

Call for Papers

Just Computation? Social and Historical Perspectives on Calculation in Law

Harvard University
Sept 8-9th, 2023

Datasets, algorithms, and statistical models are increasingly dominating legal spaces as instruments for rendering “just” decisions. Academic and popular critiques have shown that the application of such tools to delicate social problems exacerbates the very inequities they were meant to curb, whether in allocating welfare, evaluating credit, hiring, policing, and so on. Missing from this ongoing discussion, however, is a broader perspective on how computation has shaped—and been shaped by—law and governance across time and place. How have different legal orders made sense of numbers and new methods of calculation? How does the law shape the conditions under which numerical evidence is deemed legitimate? Why have political communities come to accept that fraught matters of justice might be resolved through recondite numbers, and how has that commitment evolved? At a time when the authority of quantitative tools is on the rise, what can courtroom contests tell us about the making of facts and their history?

This conference provides an opportunity to grapple with these and other pressing questions by inquiring deeper into the history and politics of numbers as evidence, legal proof, policy instruments, and even tools for representing and contesting injustice. We will bring together scholars from a host of disciplines including the humanities and social sciences, data science and legal studies interested in how the quantification of social life and decision-making raises fundamental concerns about justice and fairness across different time periods and geographies. We believe that approaching these questions from a critical perspective can help invigorate and inform the vital discussions that have formed around “AI ethics” and “Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency” in computing systems. By convening a rich, interdisciplinary conversation on the relationship between law and computation, broadly construed, we hope to attract a range of scholars interested in honing their work for a special issue on these complicated and urgent issues.

Contributors

We seek papers from scholars from across the humanities and social sciences, as well as those coming from schools of information, policy, and law. Early career scholars in particular are encouraged to apply. While the workshop is oriented toward contemporary issues, it seeks to re-frame them by bringing different time periods and geographies to the table, so we are interested in submissions that consider these questions beyond the contemporary Global North. We will also accept co-authored papers.

Publication

This conference will be a platform for authors to workshop papers intended for a special issue of the interdisciplinary legal studies journal such as *Law & Social Inquiry*, whose editors have expressed interest. Though we intend to submit abstracts as a proposal for this journal, we remain open to alternatives and will discuss options over the course of the workshop. Accepted participants will be asked to submit a draft paper (max. 8000 words) and give a short presentation on their material for feedback from the group. Further deadlines and requirements will be specified depending on the format of the journal and the intended publication schedule. Please submit your abstracts to the conference only if you are willing to eventually submit your paper for a special issue. We will aim for final papers to be submitted by the end of the year 2023.

Timeline

March 24: Deadline to submit abstracts

Mid-April: Decisions sent out for accepted abstracts

End July: Deadline to submit final papers for internal circulations

Sept 8-9: In-person workshop in Cambridge, MA

End of 2023: Submit final papers

Funding

For presenters traveling from outside of the Boston area, we will guarantee travel stipends of \$400, with the possibility of more funding and housing assistance as we secure more partnerships.

Organizers

Michael F. McGovern (mmcgovern@princeton.edu)

Program in the History of Science | Princeton University

Pariroo Rattan (pariroomattan@g.harvard.edu)

Program in Public Policy, Harvard Kennedy School | Harvard University

William Deringer (deringer@mit.edu)

Program in Science, Technology, and Society | Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Please submit your 400-word abstract (not including references) and a short bio of no more than 250 words by January 30th via [this submission form](#). Authors whose papers are accepted will be expected to provide full paper drafts two weeks prior to the conference, which will be circulated to all conference participants. Please send your questions to justcomputation2023@gmail.com. We look forward to reading your submissions!