

Information, Communication and New Media Studies: Networking a Multidisciplinary Field

A workshop to be held 2–4 February 2006 at the

Oxford Internet Institute (OII), University of Oxford
1 St Giles, Oxford, United Kingdom

Organized Jointly by
the OII and the US Social Science Research Council (SSRC)

Overview

New media, such as the Internet and other convergent information and communication technologies (ICTs), are now widely used in ways that are reshaping political, economic, cultural, legal, scientific, and other activities. The interrelated outcomes in the public sphere of these diverse uses of the Internet and new media by communities, individuals, and private and public organizations are leading to wide-ranging societal transformations, both locally and globally. The pervasive nature of this growing digital mediation and governance of social life has stimulated rethinking of research practices, institutional arrangements, and policies needed to provide better accounts and understandings of such transformations.

Over the past decade, digital convergence has been accompanied by a partial realignment of research around the technologies themselves, most notably in the form of efforts to build better-integrated, more-fluid models of engagement across social and technical disciplinary boundaries. No established field, dominant paradigm or appropriate institutional restructuring has emerged to take advantage of the new multidisciplinary research opportunities. However, distinctive approaches and themes for research on the social dimensions of new media and related ICTs—such as the relationship between ICTs, public life, media, and governance—have been created within communication and media fields, information studies, social informatics, computer science, law, the humanities, and the core social sciences. Some of these new configurations have acquired stability within or between fields; in other cases, they are characterized mostly by isolated experiments.

This OII–SSRC workshop seeks to identify the most promising approaches for connecting multidisciplinary research efforts focused on the growing social importance of ICTs in structuring diverse aspects of public life. It will bring together leading innovators in this area with policy makers and other stakeholders to focus on ways of establishing and networking relevant and excellent multidisciplinary research and institutions. The workshop will include participants from developing countries, home to both the greatest needs and some of the most interesting institutional innovations.

Aims of the Workshop

The OII–SSRC Workshop will examine three main challenges posed by ICT innovation and use:

1. Institutional responses to the fragmentation of social research on ICTs, including the new media, by topics and disciplines that have occurred as ICTs have become more pervasive.
2. Growing social and economic pressures to improve the interaction between multidisciplinary research and the formation of public policy, public advocacy, activism, public opinion, and multi-stakeholder approaches to ICT and media governance.
3. The increasingly global dimension of ICT-related policy, advocacy, and research and the new opportunities they open for institutional innovation and collaboration.

Recommendations from the workshop are expected to have complementary local and global implications, which could stimulate related teaching, educational and research programmes and policy-related initiatives. To identify these, the workshop will try to answer questions such as:

- What is the most appropriate strategy for creating and coordinating a more networked approach to social research on ICTs that can help to generate, organize, and inform policy and practice in related areas?
- How can limitations on multidisciplinary collaboration, imposed by the grounding of mainstream research methods and assessment in traditional academic disciplines and institutional and professional structures, be overcome to draw more effectively on work not only in information, communication, and the social sciences, but also in law, the humanities, computer sciences, and other relevant areas?
- How can research networks best take account of diverse competing and complementary interests and perspectives of civil society as well as government, business and trans-national, non-governmental organizations.
- What are the salient international differences in the organization or capacity relevant to this emerging field, and how generalizable or extensible are these various models of practice?
- How can the social sciences help technical designers and engineers to understand and respond to the unpredictable nature of outcomes associated with a mix of convergent technologies as pervasive, complex and rapidly changing as ICTs?
- Which ideas are most likely to be amenable to scaling-up from the core of a new curriculum for multidisciplinary academic research and teaching to a worldwide programme of activity?

Structure of the Workshop

The workshop will be held on 2-4 February 2006 at the OII in Oxford. It will start in the late afternoon of the 2nd with a panel discussion open to the public. A full-day core workshop for about two dozen specially invited participants will be held on the 3rd, concluding with a dinner for participants. On Saturday, February 4th, the final session will be held in the morning, focussing on drawing points of summary and conclusion as well as identifying follow-up activities, ending with lunch for all participants. The organizers will invite to the workshop prominent academics in the social sciences, representing a range of approaches to organizing the study of ICTs, and a number of influential figures from industry, policy communities, civil society and academics from relevant disciplines outside the social sciences.

Invited participants to the core workshop will be asked to prepare brief (1–5 page) position papers on the future of the field, addressing the institutional and thematic innovations or other aspects of the workshop questions that they believe to be most critical. The papers will be circulated in advance to workshop participants and used by the convenors to organize the workshop's agenda. These papers and the discussions at the workshop will be used to draft a discussion paper that summarizes the issues for a larger audience. Other possible follow-up activities will be considered, such as developing more substantial papers on the future of the field.

The Convenors

The workshop is organized jointly by the University of Oxford's OII, a world centre for the multidisciplinary study of the Internet and society (www.oii.ox.ac.uk), and the SSRC, an independent, not-for-profit research organization based in New York (www.ssrc.org). It is being convened by Bill Dutton, Director of the OII, and Craig Calhoun, President of the SSRC.

The workshop reflects the OII's distinctive focus on understanding the social dynamics shaping, and being shaped by, the Internet and related ICTs. The Institute will use insights gained from the event to help refine its proposal for a new Ph.D. post-graduate programme at the University of Oxford.

The SSRC views this workshop as part of its effort to facilitate more, stronger, and more-engaged research at the intersection of technology, media, and the public sphere.

Funding for the Workshop

Initial funding has been underwritten by the OII and the SSRC with support from the Ford Foundation's Media, Arts and Culture unit. The convenors are seeking further sponsorship to enable the workshop to be as international as possible, with specific emphasis on participation from developing and emerging economies. In-kind support from other research and teaching institutions concerned about the future of this rapidly growing multidisciplinary field will also be welcomed.