referred to the ‘extreme centre,’ which pervasively and directly claimed to align the interests of social democracy with those of Wall Street.

‘Optimizing People: What Changing Categories Can Do for *People Like You*’ Celia Lury (CIM, University of Warwick)

In this paper I consider some of the implications of optimizing practices for categories of person. Fourcade and Healey have claimed that what they call classification situations are increasingly shaping our life chances. I agree: in addition, I propose that life chances now depend on classification situations that are increasingly organised in relation to optimizing techniques – what Michael Dieter has called the optimization complex.

‘A Year Inside the Self-Optimization Movement’

André Spicer (City University of London)

In this talk, André Spicer discusses a year inside the world of self-optimization, a burgeoning movement that seeks to transcend the limits placed on us by being merely human, whether the feebleness of our bodies or our mental incapacities. With his colleague Carl Cederström, he wore head-bands designed to optimize meditation, attempted to boost his memory through learning associative techniques (and failed to be admitted to MENSA), trained for weightlifting competitions, wrote what they (still) hope might become a bestselling Scandinavian detective story, enrolled in motivational seminars and tantra sex workshops, attended new-age retreats and man-camps, underwent plastic surgery, and experimented with vibrators and productivity drugs. Documented in the recently published book, *Desperately Seeking Self-Improvement*, Spicer provides an analysis of the narcissism and individual competitiveness that increasingly pervades a culture in which social solutions are receding and individual self-improvement is the only option left.

Out of Data