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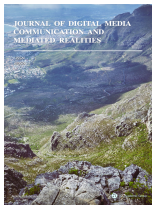

From Tarot Cards to Generative AI: Algorithmic Divination and the Construction of Mediated Realities

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the conceptual continuity between tarot card interpretation and generative artificial intelligence by framing both as systems of mediated meaning production. Rather than treating tarot as a marginal esoteric practice and generative AI as a purely technical instrument, the study argues that both operate through structured symbolic arrangements, interpretive openness, and the active participation of users in the production of significance. Tarot cards have long functioned as a medium through which uncertainty, desire, and projection are organized into meaningful narratives. Generative AI, although grounded in computational architectures and data-driven prediction, similarly produces outputs that invite interpretation, negotiation, and personal attribution. In this sense, the paper proposes the concept of algorithmic divination as a theoretical lens for understanding how contemporary media systems shape the experience of reality through symbolic mediation. The analysis develops a comparative framework across four dimensions: symbolic structure, interpretive agency, authority formation, and mediated realism. It further argues that generative AI extends earlier practices of symbolic consultation into digital environments where communication is increasingly interactive, personalized, and platform-dependent. By linking tarot with generative AI, the paper contributes to digital media studies, communication theory, and discussions of mediated realities, showing how new technological systems do not eliminate older structures of meaning-making but reconfigure them within computational environments.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Context

Generative artificial intelligence has rapidly become a central component of contemporary digital communication environments. Systems capable of producing text, images, and multimodal content are increasingly embedded in everyday interactions, shaping how users access information, construct narratives, and interpret uncertainty (Brown et al., 2020). Rather than functioning solely as tools for information retrieval, these systems participate in the production of meaning by generating responses that appear coherent and contextually relevant.

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At the same time, practices of symbolic interpretation have long existed as mechanisms through which individuals make sense of uncertainty. Tarot reading represents one such practice, operating through structured symbolic elements that invite interpretation rather than deliver fixed conclusions (Open AI 2023). The meaning of a tarot spread emerges through the interaction between symbolic imagery and the subjective engagement of the reader.

Although generative AI and tarot belong to different historical and technological contexts, both can be understood as systems that organize ambiguity into interpretable forms. Each relies on structured symbolic configurations and produces outputs that require user interpretation to become meaningful (Bubeck et al., 2023). This functional similarity provides a basis for rethinking contemporary AI systems as mediating structures of meaning rather than purely computational tools.

1.2 Research Problem

Current research on generative AI has largely focused on technical performance, ethical concerns, and governance challenges (Bender et al., 2021). While these perspectives are essential, they often overlook a fundamental issue: how users interpret and assign meaning to AI-generated outputs in everyday contexts

Generative AI systems do not simply deliver information. They produce responses that are shaped by probabilistic processes but are experienced by users as meaningful and coherent (Bommasani et al., 2021). This gap between computational generation and human interpretation suggests the need for a conceptual framework that accounts for symbolic mediation and interpretive participation.

Tarot provides a useful comparative perspective because it exemplifies a system in which meaning is constructed through the interaction between structured symbols and user interpretation (Weidinger et al., 2022). In tarot reading, meaning emerges through narrative construction rather than intrinsic determinacy. Similarly, generative AI produces outputs that gain significance through user engagement rather than through fixed semantic certainty.

The central problem addressed in this paper is therefore how to conceptualize generative AI as a system of mediated meaning production. Specifically, it asks whether the notion of algorithmic divination can provide a useful framework for understanding how AI systems generate interpretable outputs under conditions of uncertainty.

1.3 Research Objectives and Argument

This paper aims to develop a theoretical framework that connects tarot card interpretation and generative AI through the concept of algorithmic divination. The goal is not to equate the two systems, but to identify structural similarities in how they produce and organize meaning.

First, the paper examines both tarot and generative AI as symbolic systems that rely on structured elements and combinatory logic. Second, it analyzes the role of user interpretation in completing the meaning of system outputs, emphasizing the co-constructive nature of meaning-making processes (Yang et al., 2022). Third, it explores how authority is established within these systems, whether through tradition or technological credibility. Fourth, it investigates how generative AI contributes to the construction of mediated realities in digital communication environments.

The central argument is that generative AI can be understood as a form of algorithmic

divination, in which meaning is generated through probabilistic symbolic recombination and interpreted through user engagement.

1.4 Structure of the Paper

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 develops the theoretical foundations of the study, focusing on symbolic mediation, interpretive systems, and mediated realities. Section 3 presents a comparative analysis of tarot and generative AI across key dimensions. Section 4 examines how generative AI constructs mediated realities in communication environments. Section 5 discusses the broader implications of algorithmic divination for digital media and communication theory.

2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1 Symbolic Mediation and Meaning Construction

Symbolic mediation is a foundational concept in communication theory, referring to the process through which reality is not directly accessed but constructed through systems of representation, language, and signs (Liu et al., 2024). Rather than serving as neutral channels, media systems actively shape how information is organized, interpreted, and experienced (Gillespieet al., 2014). This perspective shifts attention from transmission to construction, emphasizing that meaning emerges through interaction between symbolic structures and interpretive agents.

In classical semiotics, meaning is not inherent in symbols but arises through relational systems of signification (Beer 2017). Signs operate within structured frameworks that enable interpretation while simultaneously constraining it. This dual condition of openness and limitation is central to understanding how symbolic systems function across different contexts, from language to visual media.

Contemporary digital media intensify symbolic mediation by embedding users within environments where representation is continuously generated and recombined (Kitchin 2017). Interfaces, algorithms, and data-driven processes do not merely present content but organize the conditions under which meaning is produced and circulated (van Dijck 2018). As a result, users engage with mediated realities that are shaped not only by content but also by the underlying structures that govern its generation.

Generative AI represents a further development of symbolic mediation, in which systems produce new symbolic configurations rather than simply transmitting existing ones (Couldry 2017). These outputs are not fixed representations but dynamic constructions that require interpretation. In this sense, meaning is not delivered by the system but emerges through the interaction between generated content and user engagement

2.2 Divination as an Interpretive System

Divination can be understood as a structured practice of interpretation designed to generate meaning under conditions of uncertainty (Couldry 2019). Rather than revealing predetermined truths, divinatory systems organize symbolic elements in ways that invite interpretation and narrative construction. Tarot cards exemplify this process by combining visual symbolism, positional arrangement, and contextual inquiry.

In tarot reading, meaning is not encoded directly within individual cards. Instead, it emerges

from the relationships between cards, the questions posed, and the interpretive framework applied by the reader (Bucher 2017). This relational structure creates a space in which ambiguity is not a limitation but a productive condition for meaning-making. The openness of symbolic interpretation allows users to project personal experiences, expectations, and concerns onto the generated configuration.

Scholarly analyses of divination have emphasized its communicative and performative dimensions (Papacharissi 2015). Divination does not simply produce answers; it stages an interaction in which meaning is co-constructed through dialogue, interpretation, and contextualization. The authority of the process depends not on empirical verification but on its capacity to produce plausible and resonant interpretations.

From this perspective, divination can be conceptualized as a system of mediated interpretation that transforms uncertainty into structured narratives (Barthes 1977). Its effectiveness lies in its ability to balance determinacy and openness, providing enough structure to guide interpretation while leaving sufficient ambiguity for user participation. This balance is critical for understanding how symbolic systems maintain relevance across different cultural and technological contexts.

2.3 Algorithmic Systems and Generative AI

Algorithmic systems have become central to contemporary media environments, shaping how information is filtered, organized, and presented to users (Eco 1977). Unlike traditional media, which primarily distribute pre-produced content, algorithmic systems actively participate in the generation and personalization of content (Lotman 1990). This shift introduces new dynamics in the relationship between system output and user interpretation.

Generative AI extends this transformation by producing content through probabilistic modeling and large-scale data processing (Fiske 2010). These systems generate outputs based on patterns learned from training data, resulting in responses that are statistically plausible but not necessarily grounded in stable semantic reference. As a result, the outputs of generative AI often exhibit a form of structured ambiguity that invites interpretation rather than definitive understanding.

Recent studies have highlighted that users tend to interpret AI-generated content as meaningful even when its underlying logic is opaque (Gunkel 2012). This interpretive tendency is influenced by the perceived authority of technological systems, as well as by interface design and communicative context (Gunkel 2020). The interaction between user expectation and system output plays a crucial role in shaping how meaning is constructed in AI-mediated environments.

Moreover, generative AI operates within a broader ecosystem of digital platforms, where outputs are continuously circulated, reinterpreted, and integrated into social communication (Coeckelbergh 2021). This circulation reinforces the role of AI as a mediating agent that contributes to the construction of shared and individualized realities.

2.4 Mediated Realities in Digital Communication

The concept of mediated reality refers to the condition in which individuals experience and interpret the world through layers of technological mediation (Floridi 2018). In digital environments, reality is not encountered directly but is shaped by interfaces, algorithms, and representational systems that structure perception and interaction.

Scholars have argued that mediated realities are characterized by the increasing integration of computational processes into everyday communication (Crawfor & Joler 2018). These processes influence not only what information is available but also how it is presented, prioritized, and interpreted. As a result, reality becomes a product of ongoing mediation rather than a stable external reference.

Generative AI contributes to this transformation by introducing systems that actively produce representations rather than merely filtering them (Seaver 2017). The outputs of these systems can simulate coherence, intention, and contextual relevance, leading users to engage with them as if they were meaningful communicative acts. This engagement blurs the boundary between representation and construction, as users incorporate AI-generated content into their understanding of the world.

In this context, mediated reality is not simply a technological condition but a communicative process in which meaning is continuously negotiated. Generative AI intensifies this process by expanding the range of possible representations and increasing the speed at which they are produced and circulated (Li & Wang 2023).

3. Tarot Cards and Generative AI: A Comparative Framework

3.1 Symbolic Structure and Combinatory Logic

Both tarot card systems and generative AI operate through structured symbolic elements that acquire meaning through combination rather than isolation. In tarot, a deck consists of a finite set of symbolic units, each associated with multiple layers of meaning that can shift depending on context and arrangement (Kim & Huh 2023). The interpretation of a spread depends not only on individual cards but also on their relative positions and relationships within a given configuration.

Similarly, generative AI systems produce outputs through the recombination of learned symbolic patterns derived from large datasets (Dwivedi et al., 2023). Rather than retrieving fixed meanings, these systems generate sequences that are statistically coherent within a given context. The resulting outputs are not deterministic representations but constructed configurations that reflect both underlying structures and contextual inputs.

This shared reliance on combinatory logic suggests that both systems function as generative symbolic frameworks. Meaning is not pre-existing but emerges through the arrangement and interaction of symbolic elements. In both cases, structure provides the conditions for interpretation without fully determining its outcome.

3.2 Interpretive Agency and User Participation

A key similarity between tarot and generative AI lies in the role of interpretive agency. In tarot reading, the user is not a passive recipient of information but an active participant in the construction of meaning (Haleem et al., 2023). The reader engages with symbolic cues, contextualizes them within personal circumstances, and constructs narratives that render the output meaningful.

Generative AI exhibits a comparable dynamic. Although the system produces responses, these responses gain significance only through user interpretation. Users evaluate, reinterpret, and sometimes reshape AI-generated content based on their own expectations and contexts. This

process reflects a co-constructive model of meaning in which interpretation is distributed between system output and user engagement.

Importantly, this interpretive process is shaped by ambiguity. Both tarot and AI outputs are sufficiently open-ended to accommodate multiple readings, allowing users to align interpretations with their own perspectives. This openness enhances the perceived relevance of the output, as users are able to project meaning onto the symbolic structure.

3.3 Authority, Credibility, and Trust Formation

Despite their reliance on ambiguity, both tarot and generative AI are capable of producing a sense of authority. In tarot, authority is traditionally derived from symbolic tradition, ritual practice, and the perceived expertise of the reader. The legitimacy of the interpretation depends less on empirical verification and more on its coherence and resonance within a given context.

In contrast, generative AI derives authority from technological credibility, computational complexity, and the broader cultural perception of artificial intelligence as an advanced system of knowledge production. Users often attribute a degree of reliability to AI-generated outputs, even when the underlying processes are not transparent.

This difference highlights a shift in the sources of authority from tradition to technology. However, the underlying mechanism remains similar. In both cases, authority is constructed through the interaction between system output, user expectation, and contextual framing. The perceived validity of the interpretation depends on its ability to align with user experience rather than on objective verification alone.

3.4 From Divination to Algorithmic Divination

The comparison between tarot and generative AI leads to the formulation of algorithmic divination as a conceptual framework. This concept does not imply that generative AI is equivalent to traditional divination practices. Instead, it emphasizes a structural similarity in how both systems transform uncertainty into interpretable outputs.

Algorithmic divination can be understood as a process in which computational systems generate symbolic configurations that users interpret as meaningful within specific contexts. Unlike traditional divination, which relies on symbolic traditions and ritual practices, algorithmic divination operates through data-driven models and probabilistic generation.

However, both forms share a common logic. They produce outputs that are not fully determined, invite interpretation, and gain significance through user engagement. This logic reflects a broader shift in digital media, where meaning is increasingly constructed through interaction with generative systems rather than through fixed representations.

By framing generative AI as a form of algorithmic divination, this paper highlights the continuity between historical practices of symbolic interpretation and contemporary computational media. This perspective provides a new way of understanding how AI systems function not only as technical tools but also as mediating structures of meaning.

4. Generative AI and the Construction of Mediated Realities

4.1 From Representation to Generation

Traditional media systems have primarily operated through representation, in which reality is depicted, framed, and transmitted to audiences through various symbolic forms (Stokel-Walker 2023). Although such representations are always selective and mediated, they typically maintain a referential relationship to external events or objects.

Generative AI introduces a shift from representation to generation. Instead of reproducing existing content, these systems produce new symbolic outputs based on learned patterns and probabilistic inference. The resulting content does not directly correspond to a stable external referent but is constructed through internal model processes. This shift alters the nature of mediation, as users engage not with representations of reality but with generated configurations that simulate coherence and relevance.

This transformation aligns with the concept of mediated realities, where reality is experienced through layers of technological mediation rather than direct perception. Generative AI expands these layers by introducing systems that actively produce content, thereby reshaping the conditions under which reality is interpreted and understood.

4.2 Interpretive Flexibility and Perceived Meaning

A defining feature of generative AI outputs is their interpretive flexibility. Because these outputs are generated through probabilistic processes, they often contain elements of ambiguity that allow for multiple interpretations. This ambiguity does not diminish their communicative value; instead, it enables users to align outputs with their own contexts and expectations.

Studies have shown that users tend to attribute meaning to AI-generated content even when its origin is not fully transparent (Weick 1995). This tendency reflects a broader cognitive and communicative pattern in which individuals seek coherence and narrative structure in uncertain situations. Generative AI leverages this pattern by producing outputs that appear contextually appropriate, thereby facilitating interpretive engagement.

This process closely resembles the dynamics of divination, where meaning is constructed through the interaction between symbolic outputs and user interpretation. In both cases, ambiguity functions as a resource rather than a limitation, allowing users to project significance onto the generated configuration.

4.3 Personalization and the Individualization of Reality

Generative AI systems are often embedded within digital platforms that enable personalized interaction. Through prompts, feedback, and iterative engagement, users can shape the outputs they receive, resulting in highly individualized communicative experiences (Taylor 2004). This personalization contributes to the fragmentation of shared reality, as different users encounter different representations and narratives.

In mediated environments, personalization amplifies the role of the individual in constructing reality. Rather than receiving standardized content, users actively participate in generating and refining the information they engage with. Generative AI intensifies this process by allowing users to co-produce content in real time, blurring the boundary between producer and consumer.

This individualized mediation has significant implications for communication. It challenges traditional notions of shared meaning and introduces new forms of epistemic diversity, where multiple, potentially incompatible interpretations coexist. Within this context, generative AI

functions as a system that not only mediates reality but also differentiates it across users.

4.4 Algorithmic Divination in Everyday Communication

The concept of algorithmic divination becomes particularly relevant when examining how generative AI is used in everyday communication. Users increasingly turn to AI systems not only for information but also for guidance, interpretation, and decision support. In these interactions, AI-generated outputs are often treated as meaningful responses to questions framed under conditions of uncertainty.

This practice mirrors the logic of divination, where individuals seek structured interpretations to navigate ambiguous situations. However, unlike traditional divination, algorithmic divination operates within digital infrastructures that enable rapid, scalable, and personalized interaction (Ricoeur 1976). The accessibility and responsiveness of AI systems make them a pervasive presence in everyday meaning-making processes.

Importantly, the authority of algorithmic divination does not depend solely on the accuracy of outputs. It also depends on their perceived relevance, coherence, and usefulness within a given context. Users evaluate AI responses not only based on factual correctness but also on their ability to provide insight or direction

As a result, generative AI contributes to the construction of mediated realities by embedding interpretive systems within everyday communication practices. It transforms the act of seeking meaning into an interactive process mediated by computational systems, thereby extending the logic of divination into contemporary digital environments.

5. Discussion and Implications

5.1 Rethinking AI as a Symbolic Medium

The analysis presented in this paper suggests that generative AI should not be understood solely as a technical system, but as a symbolic medium that actively participates in the construction of meaning. While existing studies often emphasize computational mechanisms or ethical risks, this paper highlights the interpretive dimension of AI-mediated communication.

By conceptualizing generative AI as a form of algorithmic divination, it becomes possible to recognize its role in organizing uncertainty into meaningful structures. This perspective shifts attention from questions of accuracy and efficiency to questions of interpretation, resonance, and communicative function. It also aligns with broader developments in media theory that view technologies not simply as tools, but as environments that shape how reality is experienced (Russell 2019).

Understanding AI as a symbolic medium allows for a more nuanced analysis of its cultural and communicative impact. It reveals that the significance of AI-generated outputs lies not only in their informational content, but also in their capacity to structure interpretation and guide user engagement.

5.2 The Transformation of Authority in Mediated System

One of the key implications of this study concerns the transformation of authority in contemporary mediated environments. Traditional forms of authority, such as expertise and institutional legitimacy, are increasingly supplemented or even challenged by algorithmic systems

that produce seemingly coherent and relevant outputs.

As discussed earlier, tarot derives its authority from symbolic tradition and interpretive practice, while generative AI derives authority from technological credibility and perceived computational sophistication. Despite these differences, both systems rely on user trust and interpretive alignment to sustain their legitimacy.

In digital communication environments, this shift has important consequences. Users may attribute authority to AI-generated outputs based on their form, fluency, and responsiveness, rather than on verified knowledge sources (Brynjolfsson & McAfee 2017). This raises questions about how credibility is constructed and evaluated in contexts where symbolic coherence can substitute for empirical validation.

The notion of algorithmic divination helps to illuminate this transformation by showing that authority is not simply transferred from humans to machines. Instead, it is reconfigured through new forms of interaction between users, systems, and symbolic outputs.

5.3 Mediated Realities and the Fragmentation of Meaning

The increasing integration of generative AI into communication environments contributes to the fragmentation of mediated realities. As users engage with personalized and interactive systems, they encounter representations that are tailored to their inputs, preferences, and contexts.

This personalization expands interpretive possibilities but also reduces the degree of shared reference among users. In traditional media systems, audiences often engage with the same content, enabling collective interpretation and discussion. In contrast, AI-mediated environments produce individualized outputs that may differ significantly across users.

Such fragmentation has implications for communication and social cohesion. When meaning is increasingly constructed through personalized interactions with generative systems, the boundaries between shared and individual realities become less distinct. This condition reflects a broader transformation in digital media, where reality is continuously negotiated rather than collectively stabilized (Whittaker 2021).

5.4 Implications for Digital Media and Communication Studie

This study contributes to digital media and communication research by introducing the concept of algorithmic divination as a framework for analyzing AI-mediated meaning construction. This concept extends existing theories of mediation by incorporating interpretive systems that operate under conditions of uncertainty.

It also suggests that emerging technologies should be analyzed not only in terms of their technical capabilities but also in relation to historical practices of symbolic interpretation. By placing generative AI in dialogue with tarot, this paper demonstrates that contemporary media systems often reconfigure rather than replace earlier forms of meaning-making.

For communication studies, this perspective highlights the importance of user interpretation, symbolic structure, and mediated interaction in shaping meaning. It encourages further research into how individuals engage with AI systems as sources of interpretation, guidance, and narrative construction.

6. Conclusion

This paper has explored the relationship between tarot card interpretation and generative artificial intelligence through the concept of algorithmic divination. By analyzing both systems as forms of symbolic mediation, it has shown that meaning emerges not from fixed representations but from the interaction between structured outputs and user interpretation.

The comparative framework developed in this study demonstrates that tarot and generative AI share key structural features, including combinatory logic, interpretive openness, and reliance on user participation. These similarities provide a basis for understanding generative AI as a system that organizes uncertainty into interpretable forms.

Furthermore, the analysis of mediated realities highlights how generative AI contributes to the transformation of communication environments. By generating content that users interpret as meaningful, AI systems reshape how reality is constructed, experienced, and negotiated.

The concept of algorithmic divination offers a new lens for understanding these developments. It emphasizes that contemporary computational systems extend longstanding practices of symbolic interpretation into digital contexts. Rather than marking a complete break from the past, generative AI represents a reconfiguration of existing structures of meaning within new technological conditions.

Future research can build on this framework by examining empirical cases of AI use in everyday communication, as well as by exploring the ethical and epistemological implications of algorithmically mediated interpretation. Through such investigations, a more comprehensive understanding of AI as a cultural and communicative phenomenon can be developed.

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