

A | S Amsterdam School of
Co | R Communication Research

ASCoR

Research programme 2022-2026

The Amsterdam School of Communication Research at the University of Amsterdam focuses its research on production, content and effects of media. While this overall aim has not changed much in past years, the context in which communicative processes take place has become substantially different. Among other things, digitalization has fundamentally altered the way information is produced, the content of this information, as well as how citizens use this information. ASCoR's research program 2022-2026 aims to further understand the key challenges that come with digitalization and related developments such as personalization and fragmentation. It focuses on the challenges and opportunities it offers to individuals, including mis- and disinformation, manipulation, human-machine communication, algorithmic selection, and the increasing importance of influencers. Overall, it has healthy digital citizenship and (mental and physical) well-being through effective communication as desirable outcomes.

The volatile context in which communication takes place and the fundamental challenges the current societies face, relating to for example sustainability, diversity and inclusion, as well as those to democratic processes, serve as the focal point of attention. More than ever, communication is of key importance in those challenges. Communication and its effects can both contribute to increasing these challenges, for example through disinformation, but also counter them, by effectively contributing to knowledge and awareness.

ASCoR's research has inherently a broad focus and research deals with a range of topics and applies a variety of methods. It is at the forefront with new computational methods, such as digital tracking of media use and computer-assisted content analysis. New types of data that stem from the digital society require different types of analysis. On the one hand, we do not shy away from this. On the contrary, as long as these methods and techniques help us to provide answers to new questions – or new answers to old questions – we are eager to use them. On the other hand, also more 'traditional' methods will keep their value.

Research takes place in four program groups: corporate communication, entertainment communication, persuasive communication, and political communication & journalism. These program groups cover a wide topical interest and focus of our research. Many cross-program group collaborations exist and are actively encouraged. ASCoR's

research agenda fits well in the broader University of Amsterdam's context and relates to central themes that are identified at the university level: responsible digital transformations, healthy future, resilient and fair society and sustainable prosperity (see Strategic Plan 2021-2026 'Inspiring Generations'). ASCoR actively searches collaborations with other disciplines both within our faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences and beyond, for example through participation in research priority areas, as well as in both the faculty and university data science center.

Key building blocks

A key aspect in much of ASCoR's research is the consequences of digitalization on individuals. Digitalization is a multi-faceted phenomenon that intervenes in all aspects of life in current (Western) societies. Current research should strive for a better understanding of what the blurring of the offline and online worlds means and how we have to adjust our theories and methods to achieve this understanding.

Whether it is the way people use media and news, how they interact with others, obtain information to inform themselves about all kind of issues and decisions, the digital environment is leading. Digitalization has both positive and negative consequences. On the one hand, it empowers people and provides them with ample opportunities to inform and entertain themselves. Virtual reality for example, increases opportunities for interaction between individuals and can empower consumers and patients. On the other hand, digitalization is often argued to contribute to polarization and increasing inequalities, has an alleged negative impact on youth, and is a key driving force in the spread of mis- and disinformation. Deep fakes, for example, are increasingly used as an effective tool to mislead individuals in the political context and beyond. Automated decision making, in all kinds of contexts, can be extremely efficient, but also yield significant biases that systematically disadvantage certain individuals and groups. Far-reaching digitalization also provoke serious ethical challenges, for example relating to privacy. Our aim is to explore the range of potential outcomes, considering both positive and negative aspects, and thus provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the consequences of digitalization

on our societies. The characteristics of the actual media content people consume and how they impact individuals' attitudes, beliefs and behavior remains the key concern.

Within the broader theme of digitalization, several developments merit our specific attention. These are:

Personalization The times when everybody received the same information are over. Although newspapers, radio, and television, keep on producing content that technically is meant for everybody, the last years have seen an enormous trend toward the personalization of content along with an explosion of available information. What we encounter is increasingly tailored to our interests, predispositions, and needs, for example on shopping or search websites and on newsfeeds. The content we read, watch, and hear is personalized *for us*, often intentionally, for instance to make us buy particular products. At the same time, we may encounter content that has been personalized for us unintentionally through the networks we belong to. Because people in our networks are at least to some extent similar to us, they share information with us that often merges with our interests and predispositions. Finally, content is also personalized *by us*. Through social media, basically everybody with internet access can create personal information and distribute it to audiences of varying sizes. The rise of content personalized for us and of content personalized by us presents a significant change in our media and communication environment. A specific interest lies in the use of conversational agents, and more general human-computer interactions, that highlight both personalized communication on the one hand and the blurring of online/offline divides on the other. Personalization raises important questions, for example about privacy, to which we need evidence-based answers achieved through rigorous research.

Fragmentation Current media landscapes are fragmented – both in terms of audiences and content. On the one hand, the availability of information is practically endless. On the other hand, audiences often receive only limited, tailored information that yields divisions and potentially harms social cohesion. Our research involves the consequences of this fragmentation. It addresses questions related to the circumstances under which algorithmic selection contributes to the occurrence of filter bubbles, or fringe bubbles, and how this

affects opinion formation and behaviour, both at the individual, as well as at the societal level. Radicalization that might take place in those bubbles, and associated phenomena such as knowledge resistance and lack of trust in media, authorities and expertise, are key focal points in our research.

Volatility and complexity Communication processes are inherently dynamic and complex and need to be treated as such. High levels of volatility seem to be omnipresent in many of the key phenomena we study – both at the individual (e.g. in social media use) as well as the societal level (e.g. public opinion dynamics, but also developments such as mediatization). With the dynamics of the media and communication environment comes with the opportunity to observe and analyze in a relatively short time span crucial longitudinal developments in how media use and communication behavior evolves, along with their effects – at different levels of aggregation and considering the interactions between individuals and other societal actors and organizations.

Key societal challenges Central in our research are societal problems in a broad sense, and research focuses on topics such as (mental) health, ageing, education, sustainability, diversity, mis- and disinformation, digital inequality, legitimacy of (public and private) organizations, and journalistic freedom. In all those issues, information content and communication processes play a key role and turn out to be of vital importance, and research can demonstrate how (desirable) behavioural change can be fostered and how citizens can be empowered to deal with some of the major challenges our societies face nowadays. Media literacy in general and digital literacy in particular is of crucial importance here. Research is inherently multi-faceted and multi-level. For example, digitally healthy citizenship, especially among young users but also across the lifespan, requires studying individuals' media use, but also the interests and structures of information providers and platforms and the impact of their algorithms. The role different actors (authorities, journalists, big tech companies) play in shaping and regulating our informational context is of key importance.

Guiding principles

Our main objects of study have become more complex and multi-faceted. Questions relating to digitalization often involve vast amounts of different data, touch upon behavioural, but also legal and normative aspects, and require different types of expertise. Therefore, we encourage team science and collaborations within our discipline and with scholars from other disciplines. This is the way to provide suitable and nuanced responses to fundamental scientific questions.

We encourage *open science* and our research adheres to fundamental FAIR principles: Findable, accessible, interoperable, and reusable. We are supportive of preregistration of research with confirmatory hypotheses and the use of the registered report format. We strive for open access to our work in all instances, and for open data when possible

Findings are not only communicated through academic outlets, but more widely to reach a non-scientific audience. This audience can consist of ordinary citizens, but also specific stakeholders that are either subjects of our studies and/or stakeholders that can use our insights to change society for the better. Collaboration with non-academic, societal partners is encouraged. We believe that such an approach is improving the quality of our research. Additionally, with our research we aim to inform policy by government and other authorities, as well as legislation when applicable as to contribute to evidence-based governance.

In line with our focus on societally relevant topics, we adhere to a principle of **science for society**. Our research strives to provide insights that can help alleviate societal problems and highlight communication that is suitable to bridge divides between opposite groups and decreases polarization and inequalities between groups in (mental and physical) well-being and (digital and health) literacy.

Finally, ASCoR aims to provide a vibrant and diverse research environment, which offers all researchers a context in which they can thrive and where social safety is ensured.

Methodology

In times of digitization, an empirical, partially computational perspective, needs to be accompanied by evidence-based support and perhaps protection of the user/citizen, notably when it concerns young people. This requires an inherently interdisciplinary approach, as it also includes normative and legal aspects.

While new media are an inherent part of the investigation, we rely on an encompassing notion of media, including both traditional and emerging media.

The new and digitalized information environment comes with several methodological opportunities and challenges. In the past years, we have developed a strong profile on new methodologies, and we plan to sustain and further develop this methodological expertise. We do this in conjunction with more 'traditional' methods such as experiments, interview studies, survey research and manual content analysis, that still carry their value. More concretely, we consider the following methodological developments important:

Computational methods, including automated content analyses, to analyze vast amounts of textual and also visual data.

Tracking of (social) media behaviour to capture what kind of information people come across in a highly personalized information environment, but also their search behaviour, social media use and interactions. Several strategies can be used here, including data donation.

Longitudinal research, where intensive, short-term data collection is combined with longer-term research. Here, inter-person analysis, that focuses on changes and dynamics within individuals in a longitudinal perspective is a promising venue.

Sub-population research. While representative samples remain important, some of the current fundamental societal questions pertain to specific sub-groups, either based on age, ethnicity, or sexual orientation.

Also more conventional methods, such as manual content analyses, surveys, experiments, as well as qualitative approaches such as interviews and focus groups, will continue to be of crucial importance to answer key questions in our discipline. Increasingly,

combinations of different methods (e.g. social media use together with surveys) will be warranted. Attention to causal inference and the extent to which cause and effect can be established remains an important point of attention.

Ambition

The enormous changes in our media and communication environment have profoundly affected people's lives, at an individual, group and institutional level. A society has emerged in which communication plays a central role. It is the main goal of the research program to explore, analyze, and understand this new digital society. Specifically, the program centers on the theoretical and empirical analyses of the contents, uses, and consequences of media and communication. A particular emphasis lies on understanding the differential character of how people use media content and communicate as well of its consequences: Depending on the interaction between individual dispositions and contextual factors, people may differ considerably in whether and how they use particular media content, how they communicate, and the consequences it elicits. In addition, the research program stresses the role of the cognitive, affective, and emotional processes that underlie communication and media use and help us to explain its consequences. Finally, the research program acknowledges that communication takes place at the individual, group, institutional and societal level as well as across them.

The ASCoR research program has several more general ambitions. First, the research program aims to develop and apply new concepts and novel theoretical developments that help us understand the communication society. Second, the program aims at responding to important current societal challenges where communication plays a vital role. Third, it aims to do so using state-of-the-art methodological approaches. Fourth, the program strives to stimulate intellectually rewarding and scientifically creative collaborations between scientists within ASCoR, but also within our faculty, and university more broadly. Finally, the research program has the ambition to break new ground in important communication scientific issues and to contribute to a general understanding of communication and potentially a new communication effects paradigm, that answers when, why and how people are affected by media and information. To achieve this, we actively search for

collaboration with the best national and international communication researchers and institutes.