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THE ROLE OF LAW IN COMPUTATIONAL SOCIETIES

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Computation has become a central condition of contemporary governance. Algorithmic systems, platform infrastructures, and data-driven decision-making now structure key domains of public and private life—from criminal justice and education to migration, finance, and environmental regulation. As legal norms are increasingly shaped by, implemented through, or bypassed by computational systems, the role of law may be undergoing fundamental transformation.

This special issue explores how law functions within, through, and against computational regimes. Law operates within such regimes when it adapts to their operational dynamics; through them when it becomes encoded into platform governance or automated procedures; and against them when it seeks to resist the epistemic, normative, or distributive implications of computation. At stake is not only the question of whether law can regulate these systems, but also whether it retains its function as a public, accountable, and contestable site of ordering in an age increasingly governed by computational technologies and their embedded normative orders.

We invite contributions that engage with one or more of the following lines of inquiry, each oriented toward understanding the tensions, adaptations, and potentials of law and (for/in/against) computational conditions.

First, how are legal norms operationalized, subverted, or bypassed in computational systems? As predictive tools and automated procedures come to shape or even replace legal decision-making, what frictions arise between the rationality of law and that of computation? How can law address the unintended consequences of regulating fast-evolving systems, or maintain its coherence when embedded in technical architectures that evolve faster than legislation or jurisprudence? How do new challenges to legal responsibility, liability, or causality emerge when agency is distributed across algorithmic or autonomous systems? And to what extent do computational infrastructures entrench or amplify inequality—especially when biases are embedded in data or design—despite formal adherence to legal norms of fairness and non-discrimination?

Second, what cultural and infrastructural shifts accompany the embedding of law into computational systems? As legal authority is increasingly administered through interfaces, code, and proprietary standards, how does this reshape the symbolic, institutional, and cultural standing of legal institutions? What forms of normativity emerge when law becomes infrastructural—part of the backend of platforms and systems rather than a publicly deliberated norm? How do questions of ownership, intellectual property, and control over machine learning models intersect with legal ordering, and how is legal compliance enacted or undermined through technical design?

Third, how do computational systems challenge the structural foundations of law, including its assumptions about time, space, personhood, and institutional form? What happens to legal subjectivity when synthetic actors—machines, agents, or automated systems—perform actions with legally relevant consequences? How is jurisdiction disrupted when transnational data flows or planetary-scale infrastructures exceed territorial legal authority? And how are legal institutions reconfigured when law must address problems—such as climate change, global logistics, or digital resource extraction—that unfold across scales of time and matter for which law was not historically designed?

Fourth, what forms of reflexivity, critique, and imagination are needed to rethink the role of law in computational societies? How can law become more attentive to its own complicities in enabling regimes of surveillance, control, or extraction? In responding to computational governance, does law risk becoming a technocratic instrument that legitimates automation rather than constraining it? Or can law still offer a space for critical contestation—for naming harms, surfacing asymmetries, and imagining alternative futures? How might legal practices, institutions, and pedagogies develop the reflexive and interdisciplinary capacities needed to resist the silent naturalization of computational rule?

We welcome contributions from legal scholars, political theorists, STS researchers, critical data scientists, and others concerned with the future of law and computational constellations. Submissions may be theoretical or empirical, doctrinal or experimental, and should aim to explore how law is both challenged by and potentially transformative of the computational societies we now inhabit.

Submission Guidelines

Submission of Abstracts (of 300 words) should be addressed to Christoph Burchard (Burchard@jur.uni-frankfurt.de and sekretariat.burchard@jura.uni-frankfurt.de) and Susana Aires de Sousa (susanaas@fd.uc.pt) **until 31 December 2025**.

After selection, final papers should be submitted directly to the platform (<https://impactumjournals.uc.pt/undecidabilitiesandlaw>) **by 30 September 2026**, always indicating the Journal's volume to which they correspond.