



Governance of Free Expression Online

Two-day workshop

October 11–12, 2019

Centre for German and European Studies (St. Petersburg State University — Bielefeld University)

Workshop speakers:

- Francesca Musiani, French National Centre for Scientific Research
- Niels ten Oever, University of Amsterdam
- Stefania Milan, University of Amsterdam

Recently, the internet's capacity to support freedom of expression has been questioned in light of increasing awareness of surveillance practices, opinion polarization through echo chambers, reproduction of existing social inequalities and overall disintegration of public debate. In addition, critics have drawn attention to forms of indirect control and censorship that limit the possibilities for free expression in online environments. This criticism stands in sharp contrast to optimistic accounts of the internet put forward by major stakeholders that tend to idealize the internet's impact on society while ignoring the actual patterns of its social embeddedness.

Growing attention to the negative effects of internet usage calls for development of theoretical and methodological approaches that can be used to study how freedom of expression online can be supported. As a result, scholars are faced with several important questions about free expression on the internet. Who are the actors involved in governing expression on the internet and what are the mechanisms they employ? How does collaboration between different actors affect possibilities to promote freedom of expression? Finally, who and how can challenge the orwellian tendencies developing on the internet?

Scholars have employed various theoretical frameworks to examine social embeddedness of the internet. Institutional theory and science and technology studies have provided fruitful conceptual frameworks that deal with these emergent issues. For example, it was proposed that institutional factors determine the modes of expression made possible by internet technologies and services; that cultural structures like discourses or large-scale imaginaries (e.g., on human rights or technological progress) influence the way these technologies are designed and used; that the internet is not just a technical phenomenon, but a system of socio-technical linkages and practices constituted therein. These approaches have also contributed to development of new models of internet governance that operate through institutional pressures, discourses, networks and material infrastructures rather than through legislation,

decision-making, or budgeting. At the same time, while getting more popular, neo-institutionalism and STS have rarely been applied to study governance of freedom of expression online.

Aiming to address this gap, workshop speakers and participants will reflect on the following questions (but not limited to them):

1. what theories and methods can be employed to study mechanisms that govern online expression?
2. which theoretical and methodological difficulties have to be addressed by researchers?
3. how institutions represent and construct free expression and censorship online?
4. what socio-technical configurations enable or stifle free expression on the internet?

We invite MA and PhD students as well as established scholars to present their research on topics related to conditions and forms of online communications, including but not limited to internet governance and regulation, online censorship, algorithms, and platforms.

We kindly ask researchers wishing to present their work to send their **name, affiliation and a short abstract of their talk (250-300 words)** to info@zdes.spbu.ru till Oct 7, 2019.

We ask those who wish to attend the workshop as listeners to send their name and affiliation to info@zdes.spbu.ru till Oct 10, 2019.