Designing the News – Datafication of News Values, Infrastructures and Publics

MediaFutures ’21

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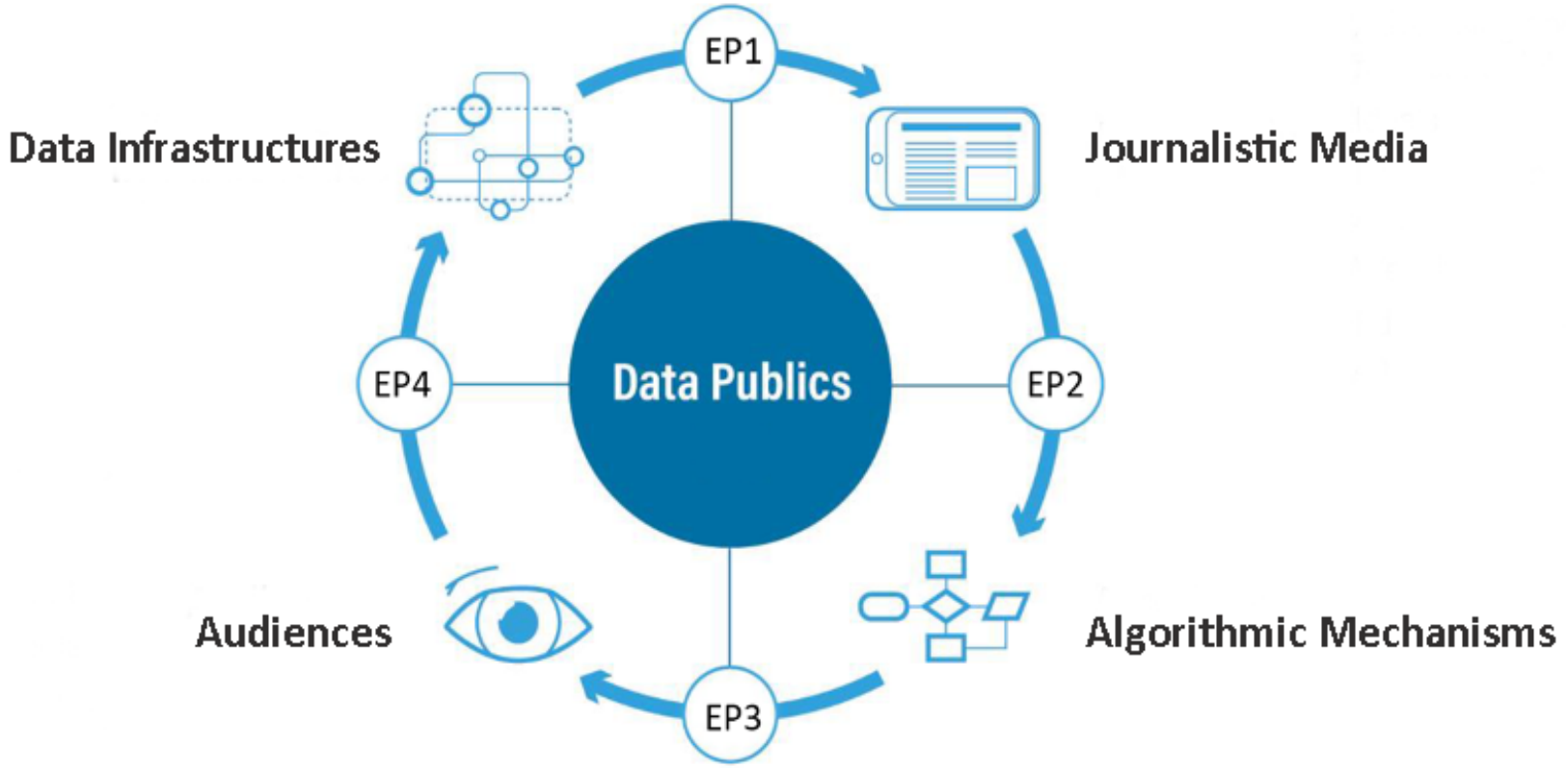
DATAPUBLICS

THE VELUX FOUNDATIONS
VILLUM FONDEN × VELUX FONDEN

RUC

Agenda


EP1
Data Infrastructures
Journalistic Media
EP4
Data Publics
EP2
Audiences
Algorithmic Mechanisms
EP3

Datafication

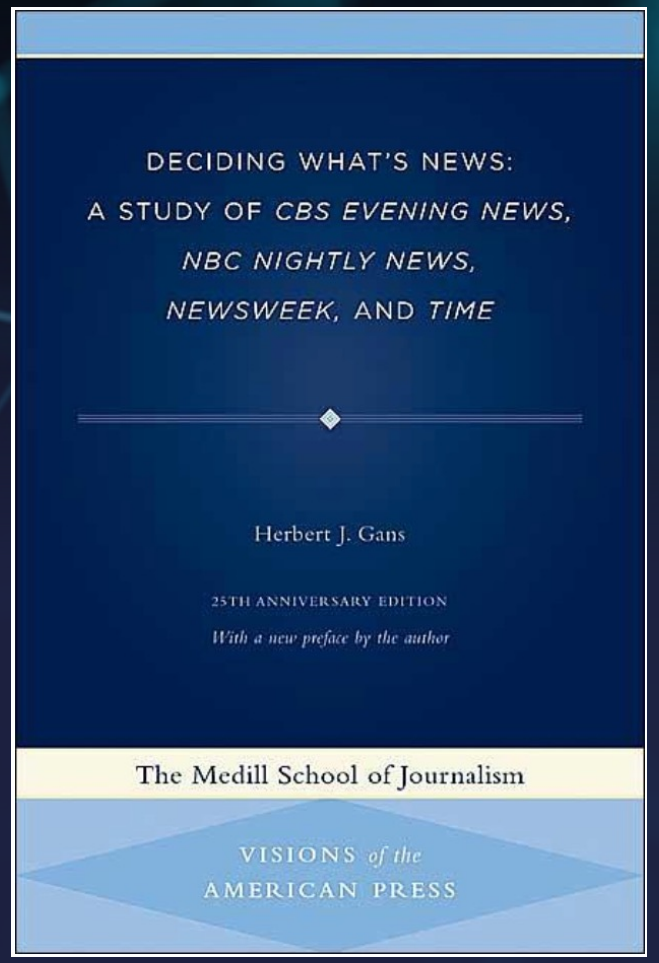
- “The process of rendering into data aspects of the world not previously quantified” (Kennedy et al. 2015).

Publics

PUBLICS = RELATIONAL HIERARCHICAL SPACES BETWEEN:

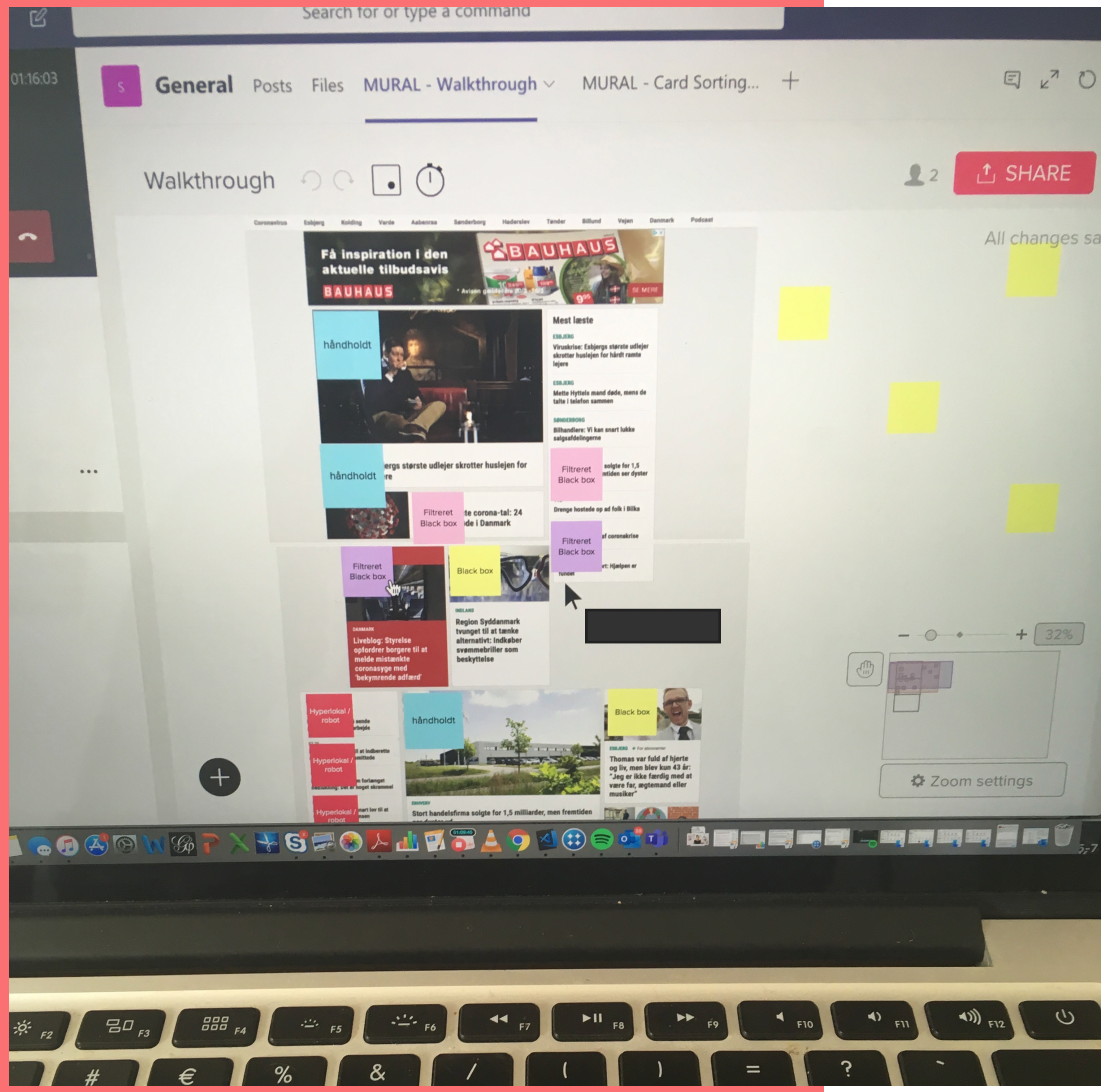
COMMUNICATIVE DRIVERS (INFRASTRUCTURES, ALGORITHMS, MEDIA)

COMMUNICATIVE AGENCY (POSITIONING, DELIBERATING, CIVIC ENGAGEMENT)


DECIDING WHAT'S NEWS:
A STUDY OF CBS EVENING NEWS,
NBC NIGHTLY NEWS,
NEWSWEEK, AND TIME
Herbert J. Gans
25TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION
With a new preface by the author
The Medill School of Journalism
VISIONS of the
AMERICAN PRESS

”If we had to think about how are readers feel, all twenty million of them, we would…. freeze” (Gans 1980)

”You do a show for a cell of people – the office staff, the wife and the kids. These are the only known audience. I know we have twenty million viewers, but I don’t know who they are. I don’t know whhat the audience wants and I don’t care. I can’t know, so I cannot care.” (Gans 1980)



Methods

- In-depth-interviews, ethnography, Meetings transcripts, field notes and Walk-through's and think aloud (online due to Covid-19)
- Policy-document analysis
- Interviews with news organisations (Danish, NYT; The Guardian, Mitt Media)
- Focus groups with Danish citizens (2018)
- Casestudy focusing on coronaprotesters: Digital ethnography (Postill and Pink 2012; Markham 2013)
- Semi-structured interviews and think-aloud elements (Bengtsson 2018)
- A largescale Gallup survey of digital citizenship (May 2021)

Entry-point 1: Data Infrastructures and Journalistic Media

The Platform Society (van Dijck 2018)

”Platform ecosystem is an assemblage of networked platforms, governed by its own dynamics and operating on a set of mechanisms that is inscribed in its architecture”

"So, until 2016, I think we use a third party Software solutions on our Web site, and up until that point the business model of a newspaper on the Web was an advertisement. But that changed in 2014/15. And then selling digital subscriptions started to gain momentum. And we realized that it was paramount for us to take control over that dataflow. So, we spent about a year on writing our own infrastructure for data collection. So that included both the script, frontend script that collects that”

”What we saw was that the questions we wanted to ask about our data we couldn't answer in those kind of systems and also the way we want the ability to customize both the data collection and the observations and how data flowed through through or our systems. And we really didn't want to be sort of sitting there just as customers of a third party product and be limited by the solutions that they offered. But of course, it's still like every costs or I'm not sure how many man hours or employees that are working on this dedicated that wouldn't have been working or that we wouldn't have to need if we have another system.”

"I think all a lot of tech companies (media companies included, ed.), though, are depending on those tech giants. So, the question for the future of society is, is it the right model or not? It's difficult to say, right. I think we are conscious that if the entire world was depending on individuals, that's probably not sustainable. Right. But at the same time, right now, I think those companies are offering incredible value for money. And we are an independent newspaper organization, so being cost efficient is incredibly important for us."

Selection and ranking- Google as gatekeeper

Addapting to values

Google selection and ranking criteria
Trustworthy sources and media reputation
Freshness and Breaking news
Noteworthy and trending
User context and needs
Original reporting, investigative reporting

Entry-point 2:
Journalism and algorithmic mechanisms

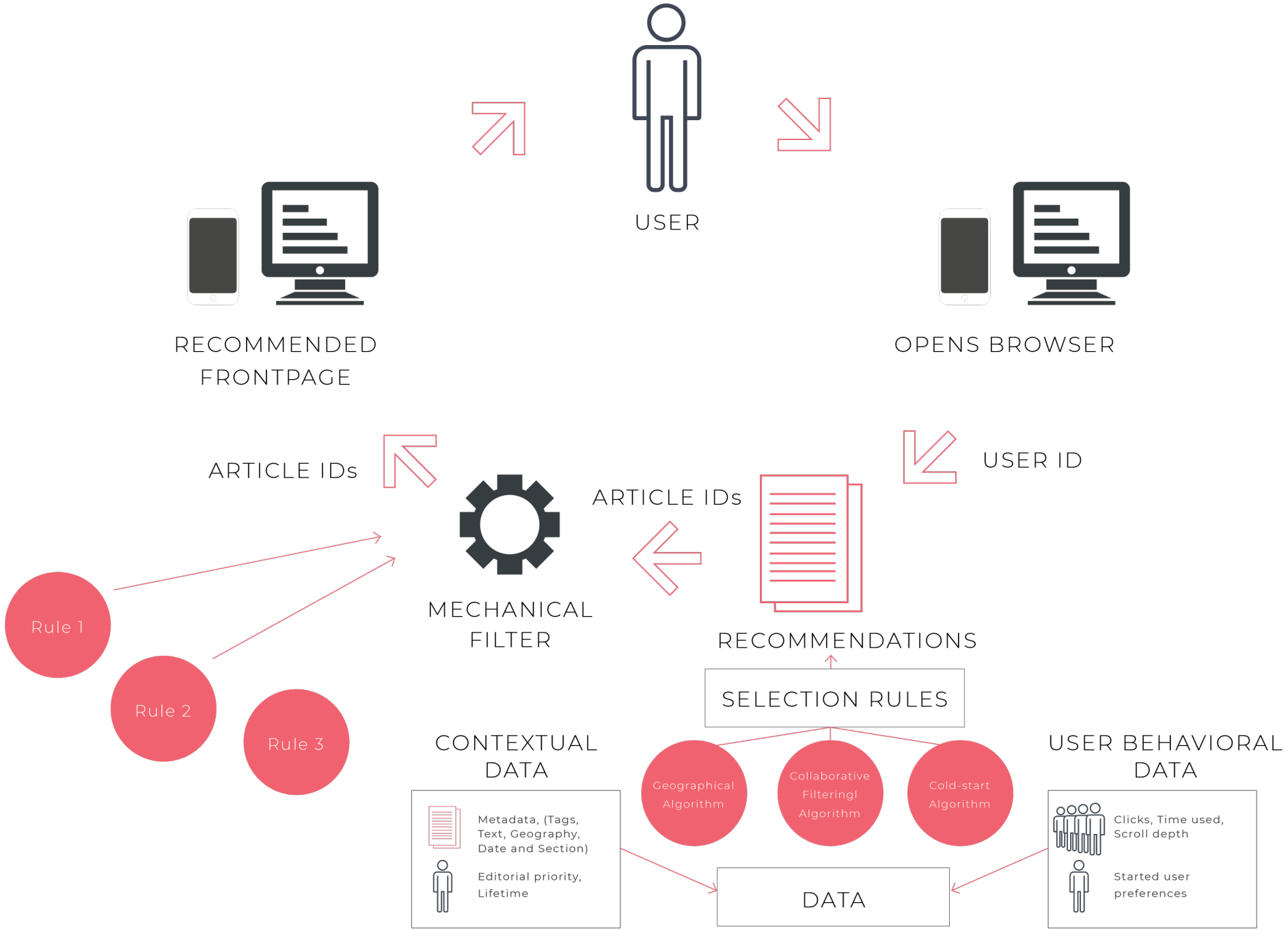
Møller Hartley forthcoming
+ Schjøtt Hansen and Møller Hartley Digital Journalism (2021)

Fetishization and the holy grail

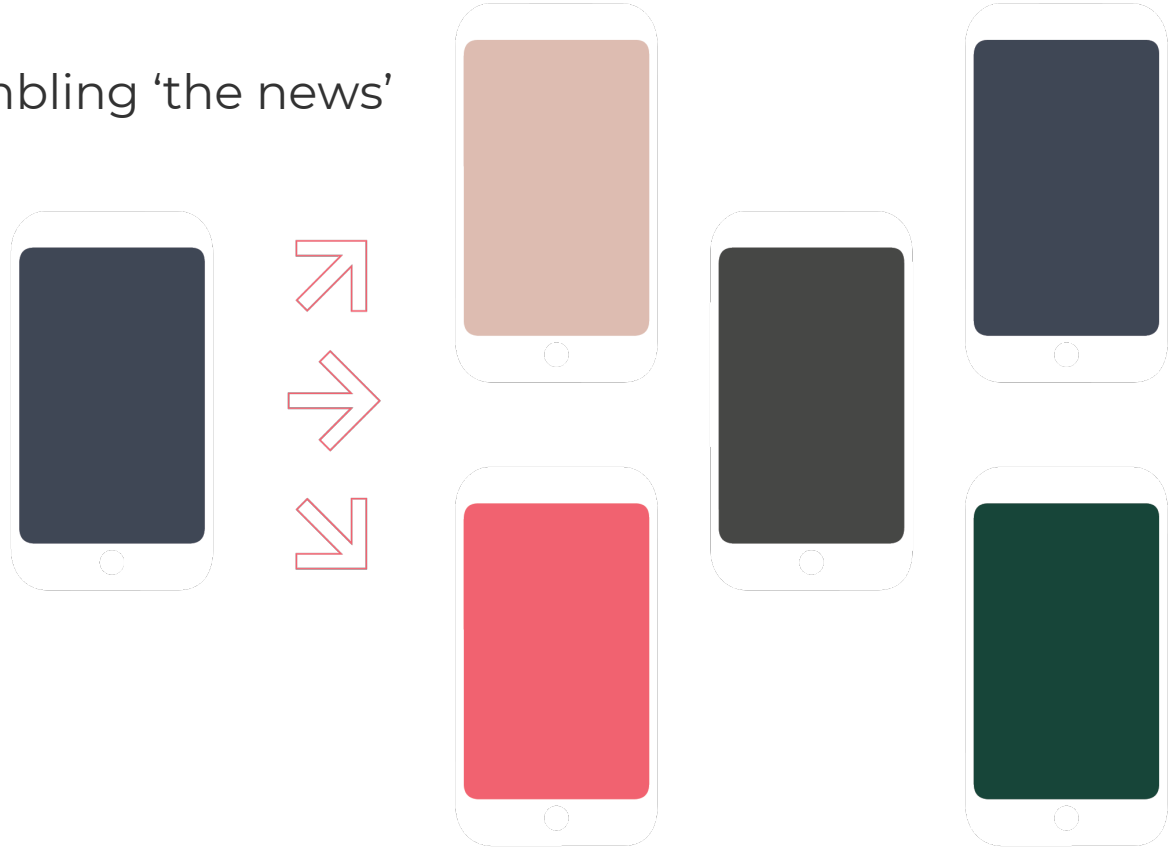
‘The way of presenting articles to its readers is currently based on journalists “gut experience” of reader peak times towards which article publishing deadlines are steered’

Is replaced with a:

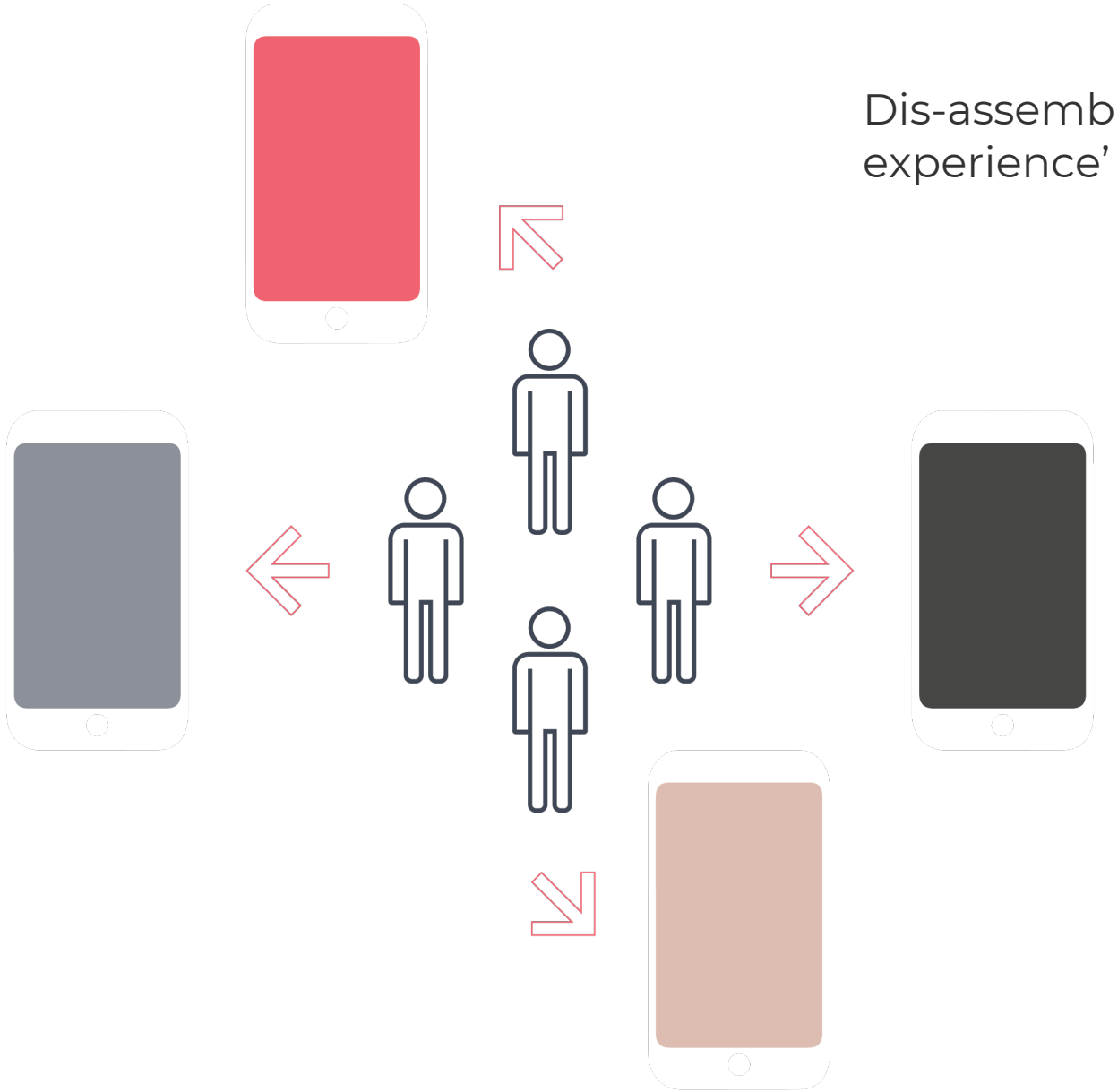
‘finetuned production and distribution of content supply according to data driven understanding of market demand’ ((Blogpost 2019, organisation B),


USER
RECOMMENDED FRONTPAGE
OPENS BROWSER
ARTICLE IDs
ARTICLE IDs
USER ID
Rule 1
Rule 2
Rule 3
MECHANICAL FILTER
RECOMMENDATIONS
SELECTION RULES
CONTEXTUAL DATA
Geographical Algorithm
Collaborative Filteringl Algorithm
Cold-start Algorithm
USER BEHAVIORAL DATA
Metadata, (Tags, Text, Geography, Date and Section)
Editorial priority, Lifetime
DATA
Clicks, Time used, Scroll depth
Started user preferences

Dis-assembling ‘the news’

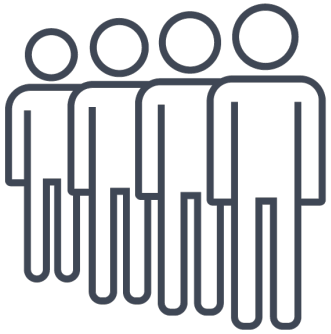


Dis-assembling the ‘news experience’



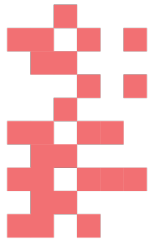
Dis-assembling of ‘the public’

User segments



User-ID

Aggregated datapoints



Constant moves of ‘re-assembling’ the news

- Implementing a ‘control filter’ in the algorithmic system
- Prioritising journalistic judgements of timeliness
- Ensuring ‘hand held’ top fields on the sites

The end of publics?

‘I do not think we should make 1.1 million different editions because we do have an editorial mission.’

(Digital chief, Jysk Fynske Medier 2020)

Entry-point 3: Algorithmic mechanisms and audiences

MOBILISATION STRATEGIES (INWARDLY)

CONSOLIDATING MAIN ARGUMENTS
(Sharing FB-post with experts and investigative material)

CALL TO ARMS
(Shares of events across FB groups and groups that aim to show all current events to ensure physical presence)

MOBILISE THE SUPPORT NETWORK TO MANIFEST VOLUME
(Group call outs to comment on FB-posts or news outlets)

SHOW THEM WHAT THEY ARE MISSING
(Pre and post protest videos on FB)

GRAB THE BY-PASSER
(Attempts to enrol by-passers into the cause at protests)

MAKE THE GROUP CONTEMPTUOUS
(Share livestreams of 'illegal' police actions or videos from other countries)

DEFENCE STRATEGIES

SAVE THE NETWORK
(Making back-up FB-groups and profiles as well as fake profiles to ensure networks remains in case of quarantine and banning)

SECURE KNOWLEDGE SPREAD BEFORE DELETION
(Using intros such as SHARE SHARE SHARE in FB-posts)

CHEATING THE 'FB-POLICE'
(Avoidance of words they think the FB algorithm will react on like 'fascist' or 'nazi' or intentional misspellings e.g. 'måderna' or '🐄rona' or using the live stream function instead of video and to showcase banned users).

DITCH THE 'FB-POLICE'
(Move to un-censured physical locations or alternative platforms e.g., Telegram)

VISIBILITY AND AUDITORY STRATEGIES

MAKE IT INSTAGRAMMABLE
(The use of visual elements in protest e.g., colourful smoke or fireworks)

GRAB THE USERS' AND THE ALGORITHM'S ATTENTION
(Use of caps lock in FB-posts, use of images, particularly of people and selfies)

NOISE AS AN AMPLIFIER
(The use of noise to illustrate dissatisfaction and be 'heard')

PUBLICITY STRATEGIES (OUTWARDLY)

FORCE THE POLITICAL AGENDA
(Formulate citizen proposals)

INVITE FOR DELIBERATION
(Emailed invitations to politicians inviting them to debates and protests)

SEEK PRESS SUPPORT
(Pitching stories to journalists)

IF YOU CAN'T BEAT EM, JOIN EM
(The making of new political parties)

MAKE THE CAUSE RELEVANT TO OTHERS
(Be present at democratic spaces, be referenced through numbers present or group sizes)

Bengtsson and Schjøtt, forthcoming

‘Cheating the 'FB-police”

Respondent 1:

”I sometimes reference the second world war, but I could never dream of writing for example Nazi in a post. I think the people who do are also the ones who get quarantined and such.”

Example from FB-groups:

🐄_ron@

🐄viiiid

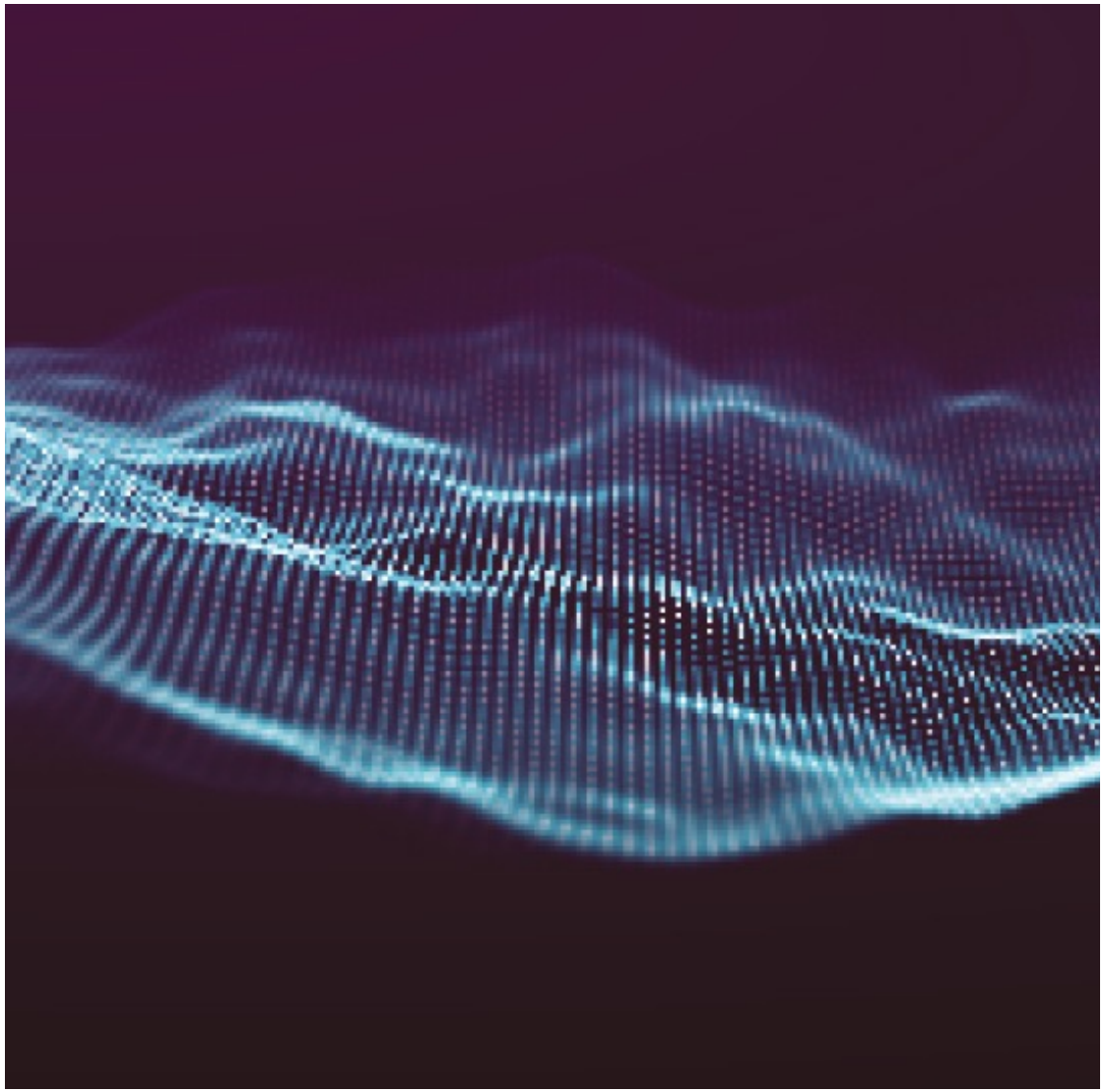
Vaxx (with xx in multiple forms)

'Make it instagrammable'

Respondent 2:

"We make anti-propaganda as we call it. We sensed that in the MIB protests the press only took picture of the hard stuff, so we go and take pictures of all the other stuff. We take pictures of people blowing soap bubbles and children writing with coloured chalk on the ground. You know – all the positive things instead of violence."

Entry-point 4: Audiences and data infrastructures



High risk: Sensitive data/low trust platform

Coping by trust

Coping by absence

igh dependence

Low dependenc

Coping by minimizing risk

Coping by apathy

Low risk: unsensitive data/high trust platform

Trust…

I think that's because it is the government who is sending the information. And okay, it may well be that they collect our data for something, but I don't think there's an unethical, purpose behind it. So, they also have all my personal information already, so, what else do they want to know? How often I open my e-box (a nationally created platform for receiving e-mails from the public sector)? I don't mind them knowing that (Older group, higher education, IP2).

Trust II...

Well, I'm thinking in relation to Spotify . . . I'm thinking that maybe [SoundCloud] is not as business-like. Also because there is no advertisement, and it's free to use. It's easy to open an account if you want access to their functions, but it's voluntary. And it's made for artists who are more underground and who want to be known. So I'm thinking that it's . . . I don't have any problem with that platform (younger group with longer education).

I can chew my own food…

‘"Personalized" news? What a dreadful idea! I already assiduously avoid reading the "Recommended for You" articles the Times suggests because I resent the implication that I do not know enough to select articles I want to read. Am I now to be forced to stop reading the Times altogether in order to avoid its pre-digested pablum? I'm elderly, but I can still chew my own mental food!”

Designing the news

Decisions are increasingly moving out of the news room and into the 'design room' shifting the distribution of power in news organisations

Data sites as 'centres of calculation' (Latour 1987) – data infrastructures

Structuring of publics by means of providing standards, software solutions and specific code

Embedded (datafied) values in the design

Datafied Publics?

Citizens as co-produsers of algorithmic infrastructures

Citizens as agentic – gaming the system

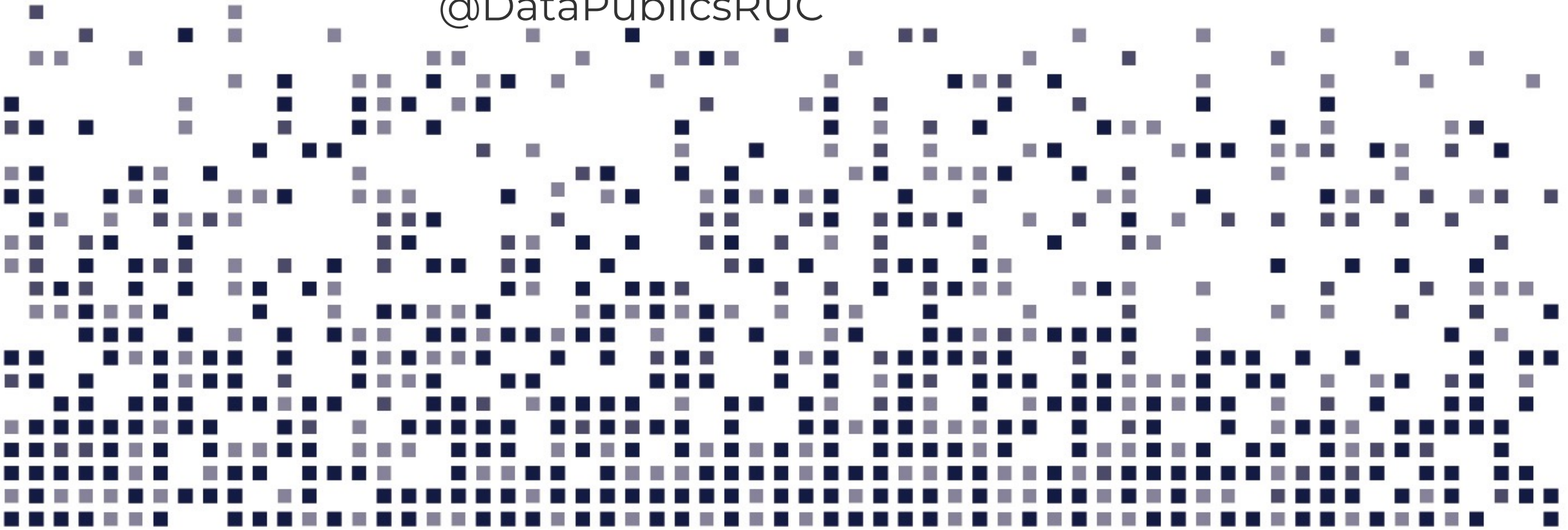
Publicist push-back

Citizens (and editorial staff) as powerless to some extent

Asymmetry in digital and deliberative inequalities

Calculated/algorithmic publics

Relational heuristics of trust

DATAPUBLICS

Thank you for your time and keep in touch
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