



Assessing Big Data

The project group The Internet Policy Field has embarked on a collaborative project with five universities with the aim of “assessing big data” (www.abida.eu). The project will analyze the development and the use of big data from different disciplinary perspectives: ethics, law, sociology, political science and economy. The WZB team will pursue the development of a political science approach towards big data.

Big Data has attracted the attention of policy-makers who expect new ways of regulation: to optimize traffic, identify security risks, influence public health, target political campaigns, etc. Prominent big data applications in the public sector are rooted in the USA, such as “predictive policing” in Los Angeles and Chicago and the monitoring of supply, patients and nursing staff in hospitals through radio-frequency identification (RFID). First cases of big data use in the public sector are also being discussed, developed and piloted in Germany, as the piloting of “predictive policing” in Bavaria illustrates. But this development does not come uncontested. In addition to ethical concerns, institutional settings such as privacy regulations put limits on the spread of big data use in Germany.

Against that background, our project team has chosen an analytical approach based on power relations and conceptualizes big data both as a resource for government and as a subject of regulation. Our work will concentrate firstly on institutional setting and, secondly, on the changing knowledge and discourses.

Research questions

	institutional setting	knowledge and discourses
big data as a resource for government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – actors – power relations – technical foundations 	epistemological foundations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – evidence – algorithms – discourses
big data as subject of regulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – legal norms – informal practices – technical solutions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – discourses



Institutional setting

We will begin by identifying the institutional setting that shapes the development of big data. With our interest in big data as a resource for government we will ask:

- What actors are relevant and who controls technologies and data?
- Does big data modify the actor's options for action? Are political decisions replaced by algorithms?

When looking at big data as a subject of regulation we inquire:

- What legal norms, informal practices and technical solutions will determine the regulation of big data? What can we expect from state regulation and corporate self-regulation? On which level is regulation discussed: national, European, global?

Knowledge and discourses

We will also delve into the impact of big data on knowledge, conceptions and discourses and the role these discourses play in return for the development of big data. When looking at big data as a resource for government we want to know:

- How can we characterize the epistemological foundations of big data applications? Does Big Data generate new types of evidence? What are the underlying rationalities?
- How do algorithms mirror and reproduce these epistemological definitions?
- What discourses shape the development of big data? How do they legitimize the development and application of big data? How is big data politicized and problematized?

With our interest on big data as a subject of regulation, we are finally interested in the question:

- Which discourses can we identify in conflicts about the regulation of big data, for example concerning privacy, property rights and trade law?

Additional information

Funding: Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF)

Period: March 2015 - February 2019

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