

OPENING WORD

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Centering Roma Voices in digital future¹

Dear esteemed colleagues, scholars, friends, and honoured guests,

It is my deepest privilege, as President of the Gypsy Lore Society, to welcome you to Paris for our Annual Meeting and Conference on Romani Studies. In this magnificent city renowned for its artistic and intellectual traditions, we gather from all corners of the world, united by our commitment to advance knowledge, dialogue, and justice for Roma, Sinti, Gypsy, Traveller, and allied communities.

In our past gatherings, we have focused on urgent matters: the social impacts and lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic, the possibilities of digital anthropology for re-imagining research methods in Romani studies and—most recently—the importance of rigorous ethical frameworks when researching minority, or “non-mainstream” communities, that are usually addressed as excluded, marginalized, peripheral or vulnerable.

This year, as we convene in Paris amid rapid technological transformation, I ask you to join me in spotlighting a challenge and an opportunity of historic proportions—a theme moving quickly from the margins to the center of our field: the entwined futures of Artificial Intelligence and Romani Studies.

Why AI? Why Now?

Artificial Intelligence is already remaking economies, politics, language, education, and even our perceptions of human identity. As scholars and advocates for communities often pushed to the peripheries, we must confront AI not as a distant abstraction, but as a phenomenon shaping the lived realities, rights, and futures of all people, including Roma, across Europe and worldwide. Evidence is mounting, for example, that discriminatory bias in artificial intelligence (Noble 2018) systematically impacts Roma, with AI-powered systems already having led to denial of access or exclusion from essential services in some cases.²

¹ Opening speech for the Annual conference of Gypsy Lore Society, 24th September, 2025 (Paris, France).

² The Fundación Secretariado Gitano (FSG) in its 18th *Annual Report Discrimination and the Roma Community* (FSG 2022) stated the discriminatory bias in the use of artificial intelligence and its impact on the Roma community: “The increasing use of algorithms for decision-making and systems based on artificial intelligence in many sectors of society, economy and everyday life, may entail risks for the exercise of fundamental rights, given the different biases (ethnic, gender, etc.) that occur, directly or indirectly, in their design, due to the

Our societies face a “digital divide”³ that increasingly becomes a new axis of social exclusion—AI, with its transformative promise and risk of hidden bias, amplifies this divide. In this regard, we have to have in mind, that many Roma are an inherent part of the digital world and consume all its benefits and privileges, but we are specifically referring to those who are threatened by the rise of technologies due to structural inequalities and who do not have equal or have only limited access to digital rights. Some Roma and other racialized minorities—already underrepresented in digital infrastructure and education—now risk being further marginalized as algorithmic decision-making grows across predictive policing, welfare allocation, and housing. Recent studies have documented, for instance, how Roma kids, but also elderly people are disproportionately affected by *digital poverty*,⁴ which links directly to algorithmic bias and new forms of invisibility in policy design (FRA 2022).

Honestly, in Romani studies, we do not know, what kind of “digital divide” we face in our particular research focus—is it predominantly a gender, generational, disability, educational or geographic digital divide? (Munté-Pascual et al. 2025).

In this context, I would like to draw the attention of Romani studies scholars to the need to identify in which Romani communities we encounter the digital divide, and whether this divide has the same or different characteristics compared to neighbouring non-Romani local communities. It is not uncommon for even poor Romani households to pay for satellite connections, internet and mobile phones, thus participation in social networks is a routine part of life for at least the young and middle generations in vast majority of Romani communities.

It seems that the digital divide does not always correspond with a “marginalized position” or social deprivation. However, this does not mean that exclusion from potential opportunities and benefits cannot occur on an ethnic or racial basis. In addition to the mentioned threat of biased algorithmic decisions made by AI, there is a lack of research in Romani Studies to identify what extent Roma being inherent part of a digital world do not make full use of its possibilities and do not benefit from its potential, for example, by regularly consulting some type of AI. Similarly, there are no studies that determine the ability to critically assess the content of news published online or ability to understand the pitfalls of information provided by AI (such as inaccurate, incomplete, or entirely fabricated information and data).

use of big data that reproduce existing stereotypes and prejudices in society” (See: <https://informesdiscriminacion.gitanos.org/informes/2022-english>, accessed on July 30, 2025).

³ The digital divide is a multifaceted phenomenon that highlights disparities in the access to, usage of, and ability to benefit from information and communication technologies between disadvantaged groups and others. At present, multiple forms of digital divides exist, including (a) the *gender digital divide*, (b) the *generational digital divide*, (c) the *disability digital divide*, (d) the *educational digital divide*, and (e) the *geographic digital divide* (Peláez-Sánchez & Glasserman-Morales 2023).

⁴ Particularly, during the pandemic it was found that Roma children were disadvantaged by a move to online distance learning, while Roma communities and the elderly were disadvantaged by the lack of non-digital alternatives (DFG; Munté-Pascual et al. 2025).

The Dangers: Bias, Exclusion, and “Ethics Dumping”

Contemporary research makes clear that AI and algorithmic systems have an alarming tendency to reproduce—and sometimes exacerbate—existing social biases present in their training data and design processes. Systemic antigypsyism is being perpetuated by opaque algorithmic decision systems, leading to new risks for already marginalized groups, including the Roma.

Societies, communities, groups and individuals who live beyond or below the threshold of the digital divide are underrepresented in digital worlds—not speaking about the various types of metaverses. Paradoxically, it is precisely the metaverses—virtual 3D spaces, avatar worlds, AR/VR experiences—that could offer them an escape from or a substitute for their lived, disadvantaged, or unprivileged realities. Individuals without access to the digital world, do not acquire digital skills, they cannot make use of its possibilities and potentials. Thus, they are excluded from yet another type of privilege that is becoming part of mainstream standards. Exclusion from the digital world today relegates a person to a substandard position, which has a decisive effect on the quality and length of the life—influencing everything from the fundamentals such as education, employment, housing, health, and social inclusion, to subtler aspects like the sense of purpose, inner fulfilment, and happiness.

Another phenomenon, recently discussed by academics and EU is so-called “ethics dumping”—where social and ethical risks are displaced onto vulnerable communities (Schroeder et al. 2021).

Ethics dumping is a worldwide issue characterized by the relocation of research projects. Studies that would be forbidden, heavily limited, or considered highly condescending in wealthy regions are conducted instead in low-resource environments. Based on the viewpoints of researchers from affluent regions, six main categories were detected: condescending behaviour, unjust allocation of benefits and burdens, culturally insensitive practices, application of double standards, insufficient due diligence, and a lack of transparency (Schroeder et al. 2021).

Romani communities are sometimes the targets of various kind of research projects, yet the ethical standards of such studies are not always sensitively developed, for instance, written informed consent is not always culturally sensitive and “fully informed”, the data are only rarely discussed with participants or targeted communities, etc. Similarly, the duration, extent, and frequency of these studies are often not evaluated, which can be burdensome or disruptive to the normal functioning of the communities. This is not to mention the asymmetry of benefits, which most often do not flow back to the researched communities, even in cases of so-called participatory-designed research.

In sum, Romani communities frequently face a lack of transparency and recourse; they struggle with digital under-representation, asymmetrical access to the digital world, and unequal consumption of its opportunities and benefits. Moreover, they bear the consequences of AI errors or biases without adequate resources or institutional support. As our field critically asks: Who bears the cost of technological innovations, and who is silenced in the process?

The Promise: Empowerment, Agency, and Participation

Yet our vision must not be limited to critique and risk. We should take also opportunity to call to reimagine AI and digital technologies as tools of resistance, empowerment, and epistemic justice.

- **Language and Culture:** Roma communities, with rich oral traditions and endangered languages, are uniquely positioned to benefit from AI-driven language preservation, translation, and multimedia archiving.
- **Civic Participation:** Digital platforms and AI have enabled new forms of Roma activism, advocacy, and organizing. But such benefits only materialize if Roma themselves are empowered as creators, not just subjects, of these tools.
- **Research Renewal:** Leading Romani studies scholars now suggest that the intelligent application of AI can renew oral history research, open new archives, and even help decolonize knowledge production if anchored in participatory and community-driven frameworks (Oylupinar 2025). The path forward is ethics-aware, narrative-sensitive AI pipelines co-created with Roma communities (Zachar Podolinská 2024).

The Challenge: AI Literacy, Community Leadership, and Policy

Our task, therefore, is threefold:

1. To **interrogate and challenge** the ways AI can threaten rights and reinforce exclusion.
2. To **innovate and empower**—equipping Roma scholars, students, and community leaders with digital and AI literacy, ensuring active participation in research, advocacy, and policy design.
3. To **insist on accountability**—demanding transparency, ethics, and Roma participation from the institutions and companies whose technologies shape our communities' destinies.

Let this conference mark our advocacy for a new generation of Romani, Sinti, Gypsy and Travellers scholars to flourish in digital humanities, data science, and ethical technology governance. Roma voices should participate in co-designing, not merely responding to, the AI revolution.

A Roadmap for Romani Studies

In its *Path to the Digital Decade Policy Programme* (EC 2021), Europe has set out to drive a digital transformation of public services and the economy with the aim of securing the EU's leadership in digital innovation. This initiative seeks to promote digital policies that are human-centered, inclusive, and sustainable, thereby empowering citizens. Consequently, the European Parliament, the Council, and the Commission have jointly established shared values, rights, and principles for the digital decade, as outlined in the *European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles* (2022). This declaration represents a significant opportunity, particularly for any people living in a *digital poverty*, as it holds transformative potential to enhance their well-being, enable them to pursue their aspirations, and support informed decision-making within the digital environment. In this context, digital transformation has

demonstrated its capacity to empower underrepresented groups and open new paths for self-sovereignty and agency (Qureshi 2022), provided that meaningful inclusion is ensured and the digital divide is addressed (Mehra et al. 2004).⁵

As we embark on this conference, let me propose a headline for Romani Studies in the era of AI:

From algorithmic marginalization to algorithmic justice: Centering Roma voices in the digital future.

Let us interrogate the politics of data—who counts, who is represented, whose stories are told. Let us share best practices for participatory digital research, support Roma-led tech and advocacy initiatives, and build interdisciplinary bridges with AI ethics, critical race theory, digital anthropology, and media studies. As front-line advocates have shown, universal and equitable access to digital tools is a necessary precondition for real participation and for contesting discriminatory digital policies.

In Closing

Let me close by invoking not only the challenges, but the possibilities. May this conference inspire rigorous debate, critical self-reflection, and collaborative strategy. Let us listen deeply to those most affected by technological change, and let us amplify their agency and creativity. Let our scholarship not merely analyze, but help invent, a more just and inclusive digital world for Roma and all marginalized peoples.

Welcome to Paris, welcome to the Gypsy Lore Society Annual Conference, and welcome to a new chapter in Romani studies.⁶

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⁵ “The internet has tremendous potential to achieve greater social equity and empowerment and improve everyday life for those on the margins of society” (Mehra et al. 2004).

⁶ The author thanks the AI assistant Perplexity for support in finding relevant literature and resources during the preparation of the manuscript. All sources and information found by the AI were verified by the author and, if necessary, corrected to meet the requirements of a scientifically rigorous work.

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