

The challenge of the computational: towards a socio-technical epistemology

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The increasing pervasiveness of technologies of computation, information and communication not only affects our culture, economy and politics, they also mediate, shape and change our epistemic practices to profound extents: increasing amounts of personal data are used for profiling, information gets personalized in more or less transparent ways, we use crowd-sourced or collaboratively created content in our daily quests for knowledge. These technologies therefore offer new possibilities, but also new challenges for epistemic practices in research just as much as in our everyday lives. Accordingly, we need philosophical approaches that help us to understand and evaluate, but also to design and govern such socio-technical epistemic systems and practices.

So far, however, philosophy has failed to offer particularly fruitful approaches to understand contemporary ways of creating, using and processing knowledge within such socio-technical epistemic environments. Part of the reason for this shortcoming may reside in (sub-) disciplinary compartmentalization. Epistemology, while starting to acknowledge the social dimension of epistemic practices and of knowledge within the emerging field of social epistemology is for a large part still missing to take the crucial role of these technologies into account. Most philosophers of technology or computing on the other hand do not appear particularly eager to take up insights from (social) epistemology. Finally, as the emergence and strength of fields such as computer ethics indicates, there seems to be a bias to philosophically assess technologies of computation, information and communication from an ethical rather than from an epistemological perspective.

The goal of my talk accordingly is to shed some light on this rather neglected but increasingly important field: the impact of the computational on epistemic practices and the challenges this brings for philosophy. Insofar as the vast majority of contemporary epistemic practices are socio-technical epistemic practices, we need to develop a socio-technical epistemology, harvesting insights from different disciplines to provide frameworks for evaluating as well as guiding the design and governance of socio-technical epistemic systems and practices.