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EDITORIAL

Practicing Sovereignty

Interventions for Open Digital Futures

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“Things don’t always go as planned.” Those were the opening words of our invitation to the symposium we had organized for mid-March 2020, “Practicing Sovereignty – Means of Digital Involvement.” The invitation concluded with the promise to provide “a stage for different forms of civic engagement that leverage digital aspects to bolster democratic values, addressing the interrelations between digital involvement, inequality and sovereignty.” Of course, things did not go as planned. It was in mid-March 2020 that European countries first introduced lockdown measures to counter the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, the day before the scheduled opening on March 12 (we had just finished setting up the exhibition accompanying the symposium), the Berlin state senate decided to cancel all public academic events.

We subsequently witnessed how the pandemic condition reorganized everyday life by introducing new routines structured by social distancing, contact tracing, upheavals in retail (between sanitation and “contactless” home delivery), remote work facilitated by video calls and collaborative online tools, and medical care remote diagnosis. Many of these new routines were enabled by digital technologies and their associated (and novel) cultural etiquettes.

Not wanting to abandon our original plan to investigate the potential—and limitations – of the concept of digital sovereignty for research on and prac-

tices of participation in the digital sphere, we decided to use our intersecting remote working lives to develop a book publication related to those topics. Edited by Bianca Herlo, Daniel Irrgang, Gesche Joost, and Andreas Unteidig, the collected volume was published, open-access, in January 2022 (Bielefeld: Transcript). *Practicing Sovereignty* assembles the researchers, designers, and artists that would have been part of our symposium – as well as representatives of additional positions – to map possibilities of *Digital Involvement in Times of Crises*, the edition’s subtitle.

After the publication of the volume and with the gradual lifting of pandemic limitations on events “in real life” (a term that had attained new significance, and promises, in the preceding two years), we finally got the opportunity to stage public debate around the positions collected. However, this time, we had the great privilege to do so within a bigger framework. With a team of committed colleagues and collaborators, we organized the Weizenbaum Institute’s annual Weizenbaum Conference, which took place on June 9 and 10, 2022, around the concept “Practicing Sovereignty: Interventions for Open Digital Futures.” This issue of the *Weizenbaum Journal of the Digital Society* is dedicated to the conference and collects four research papers based on contributions at the conference.¹

To situate these papers, it is worth considering how we approach the complex notion of “digital sovereignty.” Hotly debated in terms of its implied potentials and also its shortcomings, the term captures diverse concepts that negotiate competencies, duties, and rights in the digital age. Questions of trust, confidence, and competence (intensified by the pandemic) contextualize digital sovereignty in a fundamental reconsideration of what has been known as democratic principles, civil rights, and national identity.

The premises dictating how information and communication technology impacts societies worldwide have changed. Instead of further indulging in collective imaginaries of better, digitally mediated futures, today’s narratives are dominated by concerns about digital transformation. Issues such as the increasing vulnerability and manipulation of individuals, the violation of fundamental rights through mass surveillance, and the digitally mediated undermining of democratic institutions and practices have become increasingly threatening to an open and free society. The papers presented here offer insights that provide a fruitful perspective on digital sovereignty in terms of different practices and their challenges both within academia and beyond. They not only analyze and emphasize existing imbalances but also offer concrete approaches to productively incorporate the knowledge generated into practice.

“Making Arguments with Data” by Selena Savic and Yann Patrick Martins discusses an approach to data and networks that enables a situated critique of

¹ The conference proceedings (with further papers) can be accessed [here](#).

datafication. The paper provides insight into the complexities of practicing ethics from a critical feminist perspective in the context of large datasets, combining technical and artistic perspectives on machine learning models. The authors unfold forms of structural violence in the applications of ML models and contemplate the possibilities for addressing these forms. Informed by critical data studies, the paper positions itself in contrast to both techno-solutionist narratives and equally unhelpful universalizing critiques of technology. By exploring a community-run digital archive of radio signals, working with images and visualizations, and developing a technical framework that comprises a digital tool for data processing and analysis, the authors show “how questionable it is to fully render such technology truly open and democratic.”

In “Reclaiming (Parts of) Scholarly Communication,” Marcel Wrzesinski considers community-driven open-access publishing that challenges the prevailing commercialization of academic publishing. He elaborates on how, despite the significant role of the former, their continued existence is under threat. This prompts him to question the governance principles of community-driven open-access journals and their modes of advocacy for equitable and resilient open access. For Wrzesinski, these journals contribute to the development of an all-encompassing and diverse publishing ecosystem. He strongly advocates for community-driven publishing as an alternative means of distributing scholarly knowledge, emphasizing the need for better strategies and funding structures, including suggestions for practices that might strengthen the infrastructural support for fair and independent scholarly publishing.

A central pillar of the concept of digital sovereignty is informational sovereignty. Against the backdrop of disinformation, fake news, and deepfakes posing serious threats to democratic societies, “Defending Informational Sovereignty by Detecting Deepfakes?” discusses viable responses to new cyberthreats, particularly deepfake technology. The authors Milan Tahraoui, Christian Krätzer, Jana Dittmann, and Hartmut Aden investigate the implications of an AI-based detector for deepfakes within the context of the European discourse on informational digital sovereignty in a global environment. Given the increased manipulative potential of video and audio-based content spreading, the paper concentrates on AI-based deepfake detection, particularly legal questions concerning digital identity verification and remote ID proofing and the EU’s regulatory reactions. Ultimately, the paper positions deepfake detection as one tool among many for mitigating threats from mis- and disinformation.

In “Algorithmic Governmentality, Digital Sovereignty, and Agency Affordances,” Ana Pop Stefanija and Jo Pierson discuss requirements for the digital sovereignty of individuals, framed here as agency, control, autonomy, authority, self-reflection, and self-determination, as well as the socio-technical conditions that should enable that sovereignty. Particularly in terms of platform algorithms, the paper conceptualizes the notion of agency affordances as a tool for algorithmic sovereignty that emerges from empirical research. The

authors frame knowing and understanding how algorithmic systems govern user behaviour as a key competence to develop on the path towards reclaiming power and agency. The paper argues that agency affordances programmed at an infrastructure level enhance the possibilities for action through the ability to act, which can be inscribed at an interface level or enabled via underlying politics and societal norms, among other means.

These papers provide a glimpse of the transdisciplinarity demonstrated by the 2022 Weizenbaum Conference, which involved scholars, artists, activists, and human rights advocates in discussions surrounding the development of transformative practices and spaces to foster digital involvement. Grassroots initiatives, community projects, and participatory practices in design, art, and activism appear as collective counter strategies and bottom-up interventions that challenge the normalization of inequalities and insecurities and push back against threats to an open society. These can lay the groundwork for new forms of agency, both in the sense of collective activities and in terms of public education and experimentation, ultimately establishing novel foundations for practicing sovereignty.

The research papers in this volume are followed by two contributions to our Voices of the Networked Society section. Both adopt and discuss the topic of digital sovereignty from a critical perspective.

Julia Pohle uses her contribution – The European Strive for Digital Sovereignty: Have We Lost Our Belief in the Global Promises of the “Free and Open Internet”? – to assess the motivations for the European digital sovereignty debate within their historical and political context. She does so by linking digital sovereignty claims to not only the different types of dependencies that shape our digital world but also particular shifts in the belief system that shapes our perception of global digital connectivity.

Meanwhile, Ulises Mejias’ contribution, “Sovereignty and its Outsiders,” problematizes sovereignty as a project for national states. While the common use of the digital sovereignty concept in academic and civil society discussions has focused on values like individual and collective self-determination and human rights, actual political developments render a different perspective. For Mejias, digital sovereignty policies are dominated by the interests of the Global North and follow a path characterized by colonialism and exclusion.

We wish you an inspiring reading.