Report of the 9th Käte Hamburger Dialogue

Past the Silicon Valley: Towards a European Digital Public Sphere

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Organized in cooperation with the Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities (KWI), the 9th Käte Hamburger Dialogue was part of the ‘Praxis Europa Meeting of 2017’ that took place between 20th and 22nd October 2017. The Dialogue featured Emmanuel Alloa, Research Leader at the School for Humanities and Social Sciences, University of St. Gallen; Jean-Baptiste Soufron, IT lawyer and partner at FWPA Avocats, Paris, and former General Secretary of the French Digital Council (CNNum). Constanze Kurz, Spokesperson of the Chaos Computer Club (CCC) in Berlin and Prof. Dr Dirk Messner, Co-director of the Centre for Global Cooperation Research and Director of the German Development Institute, discussed their contributions. Prof. Dr Claus Leggewie, Ludwig Börne Chair at the University of Gießen moderated the discussion.

The Dialogue addressed the questions of digital public sphere: What kind of ‘digital public sphere’ is emerging in Europe, and what role could or should ‘Europe’ play in this regard?; Does Europe have the force to imagine convincing alternatives?

Construction of a European Digital Public Sphere: Materializing the Radical Change of Mind-sets

As the first input, Alloa gave comprehensive background on what a digital public platform is. Based on this definition, he outlined critical tasks for the building of a European digital sphere. His contribution highlighted the ‘process’ character of digitalization, the important separation between digital content and infrastructure, the need for transparency of communication medium and the necessity for perspective on the commons over individuals in constructing and managing the European digital public sphere.

In his explanation, Alloa emphasized that ‘there is no digitality…there is only digitalization’. This process disregards meanings as it produces a form of universal equivalence; everything is of equal value. Like in the history of infrastructural transformations, the emergence of digital public sphere also needs to be investigated at the level of concrete practicality. To explain this point, Alloa described how politics is normally separated into two facets: content and infrastructure. Most of the attempts to improve political elements such as participation often focus on the content facet, e.g. trying to enhance the number of participants. Yet, exclusion also takes place at the level of platform construction from which many participants are left out. The correct perception towards the importance of both content and infrastructures is pivotal. Misleading metaphors for digital platform and infrastructure such as ‘cloud’ could falsely suggest that content or data is accessible with no cost. In addition to the recognition that both facets exist and matter, Alloa said, they are intertwined. Far more than just cable wires, internet providers shape the very
topography any virtual space may take. The coders for online existence and for the use of digital commons could and do heavily interfere with how the content develops. In the words of Lawrence Lessing, code is law. And in the age of digitalization, code-makers have become the new lawmakers.

Alloa moved on to address governance forms in the digital world which he compared to the normative theories of the public sphere. Criticizing that Habermas’s strategic and instrumental use of communication concepts fall short to accommodate data exchange to date, Alloa proposed the computational approach to communication in which data as content become less meaningful. His proposal based on the fact that nowadays, in the face of “Internet of Things” that increases machine-to-machine interaction, communicational systems contain only an infinitely small portion of data exchange that is directly relevant for human interaction.

With less than one percent of collected data being analyzed, the very meaning of data communication is yet to be fully anticipated. Instead of content or data, disjunction of forming content, of syntax and semantics will become more influential. Transparency of communication medium is, therefore, of the essence, considering that the current sender-receiver model is insufficient to describe the importance of the digital world.

At present, digital communication medium is shaped by the grand dominance of Silicon Valley ideology which represents a very specific interpretation of a deeply-rooted modernist idea. Equality or a horizontal relationship is realized no longer through spatial means as in making space for more individuals or singularities. Instead, individuality and contextuality are disregarded. Algorithms create a situation of general equivalence, which allows for each and everything to be taken into account. Nonetheless, it is false to assume that the digital world is inherently liberating. Freedom is not per se part of its genetic code. Examples from ‘smartification of cities’ projects show how public-private partnership relies on open data for managing the public space. With this elaboration, Alloa made clear that commercial intervention as well takes place on the equal platform.

Alloa then connected his presented arguments to Europe. European Commissioners recognized securing data privacy to all European citizens—European data sovereignty—as part of their responsibility. To fulfil this critical task of building a European digital sphere, those involved need to be reminded that the management of the commons is the beginning of any political entity. It is equivalent to the use of woods or pastureland. Instead of the focus on individuality, the key questions for the management of a European digital public sphere are how to shape digital commons in the 21st century and what to do with these commons today.
Concluding his remarks on a positive note, Alloa reminded the audience of an ability which is singular to humankind and not shared by machines. ‘They can acknowledge us and register us in other ways, but…they don’t judge us’. This faculty of judgement is of crucial importance because it could lead to a collective faculty of judgement. And it is this judgement, Alloa noted, that machines lack.

Past the Silicon Valley: Competing for Epistemological Authority

Soufron offered a new perspective on the role of Silicon Valley in shaping and affecting public sphere. Departing from its original roots, Silicon Valley focuses less on scholarship and academic knowledge but rather concentrates on commercial purpose of its existence. EU institutions should manage the problem of epistemological ambiguity that the digitalization has brought with it. Building on this, he made suggestions on how EU institutions could make necessary interventions.

In his extensive elaboration, Soufron guided the audience through the development of Silicon Valley from its origin to what he called a ‘political movement’ from which a discussion on digital public sphere needs to move beyond. Inspired by its root from “The Mother of All Demos”, Silicon Valley serves as a model for start-ups and modern corporate governance with positive ventures often associated with it. Apparent culture of equality, simplicity and efficiency is one of many implicit ideologies. However, Soufron observed that the ‘movement’ has turned into an economic model with less emphasis on social justice and public service when commercial purpose of its existence overshadows its self-proclaimed contribution to the betterment of society.

For Europe to move past the Silicon Valley, Soufron highlighted the role of EU institutions and the genuine challenge in protecting the European digital public sphere. Changing rules is far from what Soufron suggested the EU institutions are truly up against. EU bodies are in fact competing for epistemological authority over the minds and behaviours of EU digital public sphere users. As of today, both parliamentarians and citizens have more or less equal access to digital platforms for information based on which they make decisions. However, most EU citizens rely on Silicon Valley platforms to get their news that can be manipulated also for commercial purposes. For their existence, private companies’ main objective is to win arguments and users’ minds with less consideration given to values they claim to pursue such as democracy or equality. As of today, some public services (e.g. postal office) are being sidelined to become irrelevant because other equivalent digital services (e.g. e-mail) are seen to fulfil the same purpose more efficiently and to be of lower cost. Soufron questioned whether this example of unnoticed transfer of public service to private sector in other areas is preferred by EU citizens.
While Soufron praised the first successes of the EU institutions passing the new regulations on privacy, data-totality and algorithm-transparency, he noted that the task more important than imposing regulation is to recognize the threatened democratic values of the digital public sphere and to defend them. Additionally, he suggested policy-learning from other countries—with or without democracy—for fresh perspectives and perceptions on the problem.

Technology as an Open Process and the Knowledge Deficiency of the Governing Bodies

Commenting on what both speakers had elaborated, Kurz disagreed with the underlying fear of algorithms, noting that the digital public sphere is less dependent on Silicon Valley companies than what the speakers had portrayed and what is generally assumed. She is convinced of the technology's future in which digitalization is an open process and decentralized. From Europe to the US, Latin America and Asia, the spokesperson for the CCC recognized movements that are less connected to data-driven economy.

From his point of view as a member of German Advisory Council on Global Change, Messner admitted the challenges of insufficient knowledge among governing and advisory bodies on the topic of digitalization and on how the digital world is connected to sustainability. Far more than a sector, the digital is a big shift that affects the whole society and economy. Digitalization means the transmission of cognitive capabilities from human to technical systems. While this implies an exponential curve of learning systems and opens up incredible opportunities, Messner questioned how the shift, for example, would affect competitive advantages of parliaments compared to technical systems or how the governing bodies with their knowledge shortcomings could effectively govern the digital public sphere. He highlighted that the governing bodies have a window of approximately 20 years to shape the governance of this new dynamic before irreversible trends build their path-dependencies.

Discussion: The Role of Politics and Digitalization in History

In the Q&A session, discussion revolved around possibilities and advantages of a European digital public sphere. One audience member compared digitalization to other historical developments of technology shift, while others focused on the role which politics play in the digitalization process and which actors will be included and become new political actors. In addition, the extent to which the topic actually represents a new development was critically questioned. In this sense, the current debate on digitalization was compared with the philosophy of science of the past century.