

Organizing the Digital: Relations, Publics, Societies

Proposal for a Doctoral School at the Research Platform
Organizations & Society

Submitted by

Univ.-Prof. Dr. Leonhard Dobusch
Univ.-Prof. Dr.ⁱⁿ Andrea Hemetsberger

Founding Faculty

Univ.-Prof. Dr.ⁱⁿ Julia Brandl
Univ.-Prof. Dr. Theo Hug
Univ.-Prof. Dr. Kurt Matzler
Univ.-Prof. Dr. Martin Messner
Univ.-Prof. Dr.ⁱⁿ Kerstin Neumann
Univ.-Prof. Dr. Oliver Koll
Univ.-Prof. Dr.ⁱⁿ Annette Ostendorf
Univ.-Prof. Dr. Günther Pallaver
Univ.-Prof. Dr. Ulrich Remus
Univ.-Prof. Dr. Richard Weiskopf

University of Innsbruck

December 19, 2017

1 Introduction

Our lives, our economy and our society are increasingly shaped by what Felix Stalder (2017) describes as the “digital condition”. Material reproduction and collective sensemaking processes alike are mediated by digital relations, based upon algorithms and automated decision-making processes that reduce and give shape to massive volumes of data. Key for both harvesting “digital dividends” in a sustainable manner and addressing digital dilemmas associated with all-encompassing datafication in a beneficial way for stakeholders are continuous (re-)organizing processes within and beyond traditional organizational formations and boundaries (Ahrne et al., 2017).

Recently, the increasing transdisciplinary importance of the digital has also become obvious by a growing number of PhD projects that address their respective questions from various theoretical and methodological perspectives. Across research centers, digitization poses new and relevant research questions and provides new sources of data for addressing them. However, we currently lack a scholarly hub integrating dispersed competences related to questions, theories and methods necessary to best support PhD and early career researchers in their endeavours related to digital publics.

2 Conceptual Foundations of the Doctoral School

The digital permeates micro, meso and macro level phenomena in contemporary societies. The aim and unique contribution of the doctoral school and its grounding in organization theory, media- and communications studies, consumer culture theory, labor market and general management theories is its potential to bridge and transcend these levels of analysis. Consequently, our emphasis on digital relations, digital publics and digital societies represents exactly such a transversal perspective on digital dynamics.

Digital Relations

Technological change in general and advances in communication technologies in particular have always had consequences on how relations between individuals and organizations have been organized (Langlois, 2003). Given the game-changing potential of digitalization in this

respect (Schmid & Cohen, 2013), we can observe how new digital intermediaries allow for new forms of relations among members of the same or across different organizations, for example via (internal) social networks or crowdsourcing platforms (Hemetsberger, 2013). Also, relations among organizations and between organizations and individuals increasingly become digitized, from hiring procedures to performance evaluations (“scoring”) to customer relations. Today, in many industries, customer relationship management to a large extent is the management of digital relations. Also, labor markets are increasingly shaped by digital intermediaries (Bonet, Cappelli & Hamori, 2013).

While the proliferation of new forms of digital relations is of scholarly interest in its own right, we are particularly interested in potentially unintended or emergent consequences resulting from increasingly widespread adoption as well as interactions between various types for digital relations within and across organizations, including the relationships of organizations with their stakeholders. One side effect, for example, is the potential for increasing (specific forms of) transparency (Hansen & Flyverbom, 2015), which create specific forms of visibility (numerical and algorithmic forms in particular) of organizations and their members. This often goes along with respective demands by various stakeholder groups and transforms accountability and responsibility. At the same time, digitally mediated transparency or openness might go hand in hand with the emergence of new digital formations beyond dyadic relations, that is, new forms of digital publics and networked forms of knowledge creation and civil society engagement. Furthermore, in labor markets, the transition to digital intermediaries has consequences for valuation processes (Bessy & Chauvin, 2013) and matchmaking (Marchal, Mellet & Riceau, 2007). In more general terms, we are interested to shed light on the question how digitalization might affect the different roles organizations and their stakeholders assume in contributing to sustainable value creation for business and society.

Digital Publics

Digitization facilitates the exchange of knowledge and cultural goods at lower costs and across geographic distances and communities. Digital networks facilitate stable collaborative environments that institutionalize the digital relations in new ways and thereby create transnational digital publics, that is, organized media space kept together by a continuity of practices of mediation (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2015). Building upon works on new forms of

organizing outside of traditional organizational structures (e.g., Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015), this leads to questions regarding organizational challenges of these new digital publics.

First, the growing amount of (big) data available for public scrutiny requires re-defining traditional notions of media and respective transparency (Fenster, 2015; Bernstein, 2016), leading actors to engage in new forms of organizing (e.g. "The International Consortium of Investigative Journalists"). Second, we observe how nationally funded and oriented public service media increasingly rely on digital relations with transnational platforms such as YouTube or Facebook for their goal of creating public spaces. Third, we observe how corporate actors increasingly invest in their own media platforms, thereby going beyond traditional forms of advertisement in their claims of delivering genuine journalism.

All these phenomena illustrate how digital public spaces rely on a new organizational setup of digital relations between diverse sets of private and/or public actors, collaborating beyond traditional forms of organizationality. And while being organized, the final outcome is hardly ever controlled by individual (groups of) actors but rather it is an emergent result of increasingly digital societies.

Digital Societies

As in the pre-digital era, digital societies are full of institutions that are emergent, partly unintended outcomes of intentional actions. We observe fundamental digital transformations of social collectivities (e.g. political movements), and other actor relations that create both new opportunities and fallacies in contemporary societies. Typical for capitalistic societies, we find double movements (Polanyi, 1944) of market and non-market driven developments, for example regarding the so-called "sharing economy" (Dobusch, 2017) or new forms of digital media in a nexus between private platforms and digital commons (Benkler, 2006).

Part of digital societies is also a growing importance of transnational relations across various fields of governance in both economic and other societal contexts (Hansen, 2015). As a consequence, organizing regulation in the form of social, legal or technological standardization as well as new forms of social mobilization and organization are proliferating. Understanding all of these new developments requires (and benefits from) a transdisciplinary pluralism in terms of

both theories and methods, as it can be uniquely provided in the environment of a transdisciplinary Doctoral School directly addressing these issues.

3 Methodological Focus

Methodologically, the doctoral school takes a multi-method and inter-disciplinary lens and advances conceptual research, experimental, qualitative and interpretive studies, as well as related quantifications and network analyses of digital texts, visuals, and behavioral patterns of digital relations, publics, and societies in management research and the social sciences. Complementary to big data and machine learning methodologies, we strive to apply and further develop new digital forms of collecting, analyzing and interpreting various digital data sources with a particular openness regarding multi- and mixed-method designs.

Examples for “digital” data collection and analysis methods are online ethnography (“netnography”, Kozinets, 2002) or collaborative online interpretation (Steinhardt, 2017). In addition to new digital methods, more traditional approaches of qualitative and interpretive or hermeneutical methodology shall be applied to capture and analyze new types of data sources such as online videos, social media communication or longitudinal analyses of mailing-list and blog archives (e.g., Gegenhuber and Dobusch, 2017). Furthermore, exploratory methods of computer linguistics are made fruitful (e.g., Tschuggnall, Murauer, Specht & Brandl, 2018). To better understand the causalities behind the impact of digitalization, selected simulations and experimental methods will additionally be introduced.

4 Transdisciplinarity and Faculty Membership

An organizational perspective is itself an inherently transdisciplinary endeavour, encompassing scholars and theories from business and management studies, organizational sociology as well as political science. In addition, organizational perspectives traditionally have strong relations to communication and media studies as well as humanities disciplines with a hermeneutic tradition. This transdisciplinarity of organizational perspectives is also well established in the context of the research platform Organizations & Society, which regularly assembles scholars from a variety of research centers at the University of Innsbruck. Given the joint experience and

framework of the research platform, four research centers have committed to contribute to the development of the Doctoral School in the current foundational phase:

- Organization Studies (coordinating center; liaison researcher: Leonhard Dobusch, Professor of Organization)
- Digital Humanities (liaison researcher: Theo Hug, Professor of Educational Sciences with emphasis on Media Education and Communications Culture)
- Information Systems for Connected Work and Life (liaison researcher: Ulrich Remus, Professor of Information Systems)
- Strategic Leadership, Innovation and Branding (liaison researcher: Andrea Hemetsberger, Professor of Branding)

The research profiles of the four liaison researchers listed above bring together different traditions in terms of theory and methods while sharing a predominantly qualitative methodological approach and a strong research orientation. Additional faculty will include the following scholars:

- Julia Brandl, Professor of Human Resource Management
- Oliver Koll, Professor of Marketing
- Kurt Matzler, Professor of Strategic Management and Leadership
- Martin Messner, Professor of Management Control
- Kerstin Neumann, Professor for Corporate Sustainability and Resource Management
- Annette Ostendorf, Professor of Business Education
- Günther Pallaver, Professor of Political Science
- Richard Weiskopf, Professor of Organization

5 Formal Structure and Procedures of the Doctoral School

The formal structure of the Doctoral School comprises an *Assembly*, a *Steering Committee* and an *International Advisory Board*.

Assembly and Steering Committee

The Assembly is a meeting of faculty members who participate in the Doctoral School.¹ In addition, two PhD representatives selected by the PhD students are members of the Assembly. It shall gather once a year to decide on the admission of new PhD students (simple majority) as well as on possible changes in the organization or the agenda of the school (two-thirds majority).

The Steering Committee shall consist of five members. The heads of the Research Platform “Organizations and Societies” and of the Research Center “Organization Studies” are permanent members and co-chair the Steering Committee. The Assembly shall elect the other three members of the Steering Committee. These three members will serve for a period of two years. The Steering Committee shall coordinate the activities of the Doctoral School (e.g. prepare annual meetings, research meetings, or workshops), ensure the quality of teaching and research, and function as a liaison to other Doctoral Schools and Universities.

Admission of Doctoral Students

The admission of doctoral students shall be a two-step process:

- In a first step, prospective students shall submit a proposal (i.e. letter of motivation, outline of research, certificates of academic education, two references) to one chair of the Steering Committee. The Steering Committee will assess the qualification of the prospective students and the quality of the proposed projects and shall make written recommendations to the Assembly.
- In a second step, the Assembly decides on the admission of a student to the Doctoral School. This decision involves (a) the expressed willingness of two faculty members to

¹ *Participation* shall be understood as past and current supervisions of PhD projects within the Doctoral School and respective declarations of interest. Faculty members who have not supervised a PhD project in the past five years can join meetings of the Assembly as observing members but shall not have the right to vote until the PhD candidate, who is supervised by this faculty member, is admitted to the Doctoral School. In the foundational phase of the Doctoral School (i.e. the first five years), only the founding members shall have the right to vote.

function as a supervisor and second supervisor for the research project and (b) a majority vote by the Assembly.

Members of the first Steering Committee develop detailed criteria for the selection of prospective students and put these criteria to vote in the Assembly. In determining the selection criteria for admissions, the Steering Committee will be committed to creating a vibrant transdisciplinary PhD student community. A particular focus in selecting PhDs will be on gender and diversity issues, without compromising on excellence. Appendix A provides a list of potential PhD scholars for the founding phase.

International Advisory Board

Key to achieving the goals of the Doctoral School is a wide network of international partners. Members of the International Advisory Board will be asked to commit to giving a guest lecture (e.g., in a summer school or workshop setting) and offer some one-on-one counseling to selected PhD students. In addition, members of the International Advisory Board function as primary points of contacts for research visits of PhD students in the doctoral school. Main criteria for approaching scholars as members of the International Advisory Board are research quality and fit, as well as commitment to the doctoral school.

6 Curricular Activities

The scientific and educational program of the Doctoral School will be based on existing PhD curricula and include additional course offerings and conferences. All PhD students are obliged to attend all the joint research meetings and workshops of the Doctoral School and are invited to participate in a tri-annual conference as described below:

- **Annual PhD Presentation Workshop:** One of the central aspects of academic work is the presentation and communication of research plans, theoretical concepts and results. Hence the Doctoral School requires PhD students to repeatedly present their individual projects so that all students are given the opportunity to develop their abilities during the program and are given continuous feedback. The PhD presentation workshop shall reserve 1.5 days to presentation and discussion of PhD proposals and include a joint dinner for all participants.

- **Research seminar “Theorizing the Digital”:** The main aim of this reading course is to create a common body of conceptual knowledge and transdisciplinary understanding based upon key texts commonly applied to theorizing about digital relations and phenomena more broadly. This course will be integrated in the existing PhD programs as research seminar, or similar corresponding seminars.
- **Digital Methods:** In addition to traditional method courses, which are part of any PhD program at the University of Innsbruck, digital methods courses will be regularly offered and organized by the research platform Organizations & Society and by associated research centers and areas, which focus particularly on collecting and analyzing various types of digital data. The courses are either fully integrated in existing PhD courses or offered in an intensive workshop format. Equivalent international PhD courses can be chosen as well.
- **Tri-annual research conference as a cooperation of three Doctoral Schools:** After the first three years of the Doctoral School, an international conference with invited speakers and presentations by late-stage PhD students should offer learning opportunities for more early-stage PhDs and contribute to the overall visibility of research outputs and the Doctoral School in general. The research conference shall be jointly hosted by three Doctoral Schools situated at University of Innsbruck:
 - “Organizing the Digital: Relations, Publics, Societies”
 - “Political Institutions and Leadership in a Contingent World” (Liaison researcher: Martin Senn, Professor of International Relations)
 - “Dynamics of Inequality and Difference in the Age of Globalization” (Liaison researcher: Silke Meyer, Professor of European Ethnology)

Additionally, the doctoral students are supported in choosing other courses of various international PhD course offerings (e.g., VHB ProDoc courses), which can be facultative complements according to the individual preferences.

7 Possible future PhD projects at the Doctoral School

- Activist media and digital cultures
- Algorithmic governance in organizations and markets
- Brand-stakeholder assemblages in public spaces

- Collaboration and a common good perspective for sustainable development:
- Customer Relationship Management through digital channels
- Customization of offerings: Opportunities and (ethical) dilemmas
- Critical visual and discursive analyses of digital brand content
- Digitization and educational responsibilities
- Digital ethics and ethics of algorithms
- Digital infrastructures and knowledge creation
- Digital market dynamics
- Learning in digitized workplaces
- Job search strategies in electronic job boards
- Learning Analytics
- Machines as teammates: A collaboration and connectivity perspective
- Medialization and digitization in contexts of education, learning, and knowledge
- Mediatization and medialization of politics
- New forms of organizing digital transparency and (dis)closure
- Open Education and OER
- Organizational learning and change for sustainability in the digital era
- Organization of Public Open Spaces in the Context of Private Online Platforms
- Political communication in media-centered democracies
- Regulatory responses to algorithmic governance
- Thematized Pop-up publics - networked brand discourse on social media
- Employee self-service and employment relations
- School 4.0
- Sustainability in digital human resource strategies
- Sustainable firm-stakeholder relations in the digital world
- Visual cultures and media practices
- Who is under control? Trust and control when interacting with cognitive systems

References

Arvidsson, A., & Caliandro, A. (2015). Brand public. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 42(5), 727-748.

- Benkler, Y. (2006). *The wealth of networks: How social production transforms markets and freedom*. Yale University Press.
- Bessy, C. & Chauvin, P.-M. (2013). The power of market intermediaries: From information to valuation processes. *Valuation studies*, 1:1, 83-117.
- Bernstein (2016). Making Transparency Transparent: The Evolution of Observation in Management Theory, *Academy of Management Annals*, 11(1), 217-266.
- Bonet, R., Cappelli, P. & Hamori, M. (2013). Labor market intermediaries and the new paradigm for human resources. *The Academy of Management Annals*, 7:1, 341-92.
- Dobusch, L., & Schoeneborn, D. (2015). Fluidity, identity, and organizationalitat: The communicative constitution of Anonymous. *Journal of Management Studies*, 52(8), 1005-1035.
- Dobusch, L. (2017): Sharing Economy between Commons and Commodification. Paper presented at International Conference "A Great Transformation? Global Perspectives on Contemporary Capitalisms", □ January 10-13, 2017, Johannes Kepler University Linz, Austria
- Fenster, M. (2015). Transparency in search of a theory. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 18(2), 150-167.
- Gegenhuber, T., & Dobusch, L. (2017). Making an impression through openness: how open strategy-making practices change in the evolution of new ventures. *Long Range Planning*, 50(3), 337-354.
- Hansen, H.K. (2015). Numerical Operations, transparency illusions and the datafication of governance. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 18(2), 203-220.
- Hansen, H. K., & Flyverbom, M. (2015). The politics of transparency and the calibration of knowledge in the digital age. *Organization*, 22(6), 872-889.
- Hemetsberger, A. (2013). "Crowdsourcing," In: Russell W. Belk and Rosa Llamas (eds.), *The Digital Consumer*, New York: Routledge Companion Series, 159-170.
- Langlois, R. N. (2003). The vanishing hand: the changing dynamics of industrial capitalism. *Industrial and corporate change*, 12(2), 351-385.
- Kozinets, R. V. (2002). The field behind the screen: Using netnography for marketing research in online communities. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 39(1), 61-72.
- Obermaier, F., Obermayer, B., Wormer, V., & Jaschensky, W. (2016). About the Panama Papers. *Süddeutsche Zeitung*,

<https://www.webcitation.org/6gV2xRPhE?url=http://panamapapers.sueddeutsche.de/articles/56febff0a1bb8d3c3495adf4/>

- Marchal, E., Mellet, K. & Rieucan, G. 2007. Job board toolkits: Internet matchmaking and changes in job advertisements. *Human Relations*, 60:7, 1091-113.
- Schmid E, Cohen J (2013) *The new digital age: reshaping the future of people, nations and business*. John Murray, London
- Stalder, F. (2017): *The Digital Condition*. Polity Press
- Steinhardt, I. (2017): Forschungsplan „Kollaboratives online-Interpretieren“, <https://sozmethode.hypotheses.org/266>
- Sützi, W., Stalder, F., Maier, R. & Hug, T. (eds.) (2012): *Media, Knowledge and Education: Cultures and Ethics of Sharing*. Innsbruck: Innsbruck University Press.
- Tschuggnall, M., Murauer, B., Specht G. and Brandl, J. 2018. Algorithmic Segmentation of Job Ads Using Textual Analysis. 40th European Conference on Information Retrieval (ECIR), Grenoble, France.