CDMM Workshop **Democratising Digital Methods**

Programme and Abstracts

13 November 2026 (online on Zoom), 9-12 CET. Registration required until 11 November 2026, 23:59 (CET)

Digital methods have become widely adopted as a distinctive approach for studying online cultures, platforms, and infrastructures. Using 'natively digital' methods, objects and resources of digital media, researchers have developed a broad range of innovative ways of analysing hyperlinks, search engines, social media, platform data, and digital traces. Today, however, the landscape of digital methods is changing and undergoing significant transformations. The pluralisation and sophistication of the field itself, the rapid integration of artificial intelligence in research, and the broader user groups of digital methods approaches raise new questions about how digital methods can remain distinct and accessible. New approaches such as vibe-coding new tools, quali-quantitative methods for visual and cross-platform content, or new participatory methodologies expand the digital methods research toolbox and areas of application.

With this half-day workshop the Centre for Digital Methods and Media (CDMM) at Aarhus University is celebrating its 5th anniversary. We want to interrogate and map the democratising potential of digital methods approaches to investigate digital online cultures, infrastructures and discourses. We are especially interested in engaging with developers and researchers, journalists and civic technologists who un-blackbox digital media, support critical engagement through digital methods, and create new resources or pedagogies. Join us in rethinking how digital methods can be democratised, who can profit from them, how we can develop tools, resources and approaches together that are committed to open and critical investigations of digital media in an age of AI proliferation.

Sign up: https://cc.au.dk/en/news-and-events/events/event/artikel/cdmm-workshop-democratising-digital-methods

Programme

9:00-09:15: Welcome and Scoping (Christoph Raetzsch, AU)

9:15-10:00

- **Sercan Kiyak (KU Leuven, BE)**. Democratising digital methods through shared research infrastructures. The iCANDID core facility at KU Leuven
- **Sebastian Randerath (University of Bonn, DE).** "Lost and Found. Infrastructures of Online Self-Learning Units on Digital Methods"
- **Alexei Tsinovoi** (Aarhus University, DK). Developing critical proximity in language model-based digital methods

10:15-11:15

- **Samaneh Koohestani Soorchani (UC Louvain, BE)**: "Studying Micro-Celebrity Culture in Restricted Digital Environments"
- **Lukas Lautenschlager (Aarhus University, DK)** "Vibecoding the Youtube Playlist Surfer"
- **Marilou Polymeropoulou (University of Oxford, UK)** "Using Vibe Coding as an Assistive Method for Data Collection via Spotify's API"
- Discussion: Potentials of AI-powered and creative methods and tools

11:15-11:30: break

- Closing joint discussion. Plan for proceedings in CDMM white paper

Abstracts and Contributor Bios (alphabetical by first name)

Alexei Tsinovoi (Aarhus University, DK): Developing critical proximity in language model-based digital methods

A core challenge in many forms of quali-quantitative digital methods is interpretation (Munk 2019)- what kind of stories can we tell about reality based on detected patterns and to which extent these patterns reflect a trace of a real-world phenomena or a mere artefact of the method. In addressing such concerns by drawing on the work of Latour and Haraway, digital methods scholars have suggested the notion of critical proximity (Birkbak et al 2015; Madsen and Munk 2019), that invites researchers to engage with the subjects of their studies and invite them to be part of the analysis through various forms of data sprints, thus destabilising the common notion of critical distance in social science research. Building on this approach, in this talk I will share my experience with developing language model-based digital methods, where text embeddgins are combined with visual, exploratory techniques, and how the interpretative element of the analysis can be democraticised by involving a wider set of actors through data sprints.
Alexei Tsinovoi is Associate Professor of Digital Strategic Communication, at the department of Media and Journalism Studies, Aarhus University. Alexei's research focuses on the strategic use of digital media by political and commercial actors, as well as the broader social and political dimensions of digitalisation processes, by combining ethnographic approaches with digital methods.

Lukas Lautenschlager (Aarhus University, DK): Vibecoding the Youtube Playlist Surfer

The Playlist Surfer is a publicly available tool that lets you filter CSV datasets from YouTube Data Tools and watch the videos in them, nudging researchers towards playful exploration that moves between distant and close reading. As a static, client-side web app, it can be hosted for free and needs nothing but a browser: no installation and no login. It was built by someone with no prior web development experience (me), using AI coding tools. This illustrates what "vibe coding" tools offer "maverick developers" who make software for niche practices, like us digital methods researchers, and the new questions they raise. On the one hand, vibe coding can relocate a toolmaker's attention to the usability of the interface and the development of ideas, enticing more people to build research tools that follow their situated concerns. On the other hand, it poses new epistemological challenges: data pipelines that are only partly audited, and a demo culture in which people get caught in the thrill of adding features and new tools rather than doing the research.

Lukas: I recently started my PhD at Aarhus University as part of the PAY4PLAY team, where I study how Spanish-language gaming creator communities organise themselves and

how monetisation may or may not structure their practices. In my research, I combine digital methods-style distant reading with ethnographic immersion to read platform data in light of the cultural practices behind it. This approach is shaped by my background. I hold an MRes in Social Sciences, with a thesis based on ethnographic fieldwork in a "Conversation Design" lab that develops UX principles for AI interfaces. I also hold an MA in Media Studies, for which I wrote an autoethnography of six months of vibe coding, including research tools I built as an assistant in the CAT4SMR team at the University of Amsterdam.

Marilou Polymeropoulou (University of Oxford, UK) “Using Vibe Coding as an Assistive Method for Data Collection via Spotify’s API”

I recently embarked on a small-scale research project as part of the collaborative Research Challenge run by 21st Century Music Practice (C21MP) and the Music and Online Cultures Research Network (MOCReN). In this project, I attempt to retrain Spotify’s recommendation algorithm to shift my “data story” from post-punk and darkwave towards chiptune. The aim is to see whether selectively listening to user-generated chiptune playlists will reshape my Daily Mixes and, by extension, my 2026 Spotify Wrapped. Along the way, I also experimented with digital methods, using vibe coding with Claude to create an export tool. My Python skills are basic: in previous research projects I wrote Python code to collect tweets, for example, relying on my own knowledge and guidance found on GitHub, which proved time-consuming and limited by my own abilities. This time, I used Claude Opus 5.5 to write a Python script that accesses the Spotify Web API via the Spotipy library, authenticating with a Client ID and Client Secret from Spotify’s developer dashboard, and exports the playlists’ tracklists. This freed up more time for evaluating the data and visualising it as a bipartite artist–playlist network, which maps how artists recur across the playlists. In this project, I explore democratisation from three perspectives: 1) democratisation of method, as vibe coding furthers the democratisation of research-tool creation and widens access to knowledge by narrowing gaps in researchers’ (techno-)cultural capital; 2) democratisation and research agency, examining how the AI’s suggestions interact with, and sometimes pull against, the researcher’s anticipated and expressed intent; and 3) democratisation narrative within the political economy of AI, exploring who benefits from this process.

Dr Marilou Polymeropoulou is a digital anthropologist and Research Affiliate at the School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography, University of Oxford, and a Fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute. Her research on digital culture and online music communities combines ethnography with social network analysis and computational methods, most extensively in her long-term study of the chipscene. She also teaches digital methods in secondary and tertiary education.

Samaneh Koohestani Soorchani (PhD candidate in information and communication sciences at UC Louvain, BE): “Studying Micro-Celebrity Culture in Restricted Digital Environments”

Understanding the covert dynamics of consumerism, self-representation, and social media's contradictory "democratic" possibilities is essential in understanding how digital activities manifest in constrained circumstances. By concentrating on Instagram in Iran, where stringent digital barriers, censorship, and impaired infrastructures call for inventive netnographic methods, this research analyzes the social and cultural effects of micro-celebrities. To democratize methodology for approaching digital tools in complicated situations, the paper provides a combination of netnography and digital content analysis along with digital ethnography. It investigates 10 successful Iranian micro-celebrities from 10 different genres by evaluating 945 online artifacts (images, videos, captions, stories, and reels) as well as conducting semi-structured interviews with 30 selected respondents (active users, digital marketers, Anti-bloggers/influencers and specialists).
The findings of the study indicate that micro-celebrity practices can be understood through the three basic dimensions:

- The mechanisms of fame and visibility: including the aesthetic frameworks of platforms, sponsored advertising, and emotional/confession branding in line with the basic paradigm of "McDonaldization of Celebrity."
- Socio-structural underpinnings (origins): affected by economic precariousness, capitalism in cyberspace, escape routes from offline frustrations, carnival-like traits of digital spaces, and declining power of institutions.
- The implications and impacts related to this phenomenon: such as semiotic fluidity, consumerization of life, emergence of "happygram culture", and the paradoxical character of contemporary fame.

At last, it is essential to state that this research shows that micro-celebrities’ agency in Iran is dual in nature and consists of two contradicting impulses. On the one hand, it uses marketing power and economy of attention to commodify and make showy all aspects of social life; on the other hand, it creates alternative areas of cultural authority through self-representation and informal narratives spreading widely in the context of structural limitations.

Samaneh is a doctoral researcher in Information and Communication Sciences at UCLouvain (ARC CLAIM project), holding a PhD in Cultural Sociology. In her previous doctoral research, she focused on micro-celebrity culture, self-representation, and netnographic methodologies within restricted digital environments in Iran. Building on this theoretical and methodological foundation, her current PhD research at UCLouvain extends these inquiries into the realm of climate litigation, examining tactical platformization and the mediatized visibility of marginalized actors navigating structural limitations and global environmental challenges.

Sebastian Randerath (University of Bonn, DE). “Lost and Found. Infrastructures of Online Self-Learning Units on Digital Methods”

The project Digital Methods in Media Studies (DMM), funded by the University of Bonn, Germany, develops an approach to creating online self-learning units on digital methods. These units grow out of concrete teaching and research situations, with the aim of embedding them sustainably in academic teaching and thereby democratising the underlying procedures. We draw on an understanding of digital methods (Rogers 2013; Venturini and Rogers 2025) as inventive methods (Lury 2012): they are medium-specific and call for new forms of development, sharing, teaching and mediation. Our focus is not on developing new digital methods, but on integrating them into an open approach to teaching and learning.

The first aspect of democratisation concerns who can learn with these methods and who can contribute to them. The units are developed for undergraduate and graduate students at the University of Bonn, but are also open to other students, researchers, activists and artists interested in digital methods. At present, we concentrate on integrating the methods into the curriculum at both levels while taking seriously students’ differing levels of experience and competence. To this end, we conduct workshops with faculty and students and evaluate with students how accessible the methods are and how they can be taught at each level. Democratisation also means that students do not merely use the units but produce them: the structure of the units is being opened up so that students can create their own units based on their research practice, which can then serve as course assignments. Throughout, we collaborate with existing initiatives, projects and experts in the field of digital methods.

The second aspect concerns long-term accessibility, on a temporal and an infrastructural level. As Raetzsch and Brügger (2026) note, the tools used in digital methods change rapidly, while their methodologies endure. For self-learning units, this means that we must continually assess which tools remain available and adapt the units accordingly, while the units must convey not only how to use tools but also the underlying methodologies and the approaches and traditions from which they emerge. Sustainable expansion also requires attention to technical infrastructure, which again depends on collaboration with various stakeholders and institutions. During the creation process, for example, we work with existing media production studios at the University of Bonn, where students can create films, podcasts or websites. Involving several stakeholders in the technical infrastructure repeatedly leads to misunderstandings, negotiation processes and errors.

Sustainable democratisation is therefore not a smooth process but one of negotiations. At the workshop, we aim to report on these negotiations in developing and infrastructuring self-learning units for teaching and learning digital methods, and we regard this exchange as an integral part of democratising digital methods. We would like to discuss in particular how units can be kept current as tools change without being rewritten constantly. We would also

be glad to contribute our perspective on democratisation and frictions in self-learning units, as well as our approach to inventive pedagogies of digital methods, to the planned white paper.

Sebastian Randerath teaches and conducts research as a research associate in Digital Media and Methods at the University of Bonn. He leads the DMM (Digital Methods in Media Studies) project, which focuses on developing online self-learning units as part of the media studies program at the University of Bonn. Previously, he taught in Amsterdam and Cologne, among other places. His research focuses on digital cultures and labor, as well as theories and methods of the history of digital media, critical software, infrastructure, algorithm and platform studies, and digital and artistic methods. He publishes in international academic journals such as Convergence, Computational Culture, Mobile Media & Communication, and Platforms and Society, as well as in magazines such as Arch+ and Form. His works have been shown at various art and cultural institutions, such as PACT Zollverein, the LVR Landesmuseum, and the NRW Forum Düsseldorf.

Sercan Kiyak (KU Leuven, BE): Democratising digital methods through shared research infrastructures. The iCANDID core facility at KU Leuven

In *Understanding Digital Humanities* (2012), David M. Berry suggests that the digital could become a new unifying principle of the university, connecting disciplines through computational approaches. Yet researchers seeking to use digital data often face obstacles unrelated to their research questions, including changing platform APIs, access restrictions, legal requirements, and complex data formats. This presentation introduces iCANDID, a KU Leuven core facility supporting research across disciplines, particularly in the social sciences and humanities (SSH). By centralising expertise in data collection and management, developing tools that make digital data accessible and usable, and providing training and practical support, iCANDID reduces the need for individual SSH researchers to navigate these barriers independently. Rather than prescribing methodological approaches, the facility enables researchers to pursue their own research questions. The presentation explores how such institutional infrastructure can contribute to democratising digital methods.

Sercan Kiyak is the Postdoctoral Coordinator of iCANDID at KU Leuven (Belgium), where he supports researchers with digital data collection and computational research methods. His own research combines computational and mixed methods to study representations, public discourse, and opinion dynamics around contentious topics online.