

Ethics Guidelines of the Alexander von Humboldt Institute for Internet and Society

The Alexander von Humboldt Institute for Internet and Society (HIIG) was founded in 2011 to research the development of the internet from a societal perspective and to better understand the accompanying digitisation of all areas of life. For this reason, we at HIIG have developed three long-term research programmes that provide the framework for our research agenda. Further research groups, labs, and projects strengthen this programme-oriented research. Various research results are presented and discussed as part of our science communication.

The Alexander von Humboldt Institute for Internet and Society is an independent, privately and publicly funded research institute, whose work meets scientific quality standards and transparency rules. In our research and continuing work, we always keep ethical principles in mind, which are explained below.

1. We take responsibility, preserve fundamental rights and freedoms, and continuously reflect on our work.

We assume responsibility for our research and its results. The prerequisite for our scientific practice is the research freedom enshrined in the German Constitution – both demanded and restricted by human dignity as well as other fundamental rights. Our scientists treat this constitutionally granted freedom of research with great care. Accordingly, the interests of science and society must not take precedence over the rights and needs of the individual. Our research ethics also require that the researchers at HIIG observe the rules of good scientific practice and current methodological standards in order to ensure scientific excellence and integrity. The general principles of academic work apply here, as formulated in particular in the [Guidelines of the German Research Foundation \(DFG\)](#), in accordance with occasional amendments.

HIIG promotes a culture of self-reflection with regard to one's own role in research, one's own interests, possible biases, and dependencies. An essential part of this is the exchange with colleagues about approaches, findings, practical and ethical research questions and dilemmas. Each researcher is encouraged to continuously examine and develop his/her own research ethical stance, and to be (self-)critical with regard to those social practices and constellations that may be evaluated as problematic in the light of the present research ethical guidelines. Aspects that seem questionable with regard to scientific standards and research ethics principles shall be communicated to the responsible persons. For this purpose, a "Research Ethics Committee" (REC) will be established, which can be consulted in case of any questions or uncertainties. The committee can be addressed via the address ethics@hiig.de.

2. We observe the principle of non-maleficence and damage avoidance.

We analyse which actors – also beyond the immediate research participants – are or could be affected by our work and how; which power relations are effective here and which conflicts, direct or indirect damages can result from our work. Regardless of the research subject, we adopt a diversity-conscious and intersectional perspective. Our researchers have a social responsibility to ensure that those undergoing research are not disadvantaged, either by participating or not participating in our research.

Here, we include not only physical or psychological effects but also legal, social, and economic consequences.

3. We uphold voluntariness and informed self-determination.

For research with people whose realities and perspectives are being investigated, we refer to legitimate interest under Art. 6 (1) (f) GDPR. In contrast to informed consent, this forces us as researchers – and not the data subjects – to carefully weigh the appropriateness, interests, and fundamental rights and to take responsibility for the outcome of our assessment. Of course, we inform the participants in detail about the respective research project, including the goals and methods of the project, the expected gain in knowledge, the effort required of the participants, and also information about data protection and their right to terminate their participation in the research process at any time as well as to refuse the use of the data collected. If the study is conducted with minors, parental consent must be obtained from their legal guardians.

4. We take confidentiality and anonymisation seriously and are committed to complying with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

Our researchers carefully consider the extent to which collecting data is necessary for gaining knowledge. We do not collect more data than necessary for the research objective and ensure that data is anonymised or pseudonymised whenever possible. We vow to treat any data, such as images and sound recordings, questionnaires or interviews, confidentially, and to keep track of how personal data are used, and who is allowed to access which data. In general, we are committed to complying with legal requirements concerning the handling, storage, disclosure, and deletion of data. We protect our systems from unauthorised external access to ensure data security and data protection.

5. We use digital technologies and AI applications in an ethically responsible manner.

Research on and with digital technologies and AI in particular is conducted in compliance with the [EU Commission's Ethical Guidelines for the Use of Artificial Intelligence](#), in accordance with occasional amendments. Among the requirements to build trust in AI are the primacy of human action and oversight, technical robustness and security, privacy and data quality management, transparency and fairness, as well as explainability. The assumptions and data on which the applied AI systems are based should be as representative as possible, especially to counteract biases in the data (algorithmic bias) and to reflect social diversity. In addition, we intensively research the problem of bias in AI applications, foster and promote interdisciplinary reflection, and share our findings with society and relevant stakeholders.

6. We advocate diversity and non-discrimination and are committed to intercultural sensitivity.

In our activities, we always consider the social variety of Europe and the world. We see diversity as an enrichment for ourselves and our work. Our research should be representative and should not discriminate against or exclude anyone. Especially in the context of cross-cultural studies and research activities in non-EU countries, HIIG researchers are committed to respecting local traditions, needs, and laws – always reflected against the background of human rights and our own conscience – as well as fostering equal cooperation with local partners. We are aware of the fact that we have our own social conditioning, cultural identity, and values, which we strive to reflect upon; we do not take ours to be natural, superior to others, or simply as a matter of course, in order to maintain as broad a societal

context as possible.

7. We deal with different interests in a reflective manner.

We are aware that researchers, research participants, funders, service providers, and other actors involved may pursue different interests and have different expectations, for example their own participation regarding the conduct of a study or the publication of the results, and thus appropriate the research in the process in different ways. Against the background of the concrete orientation and conception of a study, our researchers should be aware of what conflicts of interest exist, which expectations can or should be fulfilled, and how to deal with expectations that cannot be fulfilled or are disappointed. Transparency in communication with the parties involved should be achieved and – where appropriate – written down accordingly, as long as other principles do not conflict with this. Before entering into a collaboration or partnership with other research institutes, organisations, companies, or public institutions, we reflect on the possible consequences, taking into account these ethical guidelines.

8. We stand for transparency and traceability.

Within our work, we strive for scientific transparency and traceability. This includes, among other things, that we make our preliminary assumptions explicit and present the methodological approach transparently. We disclose the research interests we pursue, which methods and technologies we use, which data we collect for what purpose, and which editorial offices, research teams, or partners have access to the data and findings and bear responsibility for them. We also deal transparently with commissioners or sources of funding for research, e.g. through annual disclosure in the EU Transparency Register. To this end, we engage in both scientific and public debate.

9. We share, explain, and participate in the discourse.

We are aware of the transformative power of digitisation for our society, and it is a central research topic of HIIG. We want to help people and societies prepare for this future world and develop groundbreaking answers to challenges at the intersection of ethics and digitisation. We live our responsibility and mission by sharing our knowledge and demonstrating the possibilities of new technologies without neglecting their risks. To this end, our researchers make their findings publicly available in an appropriate, responsible manner. HIIG supports them in this and at the same time takes an active role in the scientific and practical shaping of the worldwide Open Science and Open Access movement. In scientific publications, authors share responsibility for their content. They critically reflect on the extent to which the research results contribute to discrimination in social conflicts or could be used to legitimise them.

We participate in the debate about the societal role of the internet, digital technologies, and AI by informing about results and classifying developments, explaining functionalities and promoting an open discussion about them. We seek exchange with scientific institutes and experts from the field, work in cooperation with colleges, universities, and other research institutions, and offer (young) scientists practical contexts for research work, e.g. in projects such as Ethics of Digitalisation or the AI & Society Lab. In this way, we make a decisive contribution to Germany's and Europe's role in research on the internet and society.

Reference:

We study the ethics discourse of other institutions, organisations, and companies to review and constantly improve our guidelines. The present Research Ethics Guidelines of the Alexander von Humboldt Institute for Internet and Society are oriented towards the [research ethics code of the DGSA](#), the article [Research Ethics in Qualitative Social Research of the Method Center of the Ruhr-University Bochum](#), the publication [Research Ethics Principles and Review Procedures in the social and economic Sciences of the The German Data Forum \(RatSWD\)](#), the [Ethical Guidelines of the Leipzig Research Center for Early Childhood Development](#), the [Ethical Research Guidelines of the HTW Berlin](#) and the [Guidelines for Artificial Intelligence of the Deutsche Telekom](#).

As of February 2023

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