D!ARC

NETWORK

SUMMER EDITION

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OUTDOOR HS A (KOŠUTA) | 1PM-2.30PM

THE EVENT WILL BE IN ENGLISH

D!ARC
Digital Age Research Center
AAU–University of Klagenfurt

UNIVERSITÄT KLAGENFURT

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Abstract

The use of opaque machine learning algorithms is often justified through testing and the calculation of standardized performance measures like accuracy. For example, IBM has advertised its algorithms as being able to predict when workers will quit with 95% accuracy (Christl, 2021; Rosenbaum, 2019), or an EU research project on lie detection in border control has reported 75% accuracy (Sánchez-Monedero and Dencik 2020). Such performance numbers are used to make sense of the functioning of algorithmic systems and promise to quantify the quality of algorithmic predictions by highlighting the expected frequency of correct and wrong results. They also are performative and involved in producing ascriptions of certainty towards predictions. Consequently, these measures can be also understood as rhetorical devices meant to convince others of the ability of algorithms to objectively know the world and its future through the trust in numbers and thereby make calculated and partial visions appear certain. This marks other possibilities and interpretations as unlikely, potentially invisibilizing and foreclosing different futures. I show how the construction of high accuracy and related imaginaries of certainty involves the production of ignorance. I discuss practices in machine learning and how they introduce different forms of ignorance that make the construction of high accuracy in classification algorithms possible. This move aims to deconstruct claims of certainty by highlighting the politics and contingencies of testing used to justify the adoption of algorithms. Finally, I reflect on how accuracy could be rethought with the goal of opening up possibilities, making contingencies more visible, and enabling the imagination of different futures.

Bio

Gabriel Grill (he/him) is a Ph.D. candidate in Information at the University of Michigan with a focus on science and technology studies and affiliated with the Center for Ethics, Society, and Computing (ESC), the Infrastructure Lab, and the Tech.Culture.Matters. research collective. His research interests revolve around the social study of algorithms and performance measures in supply chain management, risk assessment, and platform governance. He uses qualitative methods informed by sensibilities from feminist science and technology studies and infrastructure studies combined with technical expertise in computer science.