

Digital Power and Democratic Futures: Critical Perspectives on Governance in the Digital Age

Final Conference of the Research Group “Politics of Digitalisation”

Workshop on June 5, 2026

The final conference of the research group “Politics of Digitalisation” brings together researchers and practitioners to critically examine the digital transformation as a field of political struggle, institutional change, and normative contestation. Across two days, the event reflects on how digitalisation reconfigures power, governance, and democracy – and what it means to study these processes critically.

After the [evening event on June 4](#), the workshop on Friday is structured into four thematic sessions. Across them, we ask:

How can we conceptualize and investigate power and domination in digital societies? Have their manifestations changed – and if so, how? How did we move from Internet governance to digital geopolitics? What role does the state play in regulating, enabling, or reshaping digital infrastructures and public spheres? And how does the digitalisation of the state itself affect public authority and accountability?

Each session features four input contributions, including one from a practitioner, followed by an open debate designed to foster exchange across academic and policy communities.

Programme

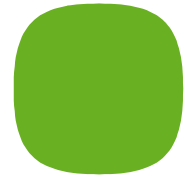
9 a.m.	Session 1: From Global Internet Governance to Digital Geopolitics
10:30 a.m.	Break
11 a.m.	Session 2: On Power and Domination -- Rethinking Critical Digitalization Research
12:30 noon	Lunch in the wintergarten
2 p.m.	Session 3: Critical Perspectives on Digital Regulation and Statecraft
3:30 p.m.	Break
4 p.m.	Session 4: Platformed Communications and Democracy
6 p.m.	Evening gathering

Workshop Details

The evening reception is supported by:



Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin
für Sozialforschung
Reichpietschufer 50
D-10785 Berlin
Telefon +49 (30) 25491-0
Telefax +49 (30) 25491684



Session 1: From Global Internet Governance to Digital Geopolitics

Session organisers: **Julia Pohle and Jeanette Hofmann**

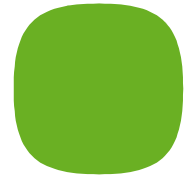
This session interrogates a fundamental transformation in how the digital transformation is governed and imagined by analysing the shift from global Internet governance to digital geopolitics. Over the last 20–30 years, the “central goods to be protected” (Schutzgüter) of digital governance have undergone significant changes. Early imaginaries with roots in cyberlibertarianism framed the Internet as a space of individual self-determination, grounded in freedom of communication, economic liberty and the deliberate sidelining of the state as a primary locus of power. Internet governance was understood as coordination among heterogeneous actors rather than top-down control.

Today, this imaginary is increasingly replaced by one in which self-determination is articulated as a collective—and often explicitly state-centered—project. Ideas such as digital sovereignty, security of infrastructures and supply chains and the protection of data appear to grant a renewed role to the state as guarantor of freedom, vis-à-vis powerful, monopolistic corporate actors and other states. Yet this raises critical questions: is this a return of the state as a protective and paternalistic authority or a redefinition of freedom – from the individual liberty to the self-determination of nation states in a globally interconnected landscape?

The session examines how geopolitical and geoeconomic interests and framings restructure digital governance. Has governance shifted from horizontal coordination to vertical integration, where states regulate, mobilize or discipline other actors when necessary? What role do private actors play across these competing imaginaries: as autonomous agents setting their own rules, as regulated entities or as strategic resources in the geopolitical competition?

Finally, the session addresses today’s “central goods to be protected” in digital governance. It asks whether the normative goals have changed or if we are defending invariant normative principles under transformed conditions. Is the strive for “digital sovereignty” thus a continuation of earlier aspirations under new constraints? Or is it a rupture that signals a deeper transformation in what and whom digital governance is meant to protect?

Session Details



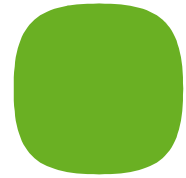
Session 2: On Power and Domination – Rethinking Critical Digitalization Research

Session organisers: **Sebastian Berg and Florian Irgmeier**

This panel examines how power and domination can be conceptualized and studied critically in the field of digital policy research. It explores which analytical frameworks enable us to understand power relations in digitalization processes, and what methodological approaches critical research can employ to investigate these dynamics. At the same time, we are interested in identifying theoretical and methodological blind spots that need to be addressed for more cogent analyses. Based on their own research or a review of the literature, presenters are invited to offer input contributions that spark reflexive discussion around these questions and help advance critical perspectives on digital power and domination.

(1) Conceptual resources: Which concepts or dimensions of power and domination have proven fruitful in research, which have not, and why? Conceptualizations of power to be discussed in this context may include, among others, architectural power based on the ability to shape the possibilities of action and interaction in digital environments, e.g. on platforms; ideational or discursive power resulting from the authority to define legitimate knowledge and desirable goals; and economic power derived from the monopolization of scarce goods. The panel also addresses questions of domination: how asymmetric power relations become stabilized and legitimized through digital technologies, regulations, and institutional practices.

(2) Methodological approaches: Which approaches have turned out to be particularly productive in studying the various faces of power in the digital constellation, what are their limits, and how can these approaches be refined further? Input presentations may, for instance, reflect on genealogical investigations of how current power configurations emerged historically; ethnographic studies within organizations from public administration or the tech industry; critical discourse analyses of policy documents and public debates; or infrastructure analyses examining the behavior-shaping effects of technical arrangements. We encourage presenters to also critically examine the blind spots and limitations inherent in these and other critical research approaches themselves.



Session 3: Critical Perspectives on Digital Regulation and Statecraft

Session organisers: Eliška Drápalová and Lena Ulbricht

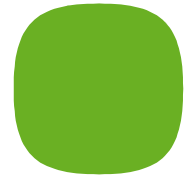
This panel examines the relationship between digital innovation and the rule of law. For a long time, digital technologies appeared to thrive in a lightly regulated environment: in many cases, existing rules proved ineffective for digital technologies and platform companies, and both firms and regulators failed to ensure proper enforcement. Critics have argued that the success of major digital platforms has been possible only because these platforms systematically circumvent or violate regulation.

However, over the past decade, we have seen significant regulatory initiatives across multiple jurisdictions, most notably in the European Union. New rules have been introduced, existing frameworks have been adapted to digital developments, and enforcement efforts have intensified. A telling example is the series of sanctions imposed by the European Commission on major technology companies. However, the new power of regulatory authorities over technology companies is very fragile and under pressure, not least due to the geopolitical turn of world politics. This panel addresses these issues by shedding light on different aspects of platform regulation, covering a range of regulatory approaches as well as different types of platforms and technologies.

Bringing together research on algorithmic regulation, platform regulation, and the legal dimensions of platform governance, the panel asks whether and under what conditions platforms and algorithms disrupt, transform, or reinforce existing regulatory arrangements. Drawing on work associated with the POLDI group, contributions place regulation at the core of analysis, treating algorithms and platforms as both *objects of regulation* and *instruments of regulatory statecraft*.

The panel explicitly engages with diverse methodological approaches, including comparative regulatory analysis, legal scholarship, and data-driven studies of enforcement practices, to assess how regulatory capacities, discretion, and authority are reconfigured across sectors and levels of government. Rather than assuming regulatory erosion, the panel advances a nuanced perspective on how states adapt, recalibrate, and sometimes strengthen regulation in response to platform- and algorithm-driven governance.

By foregrounding regulation as a form of contemporary statecraft, the panel advances a relational perspective on how states adapt regulatory authority under conditions of algorithmic mediation, highlighting variation across sectors, levels of government, and enforcement domains. The panel contributes to broader debates on how digitalisation transforms regulatory power, capacity, and legitimacy in the digital age.



Session 4: Platformed Communications and Democracy

Session organisers: Clara Iglesias Keller and Robert Gorwa

This session will reflect on theoretical and empirical approaches to the expansion of digital platforms as central communication infrastructures in contemporary democracies. In recent years, the role of platforms in shaping public spheres has been widely examined. This includes research on the contested impact of algorithmic curation on political polarization and on the spread of disinformation; the strategic role of private corporations in defining the boundaries of online expression through content moderation; the reconfiguration of journalism (including transformations in news distribution, revenue models, and metrics of visibility); and the enduring challenge of democratic oversight, which continues to fuel demands for regulatory action and platform observability.

As a field shaped by rapid technological change, political mobilization, and scholarly debate, research on platformed communications has continuously evolved. Interdisciplinary scholarship has moved beyond early assumptions of technological neutrality to conceptualize platform power across multiple dimensions – e.g. epistemic, economic, normative, and data-driven – thereby enlightening its diverse modalities and scope. Disputed, and sometimes counterintuitive, empirical findings on the relationship between platforms and democracy have not settled the question of how platforms weigh in democratic transformation. Rather, they have reinforced the urgency of developing more precise accounts of how digital infrastructures condition public discourse and political participation.

Today, in a landscape marked by both continuity and rupture, we are drawn by the rapid expansion of generative AI, with a proliferation of synthetic content that reshapes concerns about amplification, manipulation, and epistemic trust; and the political alignment of major U.S.-based technology companies with authoritarian projects.

Against this background, we propose a reflexive orientation to this session, where we can critically reassess not only our research field but our own trajectories, revisit earlier assumptions, and reflect on how critical research on digital platforms can adapt to rapidly shifting contexts. In light of contemporary challenges, some of the questions that will orient us are: what have we learned that remains analytically and normatively robust? What would we approach differently today? Which blind spots have shaped our research agendas? Which conceptual tools remain adequate, and which require recalibration?