

DEPARTMENT
OF COMMUNICATION
AND SOCIAL RESEARCH



SAPIENZA
UNIVERSITÀ DI ROMA

PhD
IN COMMUNICATION, SOCIAL RESEARCH
AND MARKETING

WHAT PEOPLE LEAVE BEHIND

MARKS, TRACES, FOOTPRINTS AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE FOR SOCIAL SCIENCES

Department of Communication and Social Research
Sapienza University of Rome

15-16 JUNE 2020

CALL FOR PANELS AND PAPERS
DEADLINE: 15/02/2020

How does Google predict flu peaks before public health authorities do? Why are these predictions wrong at times? How did Walmart link a spike in the sales of Pop-Tarts to hurricane forecasts? Why are people's inadvertent little gestures more revealing of their authentic character than any formal posture they may carefully construct? How can a single piece of unintentional information be infinitely more informative than thousands of public records? What kind of data does Netflix use to profile its customers? What did the historian Marc Bloch mean by «witnesses in spite of themselves»?

In the attempt to provide scientifically sound answers and stimulate analytically innovative discussion, the conference focuses on a particular but significant theme in the social sciences: the concepts of “footprint” and “trace”. Usually associated with the digital world, the very idea of footprints clearly gives the image of what one leaves behind without being aware of it. A sort of indentation, a by-product of other (differently focused and oriented) actions that remains empirically imprinted on reality – a footstep, an impression, an epiphenomenon. Under this light, the difference between information that is intentionally communicated (given) and information that is accidentally exuded (given off) seems to be a profound one, which identifies two deeply different kinds of communicative content (that is, signs and signals). Trace-like information, i.e. information that was not meant to be informative, is much sought after, and this is particularly true in the age of digital capitalism. The opportunity to interpret those trails that people leave behind themselves, brushing

social reality «against the grain» (i.e. against the reasons and intentions of the people involved, to borrow Walter Benjamin's expression), opens new scenarios for social theory and applied social research: what are the stakes? What are the risks? What is the potential of this approach?

Given the multifaceted objectives involved in exploring these issues, the conference intends to bring together heuristic aspects and ethical dimensions, scientific analysis and political considerations, empirical perspectives and theoretical foundation. At the same time, the main purpose is to hold together cultural analysis and social theory, communication and Internet studies, big-data informed research and computational social science. We encourage inter- and cross-disciplinary thinking and research to address all the issues relevant to the general theme. Contributions from sociology, communication studies, data science, anthropology, computational social science, history, semiotics, media and Internet studies – among others – are welcome.

We encourage scholars to address **key questions** such as:

- What are the main characteristics of traces and footprints? What is their epistemological significance? What is their ontological status?
- What makes traces and footprints strategic research materials? Why would they be considered valuable in terms of theorizing?
- What has been the role of the concept of trace in classical social theory?
- What kind of cultural object are marks, impressions, and prints?
- Given that digital platforms are perhaps the main place of trace-like data proliferation, how is given-off information used by choice architects?
- Why are communicative clues more reliable if they are left without realizing it? Is it always true that the traces that social actors leave as they go through life are completely unnoticed and unperceived?
- Is it possible to tame the computational complexity of algorithms and game it? Are unintentionally displayed signs a unique product of the Internet or do they already exist in the world of face-to-face and offline communication?
- What relationship is there between big data and footprint-like information? Is this a necessary relationship?
- Large masses of data do not presently require special effort to be gathered, since they are the digital by-product of the everyday life of big capitalist institutions – how does their “by-productness” affect their structure and status?
- What is the state of the art on “data exhaust” informed research? Is this approach a prerogative of private companies, market and instrumentally oriented research?
- How do the concepts of trace and footprint relate to contemporary social issues such as the algorithmic imaginary and the quantified self?

Different perspectives and views on the topic of “*What people leave behind*” are also welcome.

We call for papers and fully constituted panels. Panel proposals and/or papers should be sent to wplb2020.coris@uniroma1.it. The working language of the conference is English.

When submitting paper presentations, the following **information** is required:

- Title;
- Abstract (max. 500 words);
- Author's name, affiliations, appointment and email address;
- 5 keywords.

Papers must not have been previously published or presented elsewhere. The abstract should contain clear information about the topic, how it is being investigated and the intended contribution to knowledge.

The conference is also open to a small number of proposals for pre-constituted panels. Panel conveners are invited to suggest a two-hour themed panel of five/six speakers. All panel submissions should be gender balanced and include authors from at least two different countries.

When submitting panel proposals, the following **information** is required:

- Panel chair's name, affiliations, appointment and email address;
- Title of the panel;
- Abstract of the panel (max. 300 words);
- Paper titles and short abstracts (max. 200 words), with authors' names, affiliations and appointments for each paper.

The final deadline for both submissions (papers and panels) is February 15th, 2020.

Decisions of acceptance will be made by the end of February 2020. Registration links will be available from March 2020. Registration fees will be €60 for full academic faculty and €30 for Ph.D. students and non-tenured researchers.

Please note that conference organizers are planning to publish an edited volume with the proceedings of this event. In this sense, the authors of accepted papers are welcome to submit an extended, written versions of their papers to the program committee, in view of the publication of an edited volume with an international publishing house. The authors of accepted papers will receive more detailed information on this matter by April/May 2020.

Confirmed keynote speakers: **Gabriel Abend** (University of Lucerne), **Taina Bucher** (University of Oslo), **Jeffrey Guhin** (UCLA), **Hizky Shoham** (Bar-Ilan University), **Barry Wellman** (University of Toronto), **Beverly Wellman** (University of Toronto).

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wplb2020.coris@uniroma1.it

<https://web.uniroma1.it/whatpeopleleavebehind>

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