

12 JUNE 2025 11.30 - 13.00

## Panel 67. Making and Undoing BS Digitalization

Convenors:

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**Keywords: STS Making & (un)Doing, breathing space, digital futures**

The 'new spring' of AI is leading to an upsurge in optimism regarding digitalisation in the health sphere and other sectors of welfare societies. STS scholars have long argued for the need to move beyond doom-and-gloom and hype-and-hope discourses. A common mode for doing so is through empiricising detailed practices of digitalisation and their politics, which often deflate tech-driven discourses and show more nuanced politics of digitalisation and its consequences. A second increasingly common mode is through getting involved in remaking digital practices. This mode is related to work in STS Making and Doing (Downey and Zuiderent-Jerak 2021), but also draws upon long histories of participatory design and computer-supported cooperative work.

What both these modes leave out, is the work of undoing mainstream, problematic, and at times – pardon our French – bullshit practices of digitalisation, which may be crucial for attempts to contribute to transformations of digitalisation that is ongoing in fields like health care. It has recently been argued that digitalisation is making citizens feel breathless, and there is a need to develop breathing spaces for digital futures (Ruckenstein 2023). Breathing space safeguards the ability to think critically, reflect on, and foresee complex socio-technical developments. It is a response to the need to envision digital developments unrestricted by disciplinary conventions, policy expectations and funding pressures.

This panel wishes to bring together scholars who experimentally explore practices of making and securing breathing spaces in digitalisation and/or undoing bullshit digitalisation practices. We welcome contributions that are speculative, experimental, traditional, or all of the above.

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## ID 256 - Generative AI and Emerging Digital Transformations: Rethinking Digitalisation Narratives in the Digital and Creative Industries

Martin Berg, Malmö Universitet

**Keywords: Generative AI, Emerging digital transformations, Digitalisation narratives, Digital and creative industries, Socio-technical imaginaries**

This paper shares initial findings from an ethnographic pilot study exploring how advanced digital transformations, particularly through Generative AI (GenAI), are reshaping the work of tech professionals in the digital and creative industries. Adopting a socio-technical and future-focused perspective, the study critically examines how these professionals explore, challenge, and at times reinforce techno-optimistic narratives while engaging in everyday practices that both question and sustain digitalisation narratives. By acknowledging the complexities, inconsistencies, and unpredictabilities inherent in advanced digital transformation, this paper underscores the necessity of dismantling misleading visions of automated futures, emphasising the real experiences and anticipatory practices of tech workers. It scrutinises what this panel identifies as "bullshit digitalisation" – practices driven by hype rather than substantial progress – and seeks alternative frameworks for critical reflection, enabling the emergence of socio-technical visions of diverse futures. Overall, the paper aligns with a future-oriented social science agenda, highlighting the importance of anticipating and critically addressing the social and technical consequences of digital transformation, centring on human experiences and agency.



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## ID 564 - Thinking through bullshit technologies

*Santtu Räisänen, Helsingin yliopisto*

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**Keywords: Bullshit, Digitalisation**

Bullshit technologies abound but are undertheorized. In this paper, we propose to explore the work that the identification of "bullshit" can do – not only as a pejorative but as an analytic concept – for our understanding of contemporary technoculture. Harry Frankfurt (2009) theorizes bullshit as speech that is "unconnected with a concern for truth." This distinguishes bullshit from outright deception or lies and, according to Frankfurt, explains the growing tolerance of bullshit speech. With a similarly social-epistemic concern to proliferating empty speech in corporate life, Mats Alvesson's and André Spicer's concept of "functional stupidity" (2012) proposes an organisational diagnosis: a collective dearth of reflexivity and criticality that occasions complicity in practices like buzzword bingo. Indeed, according to Spicer (2020), bullshitting is a game; people in contemporary work communities are encouraged to play, and when they do it well, they can win big.

In this presentation, we draw on those mentioned above to approach bullshit technologies as a productive social practice. Specifically, we explore bullshit technology as a discursive gimmick unbound from truth, one in which would-be technologies occasion disregard for the gap between statements of current capacities and future hopes. Importantly, bullshit technologies enable certain efficacious acts. These can include professions of faith, demonstrations of innovation, and performances of projects, for example. These acts can produce narrative contexts for broad efforts, reaffirm individuals' identities as technologists, and ward off public judgments of failure. Furthermore, they allow technology projects to keep going despite the unsettled nature of technology itself and can allow various side projects or instrumental runoff to flourish. At the same time, bullshit technologies are costly: wasting resources and eroding public values yet persisting despite a lack of clear evidence for their functionality.

This presentation draws on three extended case studies of socially revolutionary technology projects that were in many ways successful despite being understood to be unattached from current socio-technical realities. One case concerns the construction of a Citizen's Digital Twin for nudge-based welfare interventions, another creating a new paradigm for personal data control and commodification called MyData, and the third, an urban digitalisation initiative, City Brain, launched by a Chinese science hero. Rather than making a judgment about the bullshit-ness of these or any other examples, we aim to show what is achieved by analysing would-be technologies through the concept of bullshit. Through these illustrative cases, we take seriously the serious nature of bullshit technology and the significant work it does as a social practice. We contend that we cannot effectively advance the good in technoscience without profoundly understanding the nature of the proliferating bullshit that is produced in its wake.

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## ID 566 - Doing eHealth Right (or wrong?): The Push and Pull of inclusive health technology

*Jessica Coetzer, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam*

*Teun Zuiderent-jerak, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam*

**Keywords: Digital healthcare, health technology, health justice, transition arenas**

The transition towards increasingly digitalised healthcare systems in snowballing, with the push towards efficiency gains leaving patients and healthcare workers feeling breathless rather than empowered. Whilst the explosion of digital care options might be suitable for many, there are still a large number of individuals who face exclusion from digital healthcare due to a myriad of intersectional factors that stem from



an inherently exclusionary socioeconomic and political systems. If we took the time to stop, breathe and understand what is at stake, we could find alternative ways of doing that promote inclusive digital care.

At the same time, the (at times, relatively unregulated) sprint towards innovation is resulting in BS technology that is (at 'best') ineffective and (at worst) actively exclusionary of groups that could benefit the most from effective and tailored care. Digital solutions are being proposed and developed to solve a myriad of health systems issues – healthcare worker shortages, increasing long term care cases, administrative backlogs – all without stopping to consider who these solutions are for and how they are used and experienced in a complex network of human and non-human actors.

We draw on our ongoing fieldwork focusing on health technology in the Netherlands to explore these pushes and pulls in the arena of inclusive digital care. We work with partners engaged in this tug-of-war; the top-down push of technology as a healthcare solution and the bottom-up pull of those trying to manoeuvre digital care towards a more inclusive, problem-centred space. From this bidirectional approach, we create a transition arena in which we simultaneously pull towards "Doing eHealth Right" and push towards "Preventing eHealth Done Wrong" so as to make space for more inherently inclusive ways of doing digital care. Infrastructuring (verb!) inclusive technology through practice, guidelines and policy, if you will.

In this abstract submission, we propose an interactive work-in-progress-type session. We hope to use the session itself as a breathing space: to take stock of our experiences with inclusive health technology, to share our fieldwork examples and to explore ideas that could aid a more nuanced portrayal of the push-and-pull dynamics at play.

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## **ID 801 - Piña Colada for Breakfast**

*Carla Greubel, Universität Graz*

**Keywords: BS digitalisation, health and ageing innovations, big tech, power, STS making & doing**

Responding to the call of panel 67, in my presentation I share insights from my PhD research where I analysed and intervened in the making and unmaking of what might be called an example of "bullshit practices of digitalisation". In particular I reflect on interfering sets of practices, logics and relational power dynamics that allowed "bullshit practices of digitalisation" to emerge and to (partly) be undone.

The empirical case that I draw upon is situated within a European research and implementation project on digital health and care technologies for the prevention and monitoring of chronic diseases among older people. In one of the health prevention use cases, a multinational consumer technology company was involved in piloting a recipe recommendation app with older people in the south of Italy. Confronted with a 'lack of user engagement', company partners had asked our team of social scientist on the project to help them find out why the older people did not use the recipe recommendation app and what could be done to increase user engagement. Drawing on ethnographic research methods and the STS making & doing approach, I did not simply adopt the problem definition pre-set by actors in the field but rather sought to re-frame problem definitions in order to identify moments of friction through which to engage with the field.

Piña Colada for breakfast points to one of the frictions I encountered. Beyond questions of an alignment of the recipe recommendation app with the eating habits of older people in the south of Italy, or the usefulness of breakfast recipes like Piña Colada for the aim of preventing chronic diseases and supporting healthy lifestyles, what requires attention is the surprise with which company partners reacted when I presented my fieldwork results. None of the company partners I talked to knew what kinds of recipes their app was sending out to the older people. Realising that they unwillingly had contributed to a 'disaster' (their own words), company partners expressed relief about the 'lack of user engagement' that initially they had framed as their core problem. Two weeks later the food recommendation system was pulled out of the pilot study.

In my presentation I engage with critical STS inquiries into power and big tech to discuss different possible



readings of the relational power dynamics observed. I conclude with a reflection on what we can learn from this case about the conditions under which problematic digitalisation practices can flourish, why and for whom / what they are problematic in the first place and what possibilities there are for undoing bullshit practices of digitalisation.