

# The internet, politically

## Controversies over digitalization

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When discussing issues in political terms, we can usually assign them to a specific policy field. Take the weather, for example. The 2018 summer heat wave turns into a climate phenomenon, and thus becomes a part of environmental policy. The legitimacy of private health insurance providers is discussed in the context of healthcare policy, and if our train arrives hours late for the umpteenth time, we can see it as an act of fate or as an issue of transport policy. Policy fields provide an argumentative and institutional framework in which issues may be considered, debated, and decided upon in political terms. That's because policy fields are based on the societal agreement that something is at stake at their core – something worth fighting for, something that serves the common good and deserves protection. Issues like the environment, health, and transport infrastructure tick all these boxes.

Which policy field, however, provides the frame of reference for debates about digitalization? Some policymakers, journalists, and citizens now speak about “digital policy,” when only a few years ago, the answer would clearly have been “Netzpolitik” or “internet policy.”

Since the 1990s, the internet has repeatedly been the object of political discussions. In these early debates, internet-related questions were always subsumed within existing policy fields and rarely examined on their own. The potential of the “information society” belonged to economic policy discourse, whereas the first global computer viruses raised concerns in terms of security policy. It wasn't until 2005 that a common, albeit controversial point of reference, emerged for debates on using and regulating the internet: “Netzpolitik.”

The term “Netzpolitik” was coined by a protest movement that had a strong impact on public opinion. Their success formula was combining a defense of civil rights, like freedom of opinion and the protection of privacy, with the idea of a free, open, and self-determined internet. Activists successfully promoted this idea to counteract legislative proposals on data retention or the filtering of internet content. Soon enough, a growing number of policymakers and ministers adopted the idea of accounting for the unique qualities of the internet instead of subordinating it to the priorities of other policy fields. The internet as an entity received broad recognition as a good that deserved protection making it worthy of independent policy consideration. This trend was further accelerated by the electoral success of the German Pirate Party, which put pressure on the other parties to develop an internet policy profile as well. “Netzpolitik” became the shooting star among policy fields, but its success was not to last.

For a number of years, the internet has been losing its relevance as a political point of reference. Debates now revolve around digitalization instead. They are no longer primarily about the internet as a sphere in its own right as a facilitator of free communication and worthy of protection. What drives debates today is the pervasiveness of digital technology in the economy, politics, and society. The general perception is that digitalization is becoming a fundamental process of transformation akin to phenomena like climate change. The range of issues connected to the term digitalization is expanding. The political debate, however, lacks a shared normative point of reference. What is at stake in the digital age? Which common good deserves the most protection?

Does the disagreement concerning these questions suggest that the internet is losing its policy field? The terminological switch from internet policy to digital policy does not mean that internet policy actors and discourses simply disappear from the political stage, yet the policy field is indeed undergoing a transformation that could result in two possible future scenarios.

First, the field may expand. In this case, digital policy would replace internet policy as an independent policy field, encompassing a much broader range of issues. Although internet policy arguments and issues would be integrated, what exactly is at stake would have to be renegotiated. At this point, there is no widespread agreement regarding the unique good that needs to be protected when it comes to digitalization. Possible candidates include the call for “digital sovereignty,” proposed by representatives of the IT economy and security industry in the wake of the disclosures of Edward Snowden, with a more civil rights-based interpretation of “digital self-determination.”

A second possibility is the diversification of the field. The uniform approach to the complex set of digital issues is falling apart. Instead, they are integrated in both established and new policy areas. In that scenario, digitalization would be negotiated both in cyber security policy and in transport policy (“smart cities”) or in global economic policy. Internet policy would continue to exist, but as a marginalized field.

The question of which alternative will prevail is not a purely academic one. Whether, how, and which policy fields eventually become established as independent thematic and institutional constellations shapes what our society views as particularly worthy of protection. Whether it is the rights of artificial intelligences, the security of national infrastructures, or the self-determined use of digital technology: The political and institutional frame of these issues is a vital concern.

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