



Universität Hamburg

DER FORSCHUNG | DER LEHRE | DER BILDUNG

TAMING THE MACHINES

SYMPATHY, EMPATHY, AND TWITTER.

REFLECTIONS ON THE ARCHITECTURE OF SOCIAL MEDIA BASED ON AN 18TH-CENTURY DEBATE

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About the lecture: Online communication, especially on social media, raises intricate challenges for regulators: how can the harm that hate waves or fake news create be minimized without limiting the freedom of expression of users in an inappropriate way? In this paper, I draw on the 18th century debate about mechanisms of sympathy for thinking about this problem. David Hume and Adam Smith present us with two different models of the transmission of emotions and ideas between human beings, which I call “empathy” and “sympathy,” respectively. Empathetic processes are causal, almost automatic processes in which emotions or ideas are taken over uncritically from others, accompanied by a positive feeling that arises from the very act of sharing. Sympathy, in contrast, means putting oneself into the other person’s position and critically evaluating whether one should take over their emotions or ideas. I use this distinction for arguing that the architecture of social media can push people more in the direction of one or the other process. This suggestion is in line with recent proposals from social psychology to prevent the spread of hate messages or fake news in the digital sphere. Moreover, it discloses important questions about the online public sphere and about the possibility of designing it such that it facilitates sympathetic processes.

Tuesday, 17. January 2023, 18:15–19:45 CET

Flügelbau Ost, 2. OG, Raum O 221

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If you like to join us virtually, register at uhh.de/inf-eit.

ETHIK IN DER
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