Research Agenda 2015+

Alexander von Humboldt Institute for Internet & Society

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Advancing towards academic questions & programme-orientation

In order to develop its overall profile, the HIIG has initiated a large number of research projects during its founding years. At the same time, we sought to establish collaborative relationships with other research institutes and potential funding organisations. One of the most important outcomes of these efforts is to be seen in the international Network of Centers with its nine steering committee members from four continents. In addition, we established various event formats such as the annual "Early Stage Researcher Colloquium" and the monthly "Digitaler Salon". Other activities focused on raising external research funds from both public and private sources. The focus on third-party funding is also in line with the recommendation of the HIIG's board of trustees to broaden our funding base. Furthermore, we started publishing initial research results.

Following these efforts, we seek to advance our research agenda and raise our academic profile. The following graph shows a draft of the envisioned structure that will be one core element to guide the research development at the institute:
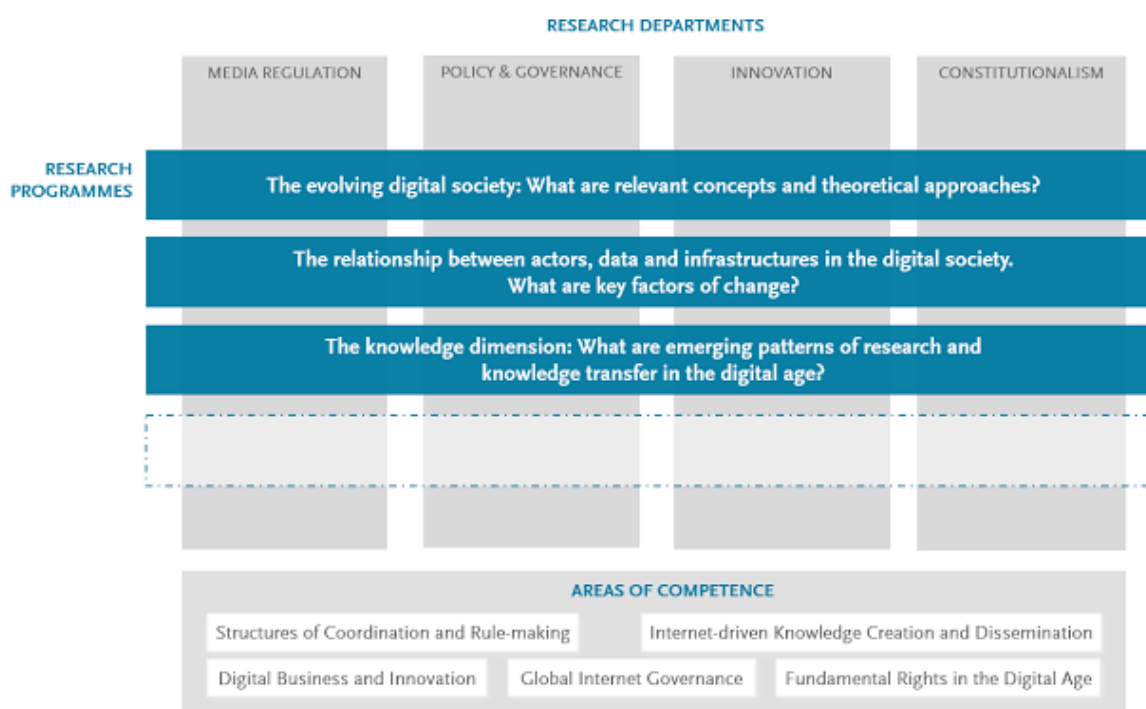
The relationship between society and the Internet can be analysed from various perspectives. All our projects draw on aspects assumed to shape and advance the digital society. However, research on the digital society often addresses specific phenomena without a sufficient theoretical or conceptual basis and empirical evidence. The HIIG aims to contribute to a broadening of both the theoretical and empirical foundation of future research on the digital society.

The institute is currently reconsidering its research agenda and intends to sharpen its focus. Our suggested approach rests on two elements:

1. **Research Programmes:** Overarching the institute's departments, research programmes are expected to stretch over a period of 3-5 years and be driven by broad research questions. The directors and senior researchers will be responsible for developing and pursuing the specified research questions. Projects contribute in various ways to addressing the research questions.
The institute has already gained some experience with **programme-orientated research throughout its work on participation**. In addition we have identified several key topics that qualify as building blocks for a long-term research programme. Themes under consideration for programme-oriented research are:
   - The evolving digital society: What are relevant concepts and theoretical approaches?
   - The relationship between actors, data and infrastructures in the digital society: What are key factors of change?
   - The knowledge dimension: What are emerging patterns of research and knowledge transfer in the digital age?

2. **Areas of Competence:** The HIIG's areas of competence reflect internal expertise. They cover long-term research interests, common methodological skill sets and theoretical inclinations of the institute's members, which the institute wants to highlight to stakeholders for potential partnerships independent of specific projects or programmes. Areas of competence may also emerge from collaborative activities with external partners. Current areas of competence are:

   - Structures of Coordination and Rule-making
   - Digital Business and Innovation
   - Internet-driven Knowledge Creation and Dissemination
   - Global Internet Governance
   - Fundamental Rights in the Digital Age

Both, Research programmes and areas of competence, do not function in a top-down fashion but create a structure that facilitates the research planning process. The programmes will be evaluated and - if necessary - re-calibrated on a regular basis depending on the research outcomes and new developments in the sphere of internet and society.

Research Programmes

The evolving digital society:
What are relevant concepts and theoretical approaches?

Based on our observations, research in the field of Internet and Governance continues to be described as a phenomenon. Until now, theories on digital society either remain unclear or have yet to come into existence. It remains uncertain whether or to what extent existing theories and concepts can be more useful. In order to begin moving towards theoretical claims, the first research question calls for any structural or societal changes that have become apparent within the institute's different areas of research. Existing theories and concepts can be called into question to separate observable changes from hype. Using this approach, critical moments and structural changes can be identified to describe patterns of transformation.

As a first step, the institute will reflect upon the theoretical premises used in its own research so far with particular regard for societal understanding. Furthermore, the institute plans to invite scholars and theorists from various disciplines to present their views on digital society. This forms the basis of a convergence towards recognizable structural changes and critical moments in different working areas. As a first step, the transformative areas below will receive worthy consideration:

- Different conceptions of privacy
- Emerging changes in norms
- Structural change through observability
- Shifting boundaries of participation between professionals and laymen (e.g. changing forms of participation)
- Structural change in administrative task execution
- New forms of knowledge creation and dissemination
- The transition from human decision-making to algorithmic processes

In contrast to other projects, this research programme does not seek to answer specific problem-oriented research questions, but rather aims to contribute to the broader theoretical discussion.

The relationship between actors, data and infrastructures in the digital society:
What are key factors of change?

Data, as the "raw material" of society, is an already widely discussed topic of research. The HIIG also intends to make a contribution by bundling and expanding the data use activities of various actors (persons, organisations, etc.). In this way, the use of data through connected power structures can be more closely examined. This programme begins at the data level, but could also touch upon the information and knowledge domains. Synergies with the third research programme are visible.

Three angles to this programme have become apparent:

A. Actors: Which actors are tied to data? How are these actors construed through data?
B. Relationships – "Data Ownership":
    ○ What types of data ownership are there? How is data being traded? What business models have emerged? What types of infrastructure are being used to transport data? (structural dimension)
    ○ Who is normatively assigned to data? What legal regulations are there besides personal data protection? Can this force or constrain openness? (normative dimension)
    ○ How does data get assigned to somebody? At what point is confidence in this assignment betrayed? (individual dimension)
C. Atomization and addressability: Which processes of addressability are identifiable? What are the structural consequences of recognizable solidarity-based institutions or power structures?

The knowledge dimension:
What are emerging patterns of research and knowledge transfer in the digital age?

This research project applies to central questions at the intersection of technology, research, and knowledge dissemination. New technologies are creating new premises for how knowledge is generated and disseminated. This is demonstrated in the exchange of research data or technology-based citizen science, which is bringing about new ways of scientific collaboration. Through social media, communicating about research content is faster and more direct (e.g. SciBlogs). At the same time, new teaching models such as MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) have come about. These developments pose new challenges for science whose classical understandings shape its own audience.

Three angles to this programme have become apparent:

A. Knowledge management: How will knowledge be processed in different areas? (e.g. government, companies, and other branches)?
B. Knowledge systems: How have systems of knowledge come to be described? Who decides what does and does not constitute as knowledge?
C. The role of science: Is problem-oriented research a special case in knowledge production? What interfaces are there between science and other fields (e.g. political science, economics, etc.). Is there a need for new forms?

The HIIG is already confronting digital change in science and research through its open science area. In the third research programme, these views should be supported and developed further within other areas of the institute. It is the confrontation with perspective C in particular that requires a constant change between the level of individual practice and the scientific reflection of these practices.