



## PROFILE

# Interview with Alexander Benlian on the “Center Responsible Digitality” (ZEVEDI, [www.zevedi.de](http://www.zevedi.de))

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Members of the BISE community actively engage in non-university digital institutes in Germany. In this interview series, we provide an overview of these activities. The Weizenbaum Institute was featured in an interview with Christoph Neuberger in issue 5/2023 of BISE, and the bidt was presented in a recent interview with Thomas Hess. We continue this series with an interview with Alexander Benlian about ZEVEDI.

Alexander Benlian is Professor of Information Systems and E-Services at Technical University of Darmstadt (TU Darmstadt). Alexander is a principal investigator of ZEVEDI (<https://www.zevedi.de>), hessian.AI (<https://hessian.ai>), and ATHENE (<https://www.athene-center.de>). He serves as Senior Editor at the European Journal of Information Systems, Associate Editor at Information Systems Research, and Department Editor at BISE. His research focuses on algorithmic management, digital transformation of organizations, and human-AI collaboration.

**BISE:** I've heard of ZEDEVI, but honestly, I don't know any details. What is ZEVEDI?

**Alexander:** ZEVEDI, the Centre Responsible Digitality ([www.zevedi.de](http://www.zevedi.de)), is a unique interdisciplinary research network that brings together analytical and application-oriented expertise on the ethical, legal, and societal dimensions of digital transformation. Its mission goes beyond observing digital change: it is dedicated to critically reflecting on and actively shaping this transformation in a way that upholds democratic values, fundamental rights, and the public good.

What sets ZEVEDI apart in the German research landscape is its explicit and consistent normative orientation, especially in the domains of data, algorithms, and AI. While other research institutions in Germany often emphasize broad technological and economic development or focus on long-term, values-based foundational research on digitalization and society, ZEVEDI is uniquely focused on anchoring responsibility as a guiding principle in the design, governance, and use of digital technologies. Its work is deeply rooted in legal and ethical inquiry, complemented by perspectives from information systems, economics, political science, and computer science.

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ZEVEDI's work extends beyond academic discourse. Its mission explicitly targets three spheres of influence: science, public policy, and the economy. In this sense, ZEVEDI is not just a think tank. I would consider it a design lab for responsible digitality, committed to developing both critical reflection and practical solutions.

**BISE:** One crucial aspect concerns the funding: How is ZEVEDI financed?

**Alexander:** ZEVEDI is primarily funded by the State of Hesse's Ministry for Digital Strategy and Innovation, which provides both base funding and project-based resources. In parallel, ZEVEDI actively positions itself as a trusted research partner in national and international research proposal frameworks. Its scholars are involved in acquiring and implementing externally funded collaborative projects, which not only broaden the scope of its activities but also sharpen ZEVEDI's research profile in key areas of responsible digitalization. ZEVEDI also strongly encourages follow-up research. Many of its project-based initiatives are designed to transition into larger-scale funding programs, such as LOEWE, the German Research Foundation (DFG), or relevant federal ministry programs, ensuring both continuity and long-term impact.

**BISE:** How is ZEVEDI organized? Which disciplines are involved?

**Alexander:** ZEVEDI was founded in 2019 as an interdisciplinary research and competence network, initiated and funded by the State of Hesse. It operates virtually and coordinates researchers from all Hessian universities and several universities of applied sciences. Its organizational model is deliberately agile and distributed, reflecting the complexity and dynamism of digital transformation itself.

At the heart of ZEVEDI are self-organized, interdisciplinary project groups that focus on pressing societal and technological issues—such as Responsible Algorithmic Decision-Making in the Workplace, Data Sovereignty, or Digital Governance. These groups are open to researchers from a wide range of disciplines and typically bring together legal scholars, ethicists, computer scientists, economists, political scientists, and BISE/IS researchers.

BISE scholars often play a leading role in these groups, as the discipline is uniquely positioned to bridge technical expertise with economic and organizational understanding. BISE researchers not only grasp the architecture and functionality of digital systems but are also able to analyze their implications for business processes and societal structures. These competencies complement and enrich the legal and ethical perspectives in the project groups, enabling a more holistic and solution-oriented approach to responsible digital transformation.

In addition to the longer-term project groups, ZEVEDI also supports ad hoc and externally funded projects on time-sensitive topics, such as data trusteeships, Gaia-X

integration, and token-based sustainability systems. All of these are coordinated by a central scientific and administrative office housed at TU Darmstadt, which also supports communication, events, and transfer activities.

This flexible and collaborative structure allows ZEVEDI to respond quickly to emerging developments in digitalization while ensuring that each topic is examined through multiple disciplinary lenses. This multi-perspective approach is crucial to ZEVEDI's mission of shaping digitality in a responsible, democratic, and inclusive way.

**BISE:** Why is an interdisciplinary structure important for ZEVEDI?

**Alexander:** Because the challenges of digital transformation are inherently multi-dimensional and value-laden, they cannot be addressed effectively within disciplinary silos. Technologies such as AI are not neutral tools; they are deeply embedded in social, legal, ethical, and economic contexts. They raise fundamental ethical concerns, such as fairness, transparency, and human autonomy; they trigger complex legal questions around data protection, liability, and algorithmic accountability—particularly in light of emerging regulations like the EU AI Act; and they come with significant organizational and economic implications, affecting business models, decision structures, and the distribution of responsibilities in both private and public sectors.

At ZEVEDI, the guiding idea is that meeting these challenges requires more than parallel expert opinions. What's needed is a genuinely integrative, interdisciplinary approach, where researchers from diverse domains collaborate from the ground up—not only to analyze problems but to co-develop responsible and actionable solutions. That's why each ZEVEDI project group is structured to combine normative, legal, technical, and economic perspectives from the outset.

Take the example of AI governance: it's not sufficient to design a technically robust system. It must also comply with legal standards, align with ethical values, and work in real-world organizational settings. ZEVEDI's structure ensures that these dimensions are not treated sequentially or in isolation, but jointly and iteratively, so that legal norms, ethical principles, and empirical realities in business and society inform each other throughout the research process.

This model not only improves the quality and legitimacy of research findings but also enables transferable outcomes (e.g., frameworks, design principles, or policy recommendations) that are well-grounded, actionable, and normatively defensible. That is the core strength of ZEVEDI's interdisciplinary structure: it enables scholars to think and act across boundaries to shape digitalization responsibly and effectively.

**BISE:** What kind of opportunities does ZEVEDI's normative focus offer for BISE scholars?

**Alexander:** ZEVEDI's explicit normative commitment creates a unique opportunity for BISE scholars, particularly those rooted in the design science tradition, to make a meaningful contribution. While ZEVEDI brings together multiple disciplines, BISE researchers occupy a crucial bridging role. Our discipline combines technical understanding with organizational and socio-economic insight, and we are trained to work at the intersection of what is technically feasible, economically viable, and socially desirable. In this context, the design science mindset is a natural fit. Many ZEVEDI projects go beyond analysis and critique. They develop artifacts in the form of design principles, frameworks, prototypes, governance mechanisms, or digital tools aimed at shaping responsible digital practices. For instance, in the Responsible Algorithmic Decision-Making project group, we have not only analyzed how algorithmic systems affect human autonomy at work but also have co-created design recommendations and interventions that organizations can apply in practice.

What's powerful about ZEVEDI is that it encourages researchers to engage in value-driven design (Spiekermann et al. 2022)—to co-develop sociotechnical solutions that align with human rights, regulatory frameworks, and ethical values. It supports the kind of purposeful, impact-oriented design science that many in the BISE community strive for but often struggle to incorporate into broader societal debates.

**BISE:** How successful has ZEVEDI's model been so far?

**Alexander:** ZEVEDI's model has proven highly effective in a relatively short time. Since its founding just six years ago, it has established itself as a recognized platform for interdisciplinary research, public dialogue, and policy engagement regarding responsible digital transformation. Its success is evident in both academic impact and societal visibility.

In terms of academia, this journal has published several widely cited discussion papers co-authored by ZEVEDI research groups with significant contributions from BISE scholars (e.g., Bartsch et al. 2025; Pfeiffer et al. 2023; Söllner et al. 2025). These and other contributions have helped shape critical debates on topics such as governing high-risk AI in healthcare and credit scoring, ensuring algorithmic fairness, and designing the responsible use of generative AI in the workplace.

Beyond publications, ZEVEDI has launched a successful science communication format—the podcast Digitalgespräch (<https://zevedi.de/digitalgespraech>)—and regularly hosts workshops, conferences, and policy dialogues, often in collaboration with unions, industry partners, and public institutions. Its flexible structure and ad

hoc capability allow it to respond quickly to emerging topics, such as data trusteeships or the digital euro. Of course, the wide range of issues it addresses presents coordination challenges. But this thematic breadth is also a strength. It reflects ZEVEDI's adaptive, open, and responsive model, which enables it to form new project groups quickly and maintain relevance in a rapidly evolving digital landscape.

**BISE:** You've been engaged in digital transformation research for many years. How has your involvement with ZEVEDI shaped your thinking and opened up new research directions?

**Alexander:** My involvement with ZEVEDI has had a profound influence on my research. It has broadened my intellectual horizon, sharpened my thinking across normative, legal, and societal dimensions, and opened up entirely new research pathways that I might not have pursued otherwise.

Working in this interdisciplinary environment has helped me see digital transformation not merely as a sequence of technological or organizational innovations, but as a tectonic, paradigmatic shift that reaches deep into the organizational DNA. We are witnessing the rise of autonomous, data-driven, and continuously reconfigurable systems that are fundamentally reshaping how decisions are made, how accountability is structured, and how human agency is exercised.

This transformation is far more than technical or economic. It represents a new logic of digital coordination and control. Platforms redraw market boundaries and concentrate power through network effects. Algorithmic management systems apply similar logics within organizations by translating human behavior into data and automated decision-making rules. Recommendation systems, in turn, shape attention and choice architectures in subtle but far-reaching ways. Together, these mechanisms create new, often opaque forms of governance and influence that challenge traditional models of oversight and accountability, producing asymmetries between individuals, organizations, and technology providers.

As researchers, we can no longer treat digital transformation as a purely operational or efficiency-driven process. The fundamental shift lies in the entanglement of the digital with the normative—issues such as fairness, transparency, literacy, and responsibility are no longer peripheral but must be at the core of how we design, implement, and govern digital systems in organizations (Benlian and Pinski 2025; Mikalef et al. 2025). This expanded understanding has also shaped my recent work on digital transformation strategies, where we propose a revised and broader framework that accounts for these deeper, structural, and identity-related shifts (Wurm et al. 2025).

**BISE:** Thank you very much. That was really insightful. I believe many in the BISE community now have a clearer understanding of ZEVEDI.

**Funding** Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

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