

Press release

Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg

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06/23/2025

<http://idw-online.de/en/news854202>

Organisational matters, Research projects
Information technology, Media and communication sciences, Psychology, Social studies
transregional, national



The Experience of Stories in the Digital Age: Millions in Funding for New Research Training Group

How are digital technologies changing the way people perceive and process stories? A new research training group at the University of Würzburg will address this question.

Stories and narratives have been an integral part of people's everyday lives for thousands of years. Initially passed down orally, such as the Gunditjmara narrative of the Aborigines, which tells of a volcanic eruption 37,000 years ago. Later, they were recorded in writing, such as the Epic of Gilgamesh, a 5,000-year-old poem that tells of King Gilgamesh and his quest for immortality.

With the triumph of digital technology in the 21st century, the way people perceive and process stories has changed dramatically. Young people in particular regularly spend many hours a day on social networks such as Instagram and TikTok or immerse themselves in digital gaming worlds.

Immersive virtual realities and social robots open up completely new possibilities for communication. People form relationships with AI chatbots, while at the same time the spread of disinformation through digital technologies is perceived as a major threat to individuals and societies.

Around 6.5 Million Euros for the New Research Training Group

How do digital environments influence the way people perceive and process stories, and how do stories unfold their psychological effects in the digital world? Scientists will investigate these questions in a new research training group (RTG) at Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg (JMU), which has now been approved by the German Research Foundation, DFG. It is providing around 6.5 million euros for this purpose over the next five years. The research training group will officially start in spring 2026.

The group is entitled 'The Experience of Stories in the Digital Age (TESDA)' and is headed by Professor Markus Appel, who is a professor of Psychology of Communication and New Media. The other principal investigators are Professor Marc Erich Latoschik (Human-Computer Interaction), Professor Birgit Lugrin (Socially Interactive Agents), Professor Gerhild Nieding (Developmental Psychology), Professor Tobias Richter (Educational Psychology), Professor Holger Schramm (Media and Business Communication) and Dr Julia Winkler (Psychology of Communication and New Media).

Research training groups are research programmes that provide structured training for doctoral students; the doctoral students work together in the group on various aspects of an overarching topic. A total of 21 young researchers are to complete their doctorates in the new RTG during the first funding phase.

Virtual Realities, Social Robots and Fake News

During this funding period of the research training group, the senior and junior researchers will focus on three areas that address the most pressing questions about the experience of stories in the present day:

Immersive virtual realities are the focus of the first area. The effects and possibilities of this technology for storytelling and its influence on the narrative experience and its impact will be explored.

So-called 'new (para-)social encounters' form the focus of the second area. Digital media enable encounters with new kinds of storytellers, such as social robots or virtual, AI-generated influencers. Researchers in this area are therefore concerned with the processing and effects of stories told by such narrators.

Misinformation and conspiracy theories are the focus of the third research area. In a series of experiments, researchers will examine stories on digital platforms and their contribution to people believing misinformation and conspiracy theories. In addition, the scientists want to look for ways to counteract and mitigate such effects.

A Breeding Ground for a New Generation of Researchers

Markus Appel is delighted about the DFG's grant approval. 'By combining narrative processing and effects on the one hand with digital communication environments on the other, the research training group offers promising opportunities,' he says. According to Appel, the group is thus a 'fertile breeding ground for a new generation of scientists.'

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