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Interview with Christoph Neuberger on “How Digital Technologies are Shaping Our Society and What We Can Do About It”

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Christoph Neuberger is a full professor of media and communication science with a focus on “digitalization and participation” at Freie Universität Berlin. He also serves as a Scientific Managing Director at the Weizenbaum-Institut e.V. Prior to this, he taught as a full professor at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich (2011–2019) and Universität Münster (2002–2011). He was also a deputy professor at the University of Leipzig (2001–2002). He is a regular member of the Bavarian Academy of Sciences and Humanities and the German Academy of Science and Engineering (acatech). His research focuses on the digital transformation of media, the public sphere, and journalism.

BISE: Let’s jump right in: In 2019, you moved from Munich to Berlin, where you accepted a position at the FU Berlin, becoming the Scientific Managing Director of the newly established Weizenbaum-Institute for the Networked Society. The Weizenbaum-Institute is a BMBF-funded project focused on the impact of digitalization on society. This is exactly what this special issue is about. So, what motivated you to change your life so drastically?

Neuberger: To some extent, I was looking for an adventure. LMU, where I was previously stationed, is truly an excellent place. It also has the leading faculty in the field of communication studies in Germany. But, at the same time, I saw an opportunity to build a new institute – an opportunity that comes along probably only once in a lifetime. From this standpoint, it is obviously an adventure compared to the university’s very stable structures.

BISE: Why do we actually need the Weizenbaum-Institute? Is it possible to do comparable research in traditional university settings?

Neuberger: The Weizenbaum-Institute has a very special mission. It is unique compared not only to universities but

also to other research institutes. First, we bring many disciplines together. We have computer science, various social sciences, law, ethics, and several other fields. All of them are important for understanding the digital world and the social technological systems. We also have the normative point of view, especially represented by law and ethics. Our key values are self-determination and sustainability. So, we don't just want to describe and explain the digital world; we also want to evaluate it and suggest options for improving it.

Second, we are publicly funded and, hence, can work independently and ask fundamental questions that are important in the long run. We want to deeply understand what's going on in this digital world and what the long-term consequences are for us as humans. Third, we are trying to provide answers to the pressing issues of our society. And if you look very fundamentally at all these questions with a long-term perspective in mind, then you can give better answers than if you are just following short-term hypes.

And lastly, we have a very special form of organization: We unite five universities and two other research institutes. Thus, we have a lot of exchange in this network between different institutions that allows for fruitful collaboration.

BISE: Indeed, interdisciplinarity is at the heart of the Weizenbaum-Institute. But it is not without its challenges. How does the Weizenbaum-Institute navigate these difficulties?

Neuberger: Interdisciplinarity is always a challenge because you have to find ways to bring people together. It is not only about different topics but also about thinking differently because of the various theories and methods used. And we have very good conditions here to bring people from different disciplines together in order to find a common understanding of terms and ideas and how they can complement their work.

BISE: You have been in the communication science field for quite a few years. Do you see a significant paradigm shift due to digitalization?

Neuberger: Yes, our view on communication has changed a lot. Previously, we used the standard model of communication—the linear, static, and asymmetric model of mass communication. One sender and many recipients: Communication goes in one direction, and the audience is unable to communicate with the broadcaster. In other words, there was no real participation. Now, with the arrival of social media and other technologies, things have changed. We are now talking about a dynamic networked public sphere. Public communication is no longer limited to one-way communication, as in the case of the newspaper and television. We have complex forms of interaction and

media effects. Hence, it is not as easy to explain things as before when we had much simpler causal relationships and not such complex connections between communicative acts. Therefore, we need new theories to understand this phenomenon, and our methods need to be more elaborate. The field of Computational Communication Science has developed strongly in the last few years.

Another interesting example of the paradigm shift is the concept of “fake news.” I wrote my dissertation about objectivity and relevance in journalism. In the early 90s, we had a dominance of constructivism or relativism perspective. Many people said, not only in journalism practice but also in journalism studies, that there is nothing like truth or objectivity. In other words, it is all just a construction and a consensus of how we want to see the world. This was especially pronounced in Münster, the headquarters of radical constructivism in the German-speaking area. There was a lot of disagreement when I argued that journalists should try to be objective – and that this is not a futile endeavor. But this has changed entirely now. We have found ways back to the value of truth. At the same time, old postmodern relativistic and constructive approaches find themselves in a very defensive position.

BISE: That sounds exciting. Is there a particular topic that you are currently passionate about?

Neuberger: Initially, I was trying to look at all the latest phenomena and make empirical studies about them as fast as possible. But I have stopped doing that. There are too many changes and hypes, and things come and go. Now, I am trying to find a more abstract way to look at all these dynamics and develop new forms of theory. For example, we have recently published a piece on the digital transformation of the knowledge order. There, we discuss how forms of knowledge production and verification have changed over time. These are more abstract questions that need to be answered.

BISE: The Weizenbaum-Institute bears the name of Joseph Weizenbaum. We will celebrate his 100th anniversary this year. You have read a lot of his work and given lectures about it. Is there anything that has particularly stuck with you? What can we learn from it for our research agenda?

Neuberger: Research in the spirit of Joseph Weizenbaum should not be something of a lip service. His ideas about self-determination and individual autonomy were already important back then. Now, they are more important than ever. In simple terms, the ideas of Joseph Weizenbaum give us inspiration and guidance on how to build a better world. We can design digital media in completely different ways. In our research, we can work to understand digital media's effects on people and society at large. In other words, by trial and error, we have to establish a foundation

for the digital world that not only follows the economic imperatives but also leverages these digital media's public value. That would be research in the spirit of Joseph Weizenbaum.

BISE: But can we, scientists, have a say in these developments? Sometimes, it feels like we are always behind the tech companies in our research.

Neuberger: Yes! For example, consider all the regulations we have in Germany and the European Union. We can influence public policy in this domain. And I think we do a lot in this field at the Weizenbaum-Institute. For example, I am currently writing a report for public broadcasting in Germany since they also want to try to find ways to navigate this digital world. Thus, there are a lot of ways to influence these developments.

BISE: So, when you think about digitalization, do you look into the future with optimism?

Neuberger: Yes, I am always an optimist, and we should return to a bit of the naive optimism prevalent in the late 90s. When I think about my field of research, I see so many innovative forms of journalism out there. Yes, journalism is in an economic crisis because people are used to information being free on the Internet. But, on the other hand,

especially young people are now trying out so many new and creative things. This was impossible in the past, with journalism dominated by traditional media such as newspapers or broadcasting.

BISE: Thank you very much! This was a fascinating interview!

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