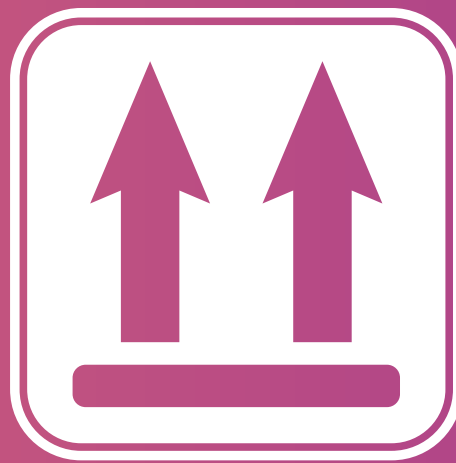


Digital Geographies in Fragile Times:

Prearity, Instability, and Uncertainty



Digital Geographies Research Group
Annual Symposium 2026

9th July 2026 - Online

On behalf of the Digital Geographies Research Group, I want to wish you a very warm welcome to our Annual Symposium, *Digital Geographies in Fragile Times: Precarity, Instability, and Uncertainty*.

We meet at a moment when fragility feels inescapable. Artificial intelligence systems are being rolled out faster than their failures or effects can be understood. Internet shutdowns and digital surveillance have been routine instruments of state power amid conflict and political unrest. Platform economies continue to deepen precarious working conditions for millions of people, even as they're marketed as tools of freedom and convenience. We are all already living with the conditions this theme describes.

Across the papers gathered here, our speakers trace how digital technologies - from wearables and drones to AI and platform infrastructures - are reshaping bodies, homes, cities, and borders in ways that are often uneven, contested, and precarious. Whether examining live streamed disasters, surveilled homes, or the digital frontiers of state power, this year's programme asks us to sit with fragility rather than resolve it: to think carefully and critically about who bears the costs of digital transformation, and who is rendered invisible, exploitable, or excluded by it.

I want to thank everyone who submitted papers this year, and our keynote speaker, Professor Margath Walker, for joining us to share her work on the fragility of AI. I'm also enormously grateful to the DGRG committee for their work organising this symposium, and particularly to Harrison Smith for chairing this year's event.

I hope this symposium offers a space for generative and critical conversations and the kind of community-building that keeps our research group thriving. Thank you for being part of it.

Tess Osborne

Chair of the Digital Geographies Research Group

This year's symposium, *Digital Geographies in Fragile Times: Precarity, Instability, and Uncertainty*, coalesces around the theme of *fragility*. We aim to take a step back from the state of things and reflect on the emergent qualities, anticipations, and affects that are collectively experienced in these turbulent global times.

Since the global COVID-19 pandemic there has been an unmistakable feeling that we are in fragile times. Fragility, and related feelings of precarity, instability, and uncertainty have now become defining features of how everyday life is collectively experienced and felt. There are countless reasons why. Artificial Intelligence, climate change, reforms to higher education, and the growing popularity of far-right politics, are just some of the ways in which social life feels increasingly fragile and in need of urgent intervention. All that appeared solid is not just melting into thin air, but rather, can feel more like a kind of fracturing, shattering, or splintering of the order of things. The future is uncertain, and we are often left in a sense of constant anticipation for what is to come.

In this symposium, we aim to think about fragility as multifaceted, ongoing, and dynamic. It provides an important opportunity into thinking about the kinds of social problems we face, and how they are internalized in unequal ways and intensities, and in certain moments over others. Fragility is not necessarily to imply futility, hopelessness, or defeat, but instead a question of values, problems, and challenges. As such, we can also think of fragility from a position of care to think about what we value. To acknowledge that the world is fragile means that it is delicate and invites us to think about how we can hold on to things we cherish.

Therefore, this symposium asks how do we confront the fragile, and how can digital geographies offer a unique lens for making sense of these issues? As digital geographers, we aim to draw on a wide range of theoretical, epistemological, and methodological frameworks to address complex questions of sociotechnical change and how it impacts our lived environments and experiences. The papers in this symposium present on critical issues concerning the ways that digital geographies can help understand our fragile times, and we think you will find them insightful and provocative. I wish to offer my sincerest thanks to everyone at the Digital Geographies Research Group that has helped organize symposium, and thank you for your participation.

Harrison Smith

Chair of the 2026 DGRG Annual Symposium

Membership Secretary

Contact the DGRG

Email: digitalgeographiesRGS@gmail.com

LinkedIn: [Digital Geographies Research Group DGRG \(RGS\)](#)

BlueSky: [@dgrgrgs.bsky.social](#)

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Do you want to get involved with the Digital Geographies Research Group?

The Digital Geographies Research Group holds its Annual General Meeting during the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) International Annual conference. This year there will likely be openings for a number of positions on the committee. Keep an eye on the DGRG mailing list for further information and calls for applications.

Subscribe to the DGRG mailing list

If you would like to receive updates from the RGS Digital Geographies Research Group and its researcher community, then subscribe to our ListServ via digitalgeogrgs@jiscmail.ac.uk



Keynote Speaker

**Professor Margath Walker
(University of Louisville)**

Margath Walker is Professor of Geography in the Department of Geographic and Environmental Sciences and School of Urban and Public Affairs at the University of Louisville. Her research focuses on technology, critical social theory and political geography. Her book, *Spatializing Marcuse: Critical Theory for Contemporary Times* (Bristol University Press) is the first to develop a geographic perspective in relation to the social philosopher, Herbert Marcuse. She has published widely on the geographies of artificial intelligence, borders and belonging and how social theory can explain current political dynamics. She is currently co-editor of the RGS-IBG Book Series.

The Fragility of AI: Disrupting Disruptive Technologies

Across the social sciences, artificial intelligence (AI) is frequently framed or critiqued in terms of claims to certainty, its capacity to distill and mirror, and its value as a problem-solving technology. This positioning of AI has roots in Newell and Simon's "General Problem Solver" formalization of the 1950s (Newell and Simon 1956). These early ambitions persist in AI's current promise to condense, compress and transfer what humans know (Crawford 2021). Garibay-Peterson et al. (2025) analyze how AI discourses produce truth narratives even where uncertainty in scientific knowledge exists. They argue that current models struggle with problems that differ from what has already been seen. Vallor (2024) contends that treating AI as a mechanism for extracting and concentrating what already exists perpetuates the myth that these technologies act as distillers or mirrors of human knowledge. Such mechanisms aim to emulate human thought processes, enabling the transfer of abstract qualities like reasoning abilities and values onto machine learning. Certainty, distillation and problem-solving in AI brings with it a reductionist tendency (Collins 2021; Granger 1991) that assumes the world can be fully known. In this paper, we build on critical geographers' call to focus on the irreducible and messy nature of life (e.g. Amooore 2020; Walker and Winders 2021) by emphasizing the fragility of AI. We argue that the taken-for-granted link between AI and decipherability reflects both a vulnerability and an opportunity to open new spaces for critique. Thinking through AI's fragility through the lens of ontological legibility allows researchers to disrupt disruptive technologies.

Programme

A link will be circulated to registered participants to attend this symposium.

Session and Timing	Speakers
Arrival 9:45am	DGRG Committee
Introduction 9:50am	Tess Osborne (DGRG Chair) Harrison Smith (Symposium Chair)
Session 1 Bodies, Data and Lived Experience 10:00am – 11:15am	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Wearables, biosocial infrastructures, and the biopolitics of uncertainty</i> - Kai Wen Wong• <i>Digital domesticities: the intimate surveillance of the 'smart' migrant home in Santiago, Chile</i> - Laura Neville• <i>Crayons x Code: Re-Exploring Children's Drawings With Multimodal AI and Dynamic Ethics</i> - Susan Qu
Comfort Break 11:15am – 11:30am	
Session 2 AI, Knowledge and Computational Worlds 11:30am – 12:45pm	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Seeing the City Like a Digital Twin: From (Mis)representation to Synthesis</i> - Fabio Iapaolo• <i>Uneven Datafication and the Geographies of Digital Colonial Capitalism</i> - Azadeh Akbari• <i>Regionalization through Digital Labor Platforms: The Reorganization of Urban Space in Brazil</i> - Igor Dalla Vecchia
Lunch Break 12:45pm – 1:30pm	
Session 3 Surveillance, Vision and Control 1:30pm – 2:45pm	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>The Vertical Gaze and the Counter-Archive: Reading Post-Protest Urban Space Through Drone Vision</i> - Suman Ghosh

Session 4

Digital Capitalism,
Governance and
Control

2:45pm – 4pm

- *Rendered fragile: intersections of digital governance with vernacular economic practices in the peripheries of the Mumbai metropolitan region* - **Keya Kunte**
- *Digital Geographies of Educational Inequality: Rural-Urban Divides during the COVID-19 Pandemic in West Bengal, India* - **Abhinandan Das**
- *Dwelling in the Cloud: Techno-Utopianism, Surveillance, and Extractive Labour in Bangalore's Digital Economy* - **Umer Jan**
- *Digital geographies of aspirational mobilities: Tal-Joseon of young South Korean women* - **Minji Gwon**
- *Digitality as the Extended Frontline of Colonial and Coloniality Practices in Iran* - **Niloufar Vadiati, Nassim Mehran**

Comfort Break

4pm – 4:15pm

Keynote

The Fragility of AI
4:15pm – 5:15pm

The Fragility of AI: Disrupting Disruptive Technologies - **Margath Walker**

Conference Close

5:15pm – 5:30pm

Harrison Smith (Symposium Chair)

Paper Abstracts

In order of appearance in programme

Wearables, biosocial infrastructures, and the biopolitics of uncertainty

Kai Wen Wong

National University of Singapore (NUS)

My paper proposes the concept of “biosocial infrastructures” to elucidate the geographical implications of the adoption of health-monitoring wearables in various contexts. The use of wearables has been critiqued as apparatuses of surveillance to discipline “healthy” bodies, or as things imbricated in more-than-human agency. However, its spatial implications have not been fully elucidated. Within geography, while research with wearables is increasing, there is a lack of research on wearables.

I argue that the biosocial infrastructural perspective offers insights into how wearables are entangled with the biopolitics of uncertainty through which dominant notions of health and wellbeing are co-constituted. On the one hand, the biosocial attends to how wearables are entangled with the biosocial becomings of the human body. These becomings are highly uncertain, and at times beyond human agency. On the other, the infrastructural perspective reveals how wearables are implicated in biopolitics. Taken together, the biosocial infrastructural analytic critiques how uncertainty is enlisted in biopolitics through wearables.

I examine this through the case of Singapore where wearables in the form of fitness trackers, amongst various infrastructures, are provided by the state to inculcate “active ageing” in a rapidly ageing society. Through in-depth interviews with 30 older adults aged 55 to 70 as part of my PhD research, I reveal how their use of wearables reflects and reproduces their uncertainty over their health. While wearables provide real-time information about their bodily performance, it ironically generates uncertainty about their ageing bodies which in turn feeds into “active ageing” biopolitical state agendas.

Digital domesticities: the intimate surveillance of the 'smart' migrant home in Santiago Chile.

Laura Neville

University College London

In Santiago de Chile's new migrant spaces of inhabitation, vertical, high-density, large-scale urban developments, commonly referred to as "vertical ghettos", digital technologies, particularly AI-driven facial recognition and biometric access control systems, are increasingly being implemented alongside existing CCTV cameras, security turnstiles, private security guards, and concierge services. Drawing on ethnographic research, this paper examines how these technologies penetrate the intimate spaces of the home and the dynamics through which the migrant home becomes transformed into a datafied entity. As racialized discourses of securitization intensify, intimate forms of surveillance within the migrant home expand through the logics of smart home infrastructures and AI technologies.

The paper focuses on the everyday experiences of Venezuelan and Colombian migrant women who inhabit these spaces while sustaining fragile and transitory notions of home. They experience being datafied and surveilled through the routine use of these technologies as they move in and out of their homes, rendering surveillance increasingly ordinary. The paper further explores the frictions surrounding these technologies, from the consent implied in promises of frictionless access and enhanced security, to practices of evasion, and the renewed forms of exclusion that emerge as these systems become part of everyday life.

By examining how migrant women's everyday experiences of domesticity intersect with the digitization of the home and the body, the paper calls for a reconsideration of deeply embedded socio-political classificatory structures and hierarchies as algorithmic control gradually penetrates the home. It asks what Santiago's new migrant spaces of inhabitation can teach us about embodied and ordinary experiences of surveillance from the fragile experiences and struggles of homemaking within South-South migration context.

Crayons × Code: Re-Exploring Children's Drawings With Multimodal AI and Dynamic Ethics

Susan Qu

University of Cambridge

Children's drawings are used to study their environmental perception, but AI-powered analysis of these visual materials remains underexplored. This paper re-explores the use of children's drawings as a tool for understanding their perceptions of the environment, leveraging multimodal AI for analysis. The study revisits a dataset of 188 drawings created by 94 children, comparing AI-based analysis with human interpretations to examine the strengths and limitations of AI in visual research. It focuses on the ability of multimodal AI to detect and classify the visual elements of children's drawings, whilst also investigating potential links between these elements and various health or demographic factors, including physical activity, gender and age, through a combination of quantitative statistical analyses. The research highlights the potential and challenges of AI in interpreting the complexity of children's drawings. The paper, based on ethical reflections, also addresses the ethical implications of using AI in sensitive contexts, proposing dynamic ethics to ensure responsible use of technology in research involving children. This study offers new insights into the intersection of AI, ethics and visual research.

Seeing the City Like a Digital Twin: From (Mis)representation to Synthesis

Fabio Iapaolo

Polytechnic University of Milan

Digital twins are increasingly deployed as techniques for governing urban uncertainty, particularly as cities face mounting environmental, infrastructural, and social crises. Existing critiques have approached these systems primarily through the lens of (mis)representation, asking how accurately they capture urban reality and where they fall short. This paper proposes a different starting point.

Rather than asking how faithfully digital twins represent the city, it asks what kind of urban reality they synthesise. Drawing on Fazi's (2024) understanding of synthesis as the computational production of unity through distributed representations, the paper argues that digital twins are better understood as generative systems than as representational ones. They do not distort a pre-existing city but produce a version of it, shaped by distinct computational processes that are as much political as they are technical.

Once deployed in urban governance, moreover, these synthetic wholes do not remain external to the city they model. They shape the data, decisions, and interventions through which urban conditions are interpreted and managed, recursively conditioning the environments from which future models learn. The paper sets out to explore what this shift from misrepresentation to synthesis means for how we understand the politics of urban digital twinning, and what forms of critique might be adequate to it.

Uneven Datafication and the Geographies of Digital Colonial Capitalism

Azadeh Akbari

Goethe University Frankfurt

This paper examines how contemporary forms of datafication reproduce and intensify uneven spatial, political, and economic relations across the globe. Building on the concept of “uneven datafication,” it argues that digital transformation is neither universal nor homogeneous, but structured through colonial continuities, differentiated dispossession, and asymmetrical forms of value extraction. Rather than approaching datafication as a neutral technological process, the paper situates digital infrastructures, platform economies, and AI governance within longer histories of colonial capitalism and uneven development.

The paper contributes to debates in digital geographies by foregrounding the spatial politics of data extraction and infrastructural power. It demonstrates how contemporary digital systems territorialise and reterritorialise space through data centres, platform infrastructures, cloud architectures, and algorithmic forms of governance that disproportionately shape everyday life in the Global South and other marginalised contexts. At the same time, datafication produces differentiated forms of visibility and exclusion, rendering some populations hyper-visible and exploitable while others remain structurally privileged within global circuits of data accumulation.

Drawing on decolonial theory, dependency theory, and critical political economy, the paper conceptualises datafication as a process deeply embedded in geopolitical hierarchies and historical relations of domination. It argues that the expansion of digital infrastructures and AI systems cannot be understood outside the logics of extraction, labour exploitation, and epistemic asymmetry that have historically organised the global economy. In this sense, digital capitalism represents not a rupture from earlier colonial formations but their reconfiguration through computational infrastructures and data-intensive forms of governance.

Regionalization through Digital Labor Platforms: The Reorganization of Urban Space in Brazil

Igor Dalla Vecchia

Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg

The expansion of digital platforms has produced increasingly refined forms of urban spatial division. Although the regionalization of cities is not a new phenomenon, platforms such as Uber, iFood, Airbnb, Amazon, and Mercado Livre have intensified this process by operating through algorithms, real-time geolocation systems, and digital infrastructures capable of continuously classifying territories according to criteria of demand, circulation, and profitability. This paper discusses how digital platforms have promoted new forms of urban regionalization, in which urban space is reorganized less through traditional administrative boundaries and more through statistical projections and consumption patterns produced in real time.

Among the cases analyzed, particular attention is given to Uber's H3 system, which subdivides space into hexagonal cells in order to monitor movements, modulate prices, and redistribute drivers according to fluctuations in supply and demand. The paper also examines iFood's systems of "praças" and "sub-praças," which define priority zones of circulation and labor for delivery workers across different Brazilian cities. More recently, the "+Entregas" system has deepened this process by expanding mechanisms of temporal labor allocation, encouraging delivery workers to remain connected during specific hours and in particular areas of the city through targets, incentives, and demand forecasting. Although companies continue to promote a discourse of worker autonomy, these spatial dynamics of regionalization increasingly resemble forms of labor organization associated with formal employment, but without the rights, protections, or guarantees linked to labor contracts. In the case of Airbnb, the paper discusses how descriptions produced by users themselves contribute to the symbolic redefinition of certain neighborhoods, expanding tourist centralities and reorganizing circuits of urban valorization. By examining these different cases together, the paper argues that digital platforms have become active agents in the contemporary production of urban space in Brazil.

The Vertical Gaze and the Counter-Archive: Reading Post-Protest Urban Space Through Drone Vision

Suman Ghosh

Tampere University

This paper examines how digitally mediated forms of vision shape the afterlife of protest in urban space. It focuses on Shaheen Bagh in Delhi, a neighbourhood that became a focal site of anti-CAA protest in 2019–2020 and was subsequently cleared under pandemic restrictions. Rather than reconstructing the protest itself, the study asks how dissent persists once its visible infrastructure has been removed. The analysis draws on drone footage and street-level walkthroughs recorded four years after the protest's dispersal. It develops the concept of situated seeing to examine how different visual registers, aerial and ground-level, produce distinct encounters with urban space. Working through infrastructures associated with contemporary surveillance, including drones, satellite imaging, and mapping platforms, the paper treats vision not as a neutral tool but as a condition that shapes what becomes perceptible. Material residues such as overpainted walls, patched footbridges, and faint inscriptions are read alongside embodied responses to filming: gestures, humour, indifference, and casual acknowledgment of cameras. These encounters show how protest persists through ordinary spatial practices rather than overt acts of remembrance. From above, erasure appears as interruption; at ground level, it becomes texture, layered into the surfaces of everyday life. The paper argues that urban space functions here as a dispersed counter-archive in which memory is enacted through movement, use, and routine encounter. It contributes to digital geographies by showing how visual technologies not only document or surveil protest but participate in shaping how its afterlife is lived and encountered in the present.

Keywords: Digital geographies, Drone vision, Urban surveillance, Counter-archives, Situated seeing

Rendered fragile: intersections of digital governance with vernacular economic practices in the peripheries of the Mumbai metropolitan region

Keya Kunte

University College London

Bhiwandi-Nizampur, a peripheral city in the Mumbai metropolitan region of western India, is caught between two defining moments. The first is an economic restructuring, which is pulling labour and resources away from its existing, small-scale textile industry into the logistics and warehousing sector. Secondly, the expansion of digital governance has produced frictions with vernacular practices of power loom workshops within the city, forcing compliance to survive. Positioning itself at this conjuncture, this presentation highlights how specific practices of the small-scale power loom economy on which the city is highly dependent are excluded from different registers of digital governance, thereby exposing its fragility. Drawing on eight months of ethnographic fieldwork focusing on Bhiwandi-Nizampur's male loom owners, I show how new norms of digital governance disrupt cash-based transactions, introduce new norms of online documentation and weaken existing economic networks. An emerging consequence is a vastly differentiated future for loom owners, whose negotiation also depends on class hierarchies, religious identities, kinship relations and property ownership. In other words, digital governance has not produced the same outcomes for all loom owners. Therefore, if fragility is a framework for viewing digital governance, it raises critical questions for discussion in this presentation: which modes of the local economy are indeed fragile, and which survive? How does fragility produced through digital governance intersect with other considerations that perpetuate uncertainty and precarity? And how does this exposure to digital governance produce fragile conditions for one set of loom owners but opportunities for others? By attending to these questions, this presentation hopes to derive insights into the necessity for nuanced readings of the outcomes of digital governance on local economies, even as it draws attention to the fragility shaping everyday life in peripheral cities.

Dwelling in the Cloud: Techno-Utopianism, Surveillance, and Extractive Labour in Bangalore's Digital Economy

Umer Jan

Alliance University, India

In this paper, I examine the socio-technical transformations underpinning Bangalore's emergence as a global technology hub, focusing on how digital infrastructures reshape urban life, labour, and governance. Drawing on critical theory and ethnographic observations, I conceptualize the city's techno-utopian development as a system sustained through surveillance, extractivism, and the gamification of everyday interactions. I analyse how platform-based housing applications, workplace monitoring systems, and gig economy practices produce new forms of control while normalizing data extraction and precarious labour conditions. At the same time, these systems reconfigure interpersonal relations, embedding surveillance within domestic and community life. I introduce the concept of "dwelling in the cloud" to describe how digital abstraction obscures material inequalities and infrastructural deficits, even as it intensifies dependence on networked technologies. By situating Bangalore within global circuits of digital capitalism, the paper highlights how technological innovation coexists with, and relies upon, forms of social and economic disposability.

Digital Geographies of Educational Inequality: Rural-Urban Divides during the COVID-19 Pandemic in West Bengal, India

Abhinandan Das

Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Kharagpur, India

One of India's most notable features is the disparity in digital infrastructure between rural and urban areas. The accessibility and quality of digital education in India's rural areas are noteworthy obstacles. By using a sample village and a city close to the Kolkata Metropolitan Development Authority (KMDA), Kolkata, the current study has aimed to highlight this issue. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a terrible and devastating impact on the Indian economy overall. India's education system was one of the most severely impacted. There is a serious lack of digital infrastructure in Ukilnara (sample village) and Ranaghat City (sample city), according to the study's observations and findings. In contrast to the example city, there was very little online education in the sample village, which was the final option during the pandemic. Primary school students in the village were the most affected, followed by upper primary, higher secondary, and other higher education levels. The city with the best and most accessible digital infrastructure had the least impact on the students. Due to the lack of digital infrastructure in rural areas, many village students deserted their institutions and colleges. In light of social and economic inequality and the long-term rural-urban divide that results from it, this may have wider ramifications for unsustainable urban growth. Since the right to education is a fundamental human right that must be protected and promoted at all costs, sustainable and inclusive planning is urgently needed.

Digital geographies of aspirational mobilities: Tal-Joseon of young South Korean women

Minji Gwon

University of Waterloo

Tal-Joseon, which means escape from Korea, has been a widespread digital discourse among South Korean young adults in the recent decade. With the popularization of feminism via digital platforms in 2015, young women reinterpreted this discourse through gender lens, criticizing deep-rooted patriarchy in Korean society. Their experiences of precarity are uniquely shaped by gendered social and economic conditions. Although Tal-Joseon has received significant attention in media and public debate in Korea, this has been insufficiently examined in relation to gender. Through the case of Tal-Joseon in South Korea, this study aims to answer the following research questions: How does digital space transform gendered precarity into aspirational mobilities? How are diasporic subjectivities formed through the process? In doing so, the study highlights how young women from Asian contexts negotiate desire, identity, and precarity across online and offline spaces. Qualitative methods will be used to gather data, including semi-structured in-depth interviews with young South Korean women who moved to Canada and digital ethnography of online communities and social media platforms. This research contributes to digital geographies by reconceptualising human mobility in this area, adding affective and imaginary aspects to mobility and revealing how it is produced by precarity. This study also offers contributions in terms of data collection by documenting lived experiences of diasporic communities in Canada, challenging Western-centric focus in the field and further promoting greater digital inclusivity.

Digitality as the Extended Frontline of Colonial and Coloniality Practices in Iran

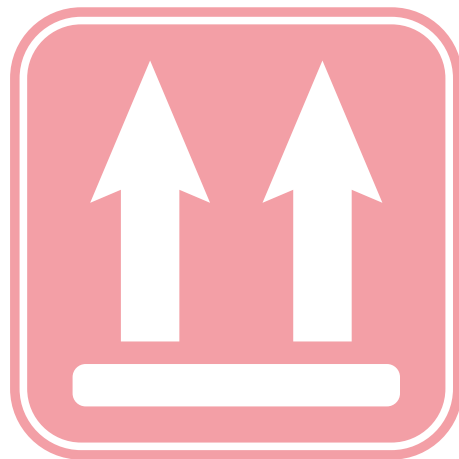
Niloufar Vadiati, Nassim Mehran
Goethe University Frankfurt

Digital technology have become central technologies through which contemporary states manage political crisis, territorial control, and social differentiation. This paper examines how the Islamic Republic of Iran has expanded authoritarian governance into the digital sphere, transforming computational infrastructures into active instruments of political violence, surveillance, narrative control, and socio-economic stratification. Drawing on four political vignettes between January and May 2026, the paper analyzes how digital infrastructures operate across multiple scales of state power. First, it examines the January 2026 internet shutdown as a spatial strategy for obscuring state violence and restricting the circulation of evidence during mass repression. Second, it explores how existing surveillance infrastructures became entangled with regional military operations during the US-Israeli attacks on Iran, revealing the transnational and multi-scalar character of contemporary digital security assemblages. Third, the paper investigates the platformization of wartime narratives through state-controlled intranets, algorithmic filtering, and AI-generated propaganda. Finally, it analyzes the post-ceasefire expansion of differentiated internet access regimes, in which marginalized populations are increasingly directed toward highly surveilled national platforms as a condition of economic participation and social access. Building on debates around digital colonialism, computational governance, and the uneven production of digital space (Akbari, 2026; Couldry & Mejias, 2019), the paper argues that authoritarian state power is increasingly exercised through layered computational infrastructures that reorganize capital, labour, visibility, mobility, and access to resources. The paper further argues that these infrastructures do not operate in isolation within national boundaries. Instead, they are embedded within wider geopolitical and technological assemblages in which state surveillance systems, military operations, global platforms, and AI-mediated information regimes intersect.

The Fragility of AI: Disrupting Disruptive Technologies

Margath Walker, Jamie L. Winders
University of Louisville, Syracuse University

Across the social sciences, artificial intelligence (AI) is frequently framed or critiqued in terms of claims to certainty, its capacity to distill and mirror, and its value as a problem-solving technology. This positioning of AI has roots in Newell and Simon's "General Problem Solver" formalization of the 1950s (Newell and Simon 1956). These early ambitions persist in AI's current promise to condense, compress and transfer what humans know (Crawford 2021). Garibay-Peterson et al. (2025) analyze how AI discourses produce truth narratives even where uncertainty in scientific knowledge exists. They argue that current models struggle with problems that differ from what has already been seen. Vallor (2024) contends that treating AI as a mechanism for extracting and concentrating what already exists perpetuates the myth that these technologies act as distillers or mirrors of human knowledge. Such mechanisms aim to emulate human thought processes, enabling the transfer of abstract qualities like reasoning abilities and values onto machine learning. Certainty, distillation and problem-solving in AI brings with it a reductionist tendency (Collins 2021; Granger 1991) that assumes the world can be fully known. In this paper, we build on critical geographers' call to focus on the irreducible and messy nature of life (e.g. Amoores 2020; Walker and Winders 2021) by emphasizing the fragility of AI. We argue that the taken-for-granted link between AI and decipherability reflects both a vulnerability and an opportunity to open new spaces for critique. Thinking through AI's fragility through the lens of ontological legibility allows researchers to disrupt disruptive technologies.



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