Johannes Walter

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Education

Karlsruhe Institute of Technology (KIT)   *May 2022 – present*
Ph.D. in Economics

Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)   *Sep 2022 – Dec 2022*
Visiting Ph.D. Student

University of Cologne   *Oct 2015 – Nov 2018*
M.Sc. Economics
Semester abroad: Durham University, UK.

University of Passau   *Oct 2011 – Jun 2015*
B.A. Governance and Public Policy
Semester abroad: Charles University, Prague.

Research Interests

Digital Economics; Behavioral and Experimental Economics; Economics of AI.

Research Papers

Job Market Paper

- **Using AI Persuasion to Reduce Political Polarization**
Rising political polarization generates significant negative externalities for democratic institutions and economic stability, yet scalable interventions to reduce polarization remain scarce. In this paper, I study whether AI chatbots can reduce political polarization. In two preregistered online RCTs with representative U.S. samples, I find that AI significantly reduces polarization on the Ukraine war and immigration policy. In Experiment 1, AI reduced polarization by 20 percentage points, with effects persisting for one month. Experiment 2 pits AI against incentivized human persuaders and static text. I find no significant difference in effectiveness: all three reduced polarization by roughly 10 percentage points. While AI conversations were rated as more enjoyable, mechanism analysis reveals that persuasion is driven by learning and trust, not enjoyment. These results demonstrate AI's scalable persuasive power, highlighting its dual-use potential: it can be deployed to effectively reduce polarization, but also poses risks of misuse.

Working Papers

- **Advised by an Algorithm** (with Jan Biermann and John Horton)
A 2×2 dot-guessing task introduces a biased algorithmic recommendation and orthogonally varies a bias explanation and outcome feedback to examine calibration, learning, and reliance on advice.

- **Testing Novelty Incentives in Human Red Teaming** (with Dominik Rehse and Sebastian Valet)
A market-style red-teaming platform and preregistered experiments pay for novelty-weighted harm using embedding-based scoring to test how incentive design shapes adversarial inputs and auditing efficiency. (Funded by the Baden-Württemberg Foundation)

Work in Progress

- **The Effect of AI on the Demand for Human Expertise**
  Observational analysis using 100,000+ users around ChatGPT adoption to study the effect of AI adoption on the probability of visiting human expertise websites, like Wikipedia or Stack Overflow.

- **Automated Misinformation Correction on Social Media**
  Online experiment testing the feasibility and effects of AI-generated fact-check replies within threads by randomizing correction presence/style and measuring perceptions and reply behavior.

Policy Publications

- **Walter, J. (2024).** *Human oversight done right: The AI Act should use humans to monitor AI only when effective.* ZEW Policy Brief. Available here.

- **Rehse, D.; Valet, S.; Walter, J. (2024).** *Using Market Design to Improve Red Teaming of Generative AI Models.* ZEW Policy Brief. Available here.

Research Experience

ZEW – Leibniz Centre for European Economic Research, Mannheim *May 2019 – present*
Researcher, Digital Economy Unit

Student Trainee, Weber Shandwick (Analytics), Cologne *Apr 2017 – Jul 2018*
Developed a statistical model to assess causal effects of women's university degree choices.

Student Research Assistant, Univ. of Passau (Chair of Microeconomics) *Oct 2014 – Apr 2015*
Tutor, Labour Market Economics
Instructor, Microeconomics *Repetitorium* (exam preparation)

Selected Presentations & Media

Conference/workshop presentations: EARIE (2025), Munich Summer Institute (2025), TSE Digital Economics Workshop (2025), Verein für Socialpolitik (2024, 2025), IBEO Digital Economics (2024), ICT Conference (2024), ASFEE (2022, 2025), Young Economist Summit (2022).
Attended: CODE (MIT, 2022), German-American Conference (Harvard Kennedy School, 2022), ICT Conference (2020–2025).
Media Coverage & Opinion Pieces: Research covered in the *Economist*, *Politico Digital Future Daily*; opinion pieces at Table.Media (here) and Euractiv (here).

Workshops Organized

Academic

- *Red Teaming Generative AI Models*: Co-organizer; research workshop on adversarial testing and auditing of generative AI at the ML–market design intersection; Online, Sep 6, 2024.

Policy & Regulatory

- *AI Act Workshop*: Co-organizer; focus on regulatory implementation; invited stakeholders from EU institutions and academia; Brussels, Feb 2024.

- *Implementing the AI Act in Germany*: Co-organizer; participants from several Ministries and Members of Parliament; Berlin, Feb 2024.

Skills

Programming and tools: Python (pandas, scikit-learn, Keras, PyTorch); R (tidyverse, ggplot2, plotly); oTree / Django / JavaScript for web-based experiments; LaTeX & R Markdown; Git; SQL.
Languages: German (native); English (fluent; TOEFL 114/120), French (basic).

Extracurricular Activities

Amnesty International: Focus Group "Human Rights in the Digital Age"   *2010–present*
Talks and workshops on AI and human rights (Chaos Computer Congress (rc3), Digitale Woche Kiel, University of Mainz; internal trainings for Amnesty Germany).

Improvisational theatre: Member/performer in groups in Passau, Cologne, Mannheim, and Stuttgart.

References

Prof. Dr. Adrian Hillenbrand	**Prof. Erik Snowberg**	**Prof. Dr. Irene Bertschek**
(Main Advisor)	(Co-Advisor)	ZEW Mannheim &
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