

# Statecraft, Sovereignty & Digital Government

## Symposium Programme

16-17 April 2026 · Goldsmiths, University of London

Campus map: [gold.ac.uk/campus-map/](https://gold.ac.uk/campus-map/)

	Room 1 (PSH LG01)	Room 2 (PSH 326)	Room 3 (PSH 302)
<b>THURSDAY, 16 APRIL</b>			
<b>09:00</b>	<i>Registration and Coffee Lower Ground Foyer, outside PSH LG01</i>		
<b>09:30</b>	<i>Opening Remarks — PSH LG01</i>		
<b>09:50</b>	<i>Keynote Session 1: Cecilia Rikap &amp; Paolo Gerbaudo — respondent: Lina Dencik — PSH LG01</i>		
<b>11:30-13:00</b>	<b>Digital Sovereignty in Theory &amp; Practice I (chair: Irina)</b>	<b>AI in the State, Expertise &amp; Legitimacy I (chair: Ruth G)</b>	<b>Infrastructural Power &amp; Politics I (chair: Jess)</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Janine Patricia Santos</li><li>Sandeep Mertia</li><li>Frederik Schade</li><li>Ida Marie Iversen &amp; Maja Hvarregaard</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Alexander Campolo</li><li>Anuradha Sajjanhar</li><li>Becky Kazansky &amp; Lina Dencik</li><li>Siddharth de Souza, Emrys Schoemaker &amp; Thomas Kirk</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Bastian Manteuffel</li><li>Julia Valeska Schröder</li><li>Gavin Duffy</li><li>Nika Mahnic</li></ul>
<b>13:00</b>	<i>Lunch</i>		
<b>14:20-15:50</b>	<b>Digital Sovereignty: Alternatives &amp; Lock-ins I (chair: Irina)</b>	<b>AI in the State, Expertise &amp; Legitimacy II (chair: Gavin)</b>	<b>Authoritarian Currents I (chair: Nate)</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Roser Pujads &amp; Daniel Curto-Millet</li><li>Lasse Uhrskov Kristensen</li><li>Emilie Mørch Groth</li><li>Gianmarco Cristofari</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Chiara Poletti</li><li>David Moats</li><li>Freyja van den Boom</li><li>Dominik Piétron</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Dmitry Kuznetsov &amp; Alex Gekker</li><li>Gregory Asmolov</li><li>Roei Davidson</li><li>Roger Burrows &amp; Nicholas Gane</li></ul>
<b>16:10-17:40</b>	<b>Digital Sovereignty in Theory &amp; Practice II (chair: Rob)</b>	<b>Digital Transformation I (chair: Chiara P)</b>	<b>Authoritarian Currents II (chair: David M)</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Joao C. Magalhaes &amp; Edemilson Parana</li><li>Marguerite Borelli</li><li>Clara Iglesias Keller &amp; Julia Pohle</li><li>Samuele Fratini</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Jess Brand</li><li>Petter Falk</li><li>Krystian Lukasik &amp; Renata Wloch</li><li>Nathan Davies</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Lianrui Jia &amp; Ting Luo</li><li>Ruth Garland</li><li>Anirban Mukhopadhyay</li></ul>
<b>17:40</b>	<i>Drinks at The Rose</i>		
<b>FRIDAY, 17 APRIL</b>			
<b>09:30-11:00</b>	<b>Infrastructural Power &amp; Politics II (chair: Dang N)</b>	<b>Digital Sovereignty: Alternatives &amp; Lock-ins II (chair: Loup C)</b>	<b>Digital Transformation II (chair: Fenwick)</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Bidisha Chaudhuri &amp; Sookthi Kav</li><li>Matilde Bro</li><li>Loup Cellard &amp; Clément Marquet</li><li>Dan M. Kotliar &amp; Alex Gekker</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Oscar Arruda d'Alva, Rodrigo Santaella-Gonçalves &amp; Edemilson Parana</li><li>Eva Iris Otto, Sofie Flensburg &amp; Signe Sophus Lai</li><li>Damiano Razzoli &amp; Nicola Casucci</li><li>Pedro Burity, Rafael Grohmann, Kenzo Soares Seto &amp; Rafael De Toni</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Torjus Solheim Eckhoff</li><li>Karine Côté-Boucher &amp; Mireille Paquet</li><li>Jessamy Perriam</li><li>Margarita Boenig-Liptsin</li></ul>
<b>11:10-12:40</b>	<b>Digital Sovereignty: Alternatives &amp; Lock-ins III (chair: Nate)</b>	<b>Citizens, Users &amp; Citizenship (chair: Matt S)</b>	<b>Digital Transformation III (chair: Jess)</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Matilde Bro, Rebecca Adler-Nissen &amp; Kristin Anabel Eggeling</li><li>Dr Paloma Viejo Otero &amp; Dr Eugenia Siapera</li><li>Matt Spencer</li><li>Gro Stueland Skorpen</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Rachel Humphris &amp; Nika Mahnič</li><li>Zhou Pei</li><li>Oisín O'Brien</li><li>Keren Weitzberg, Margie Cheesman, Aaron Martin, Hanna Stoll &amp; Isadora Dullaert</li><li>James Rosenberg</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Mait Kask, Andra Siibak &amp; Maris Männiste</li><li>Sruthi Vanguri</li><li>Carina R. Nasser &amp; Mattéo Bard</li><li>Alexei Tsinovoi &amp; Ask Greve</li></ul>
<b>12:40</b>	<i>Lunch</i>		
<b>14:00</b>	<i>Final Keynotes &amp; Roundtable: Dang Nguyen &amp; Fenwick McKelvey — respondent: Rob W. Gehl — PSH LG01</i>		
<b>16:00</b>	<i>Close of the Symposium</i>		

# Statecraft, Sovereignty & Digital Government

*Abstracts by Panel*

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## Infrastructural Power & Politics I

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### **Bastian Manteuffel**

The availability of digital administrative services is routinely mobilized as an indicator for modern state-ness. In Germany, efforts to transform internal state affairs by means of digital technologies have been characterized as both institutionally and infrastructurally fragmented, with the lack of progress usually discussed as a governance problem of vertical and horizontal coordination. Rather than problematizing the implementation per se, this paper is interested in how the German case reveals how digital state-making is not a monolithic state activity but unfolds across institutional and infrastructural spaces. Drawing on an ongoing research project (2021-), this paper traces digital state-making through municipal digital building permits, digital planning, and an internal modernization project, showing how tensions on the infrastructural layer revolve around issues of translation, institutional shifts, and temporality. This paper looks at these phenomena in terms of infrastructural politics governed by uncertainty.

### **Julia Valeska Schröder**

While the ever more explicit etatization of Digital Transformation is intensified through high-tech 'GovTech', analyses of digital statecraft tend to focus on digital technologies as transformative force of the state. This contribution emphasizes the role of institutionalized digital politics for governmental technologies of Digital Transformation: the enactment of crisis narratives; the conceptualization of 'digital sovereignty' as reinterpretation of state power; as well as the operationalization of technopolitical modes. Based on an ethnographic study of the Public Innovation Lab in Berlin (CityLAB), this paper develops the concept of 'intrastatecraft' to highlight a specific programmatic shift away from technocentric approaches, characterized by craft-like 'intraventions' in infrastructural-administrative situations.

### **Gavin Duffy**

The rise of AI has resulted in increasing focus on the material infrastructure required to support AI imaginaries, particularly data centres. This raises questions around sovereignty for local communities and, in particular, for Indigenous populations in many countries whose land and water rights are often threatened by the construction of data centres. This presentation details critical AI data centre studies as part of a scoping review of this field, and presents empirical findings from the author on local resistance to data centres in London. In contrast to larger policy debates focusing on sovereignty at national or international levels, this presentation addresses the question of what sovereignty means in an age of AI at a local, community level, generating a non-digital-centric idea of digital governance using the framework of AI justice.

### **Nika Mahnic**

This paper addresses the enmeshment of the public and the private with reference to the 'governmental sphere', composed of public and private actors collaborating on the ways of governing the state. Reading digital transformation through Brett Christophers's forms of rentierism, the paper illuminates the various forms of rent pursuant to the building of the British 'programmable infrastructures'. Building on interdisciplinary secondary literature, grey literature and archival records, the paper expands Dencik's concept of the 'tenant state', contributing the concept of 'the indentured state' — a political formation and a condition referring to the state of being captive to digital transformation, contracts, workfare and indebtedness.

## Infrastructural Power & Politics II

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## **Bidisha Chaudhuri & Sookthi Kav**

Digital Public Infrastructures (DPIs) are the new buzzword in international policy circles, typically including state-initiated large-scale infrastructural projects meant to operate at societal scale. This paper explores the case of the Unified Payment System (UPI) of India to examine the specific nature of state-market collaboration. Drawing on content analysis of policy documents, media reports, industry reports and qualitative interviews, the paper traces the shared vision of the infrastructure, skills and interests of the main actors involved, and the specific configuration of institutional, technological and regulatory capacities of these actors in enacting the infrastructural vision, showing how such collaboration blurs the line of what is typically considered public and/or private.

## **Matilde Bro**

This article examines how digital sovereignty in the European Union is designed and co-produced by EU institutions, member states and private consortia through public-private partnerships. Through a case study of the EU Commission's launch of the so-called AI gigafactories — public-private partnerships initiated to establish supercomputing ecosystems across five EU member states — it contributes new insights into how the processes, relations and practices of building AI infrastructure design and co-produce digital sovereignty in Europe. Drawing on STS and International Relations' infrastructural 'turn', the paper conceptualizes AI gigafactories as public-private partnerships of (geo)political infrastructures that (re)order space, authority and identity, identifying three sovereignty dilemmas of control, territorialization and membership. Empirically, the article draws on ethnographic fieldwork in Brussels combining participant observation, semi-structured interviews with EU digital policymakers and industry actors, and document analysis.

## **Loup Cellard & Clément Marquet**

Between 2018 and 2024, the American company Digital Realty constructed four data centers at the Marseille-Fos Port. This paper examines how the (mis)alignment of interests between regional state agencies and private infrastructural actors shaped the ordering of data centers and subsea telecom cables in Marseille, France. Three phases illustrate the complex relationships between the state and private actors: prior to 2021, development was driven solely by the private sector; between 2021 and 2023, the prefecture facilitated private-sector work despite local contestation; and since 2024, calls for national sovereignty have begun to influence how cables are laid and data centres integrated. The case shows how the alignment between public and private sectors is never complete, and that national sovereignty slogans struggle to fully compel local state actors to regulate infrastructural work.

## **Dan M. Kotliar & Alex Gekker**

This paper examines Israel's Project Nimbus, a \$1.2 billion national initiative to 'migrate the state' into GCP and AWS, to explore how digital sovereignty is contested, claimed, and refused by divergent publics. Drawing on discourse analysis of government documents, corporate communications, news press, and activist media, the paper traces three distinct contestations: how Google and Amazon worked to naturalise their data centres as benign through techno-nationalist imagery; how Israeli residents reframed Nimbus through securitised imaginaries as vulnerable national infrastructure; and how the #NoTechForApartheid campaign mobilised a transnational counterpublic around Nimbus as an instrument of occupation. These contestations reveal digital sovereignty as a floating signifier, claimed simultaneously by the state, local residents, and international activists.

# **AI in the State, Expertise & Legitimacy I**

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## **Alexander Campolo**

This presentation analyses the emerging political logic of calls to 'action' on AI in the UK, culminating in the Labour government's 'AI Opportunities Action Plan' presented in January 2025. Despite nostalgic references to mid-twentieth century industrial policy, contemporary reflection on AI and government operates within a transformed political context marked by new geopolitical divisions and mercantilist rivalries. The paper argues that AI makes a politicised 'claim to techné' — a privileged competence for delivering what citizens desire. This 'technopopulist' reflection speculates on AI as digital government assistants that promise to radically disintermediate service provision, constituting a direct interface between the individual citizen and the state, encoded into the parameters of machine learning models.

## **Anuradha Sajjanhar**

Artificial intelligence is no longer a speculative frontier in UK governance but an operational reality across welfare, immigration, and health. This paper develops the concept of AI as epistemic infrastructure to analyse how AI integration is reshaping foundational questions of expertise, authority, and legitimacy. The UK provides a critical case study: positioned outside the EU AI Act, the UK has adopted a pro-innovation regulatory stance while outsourcing technical capacity to private firms. Preliminary findings reveal a fragmented landscape in which AI systems are introduced without settled oversight frameworks. The paper argues that this reconfiguration carries significant implications for democratic governance, as AI systems embed normative assumptions into administrative routines, narrowing the space for deliberation and contestation.

## **Becky Kazansky & Lina Dencik**

In corporate sustainability reports, Big Tech companies characterise their AI development as a duty to respond to overwhelming societal demand — a duty that justifies renegeing on climate commitments, since AI is also framed as the primary solution to the climate crisis. National AI strategies of closely allied countries speak of an obligation for governments to 'keep up' with AI developments. This paper explores how corporate and governmental actors construct the idea of an unrelenting societal demand for AI. Based on discourse analysis of corporate sustainability reports, national AI strategy documents, and government transparency documents demonstrating the scale of Big Tech lobbying, the paper tracks how an agentic dance of duty and obligation serves to rationalise and naturalise current AI trajectories at national scales.

## **Siddharth de Souza, Emrys Schoemaker & Thomas Kirk**

Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) — primarily digital ID systems, data exchange systems and digital payment systems — has emerged as an increasingly popular approach for governments wishing to pioneer state-led digitalization projects. This paper makes two critical contributions to the emerging DPI governance field. First, it provides a landscape overview of different governance approaches to DPI from national, regional, and transnational actors. Second, drawing from experiences of working with international organizations to research and support 'multi-stakeholder' approaches to DPI governance, the paper develops and presents a typology of what DPI governance is and what kinds of future directions are possible.

# **AI in the State, Expertise & Legitimacy II**

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## **Chiara Poletti**

This contribution examines AI adoption in Welsh local government: a site where devolved governance, public service transformation, and participatory traditions intersect. Despite growing AI adoption in UK public services, the country lacks binding horizontal AI legislation. The paper asks how local AI adoption reconfigures state capacity in a devolved context and what forms of democratic oversight are feasible under real-world constraints. Wales offers a distinctive case, with its governance explicitly oriented toward public value through the Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015. The contribution presents an initial mapping of AI-related initiatives across South Wales local authorities and a synthesis of co-production and participatory governance initiatives in Welsh public services.

## **David Moats**

In 2023, OpenAI funded 10 teams worldwide to prototype scalable solutions for participation in AI development. Several of the teams involved were civic tech experts who used the opportunity to trial new techniques for digital democracy platforms, including LLM-summarised text, LLM-moderated focus groups, and interviews designed to extract participants' 'underlying values'. Many of these teams went on to embed AI-driven technologies in bespoke digital democracy software now being rolled out by governments. Drawing on Science and Technology Studies and Valuation Studies, this paper employs digital controversy analysis to study how these experiments with AI 'format' participation, asking what happens when opinions are aggregated through LLMs rather than voting, and what standard evaluation metrics mask about the process.

## **Freyja van den Boom**

As governments rush to integrate Generative AI into public services, they are not just purchasing software; they are outsourcing the power to define reality, effectively ceding digital sovereignty to corporate imaginaries. To dismantle the narratives of the AI Arms Race that justify this regulatory capture, this paper introduces the Insight Catalyst through Causal Layered Tetrad Analysis (CLTA). This novel framework interrogates the AI Race through four layers: the surface urgency of 'staying ahead' geopolitically; how proprietary GovTech creates lock-in where private terms of service functionally act as public law; the clash between techno-solutionism and democratic pluralism; and the deconstruction of the 'Genie out of the bottle' metaphor that frames corporate AI as inevitable rather than as a product of specific economic choices.

## **Dominik Piétron**

Online platforms have impacted state and municipal actors in public service areas such as housing, health, education, and mobility, who are increasingly coming into contact with private platform companies. This contribution uses a comparative field analysis of local public transport and the rental housing market in Germany to examine the structural effects of platformisation in public services. The study shows that digital public services are undergoing a double privatisation: private platform companies with profit-oriented business models are expanding into core public services, while many local authorities outsource their own public platforms to private service providers. Nevertheless, strategies for overcoming this dilemma are emerging through local and national organisations identifying shared needs and developing joint platform software.

## **Authoritarian Currents I**

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### **Dmitry Kuznetsov & Alex Gekker**

Russia's federal AI project is a prominent case study of the intersection between geopolitical pressure, frontier technological development, and state power. Adopted in 2019, it embodies a strategic logic of AI development under domestic constraints exacerbated by sanctions. As reducing strategic interdependence becomes explicit state policy, the state becomes guarantor of access to restricted resources — actively shaping domestic technology industries. The paper explores this logic through document analysis of Russia's federal AI portal (ai.gov.ru), which maps legal frameworks, ecosystem actors, R&D; coordination, and funding streams. The portal functions both as dataset and as artifact of statecraft, performing state capacity while coordinating arrangements between government and companies like Yandex and Sber.

### **Gregory Asmolov**

Disconnection and fragmentation are central to the strategies of authoritarian states seeking to maintain resilience and eliminate threats to legitimacy. The growing dominance of sovereignty as a framework for governing digital platforms can be understood as part of a broader process of authoritarian diffusion. At the same time, certain expressions of sovereignty address legitimate concerns related to socio-cultural and individual autonomy, and mitigating risks associated with the platform economy and surveillance capitalism. The paper offers a critical reflection on how AI sovereignty can be driven by authoritarian states and suggests that this reflexivity may help mitigate authoritarian diffusion in the field of AI governance, drawing on analysis of Russian narratives and documents presented by BRICS countries.

### **Roei Davidson**

This study relies on an analysis of Israeli parliament (Knesset) committee debates in 2023–2024 to consider the Israeli Information Technology industry's public intervention in the political sphere against the background of an authoritarian turn and protracted war. Senior IT industry executives participated in the Knesset constitutional affairs committee opposing government efforts to neuter judicial independence, while in another committee, IT industry actors mostly sought accommodation through financial compensation policies. The analysis suggests that the IT industry, which possesses high levels of economic and symbolic capital within a highly unequal society, structures its political interventions in a manner that protects its privileged economic position, constituting a partially missed opportunity to meaningfully reinforce liberal democracy within the Israeli polity.

## **Roger Burrows & Nicholas Gane**

This paper reconstructs the ideological formation that underpins Peter Thiel's politics of exit, exemption, and privately engineered sovereignty. It argues that Thiel's investments, writings, and alliances are held together by an 'alt-canon' drawing on René Girard, Leo Strauss, Oswald Spengler, Carl Schmitt, and Davidson and Rees-Mogg's *The Sovereign Individual*. Across sites including Zero to One, The Straussian Moment, and recent eschatological lectures, the paper shows how monopoly, jurisdictional arbitrage, cryptography, and experimental forms of governance are framed as means to relocate sovereignty into privately controlled domains. It concludes that this alt-canon tends towards authoritarian, at points fascistic, configurations in which rule-by-exception is normalised and political authority is redistributed to a narrow, computationally empowered elite.

## **Authoritarian Currents II**

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### **Lianrui Jia & Ting Luo**

Over the past three decades, China's trajectory in digital government has shifted from belated connectivity to an assertive model of digital sovereignty. This project develops a historical account of China's digital statecraft that highlights three linked transitions structured around a dynamic between different levels of government, capital markets, and rapidly growing technology companies: early 2000s foreign investment and hybrid state-industry arrangements; the expansion of powerful platform firms and regulatory formalisation; and China's AI-oriented industrial strategy reframing digital transformation as a strategic resource in global competition. Across these transitions, China has built a sovereignty-centred governance model operating through control of infrastructure, standards, content, and code.

### **Ruth Garland**

The outcomes of a longitudinal study of UK government communications from 1979 to date find that substantive and troubling long-term changes have progressively undermined the public consent essential to democracy. The Government Communications Service is internally regulated, with no enforcement mechanisms, while successive restructures have taken place without public discussion. The paper examines the misuse of WhatsApp during Covid, Rishi Sunak's use of official Treasury social media channels for personal branding, and a 2025 structural change in which the Labour government appointed a former Sun editor as Permanent Secretary for Government Communications. It argues that the government's public communication function must be transparently regulated in the public interest.

### **Anirban Mukhopadhyay**

This paper investigates the digital governance initiative launched by the government of India that mandates the pre-installation of the 'Sanchar Sathi' application on every mobile phone in India. The government's rationale hinges on ensuring citizens' cybersecurity and authenticating mobile handsets, but this paper explores how this mandatory diktat raises concerns about invasion of privacy and surveillance of free speech. Using critical discourse analysis of the Indian Telecom Cyber Security Rules (2024) and official press releases, the paper analyzes how this digital governance infrastructure poses a threat to digital democratic freedom and right to privacy, situating the 'Sanchar Saathi' application within the broader context of governmentality shaped by neofascist tendencies and neoliberal surveillance regimes.

## **Digital Transformation I**

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### **Jess Brand**

Across the UK, Local Authorities are implementing predictive analytics as a means of governing complex social challenges like poverty and homelessness. This paper traces the separate genealogies of prediction and pre-emption in order to consider how they have merged into 'pre-emptive prediction' through the spread of data analytics. Arguing that pre-emption interplays with enduring principles of care in social welfare contexts, the paper employs a Lipsky-inspired appreciation of 'street-level bureaucracy'. Using ethnographic insights from two Local Authorities and interviews with frontline workers, it highlights 'pre-emptive care talk' as the emotional-informational labour required to translate risk predictions into caring interventions.

## **Petter Falk**

Over the past decade, political and administrative initiatives within Swedish public care have advanced data sharing across organizational boundaries as part of broader digital transformation efforts. Systems such as SSBTEK, GIF, and the THEA database enable welfare providers to assemble authority-held data to produce digital representations of individuals. This paper examines how the political framing of interoperability in welfare administration not only asserts that vulnerability can be addressed through intensified data practices, but also shapes how vulnerability itself is constructed. Drawing on ethnographic studies of Swedish public welfare, the paper addresses interoperability as an understudied dimension of welfare digitalization, increasingly entangled with datafication, statecraft, and ideas on vulnerabilities.

## **Krystian Łukasik & Renata Włoch**

This paper examines how national digital government strategies are imagined from inside the state in a context where powerful global actors increasingly define what 'the digital future' looks like. Drawing on 11 semi-structured interviews with senior officials responsible for drafting Poland's current digitalisation strategies, including the forthcoming Digitalisation Strategy 2035, the analysis identifies three clusters of imaginaries: the state cast alternately as facilitator of innovation, guardian of rights, and technological sovereign; technological change as fast and externally driven; and digital technologies as simultaneously strategic opportunities and systemic risks. Together, these findings characterise contemporary state imaginaries of digital government not as coherent national projects, but as assemblages of constrained agency in an asymmetric imaginative landscape dominated by Big Tech.

## **Nathan Davies**

Over the last fifty years, government administrations in the UK and US have undergone a profound transformation in how they acquire and govern computational technologies. This paper argues that future-oriented narratives about AI obscure the inheritance of technical systems, contractual relationships, and earlier policy reforms. Drawing on archival materials, policy documents, and interviews, the paper traces three moments in the evolution of government computing: the rise of middleware and systems integration, the consolidation of commercial cloud computing, and the current turn toward AI. Across these moments, states have engaged with technological change through contract regimes — historically sedimented configurations that have become increasingly conjoined through shared suppliers and technical architectures, producing transnational trajectories that endure across reform cycles.

# **Digital Transformation II**

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## **Torjus Solheim Eckhoff**

Playing with the notion of statecraft, this paper investigates historical efforts of technological development and political control by analysing the computerisation of the Norwegian public administration from the 1970s to the 1990s. Following the modification of data policy and, through infrastructure inversion, the materialisation of a growing information infrastructure underpinning statecraft, the paper asks how political control over computing power was enacted in public documents and how a computer infrastructure materialised. Drawing on a practice-oriented document analysis of strategy documents, White Papers, and expert enquiries, the paper points to the width of challenges small countries face in navigating national political interest with externally driven technologies — findings that can serve as a reflection for current issues of digital sovereignty.

## **Karine Côté-Boucher & Mireille Paquet**

Research often pays little attention to the backbone of digital government development: government IT systems and legacy technological devices. Based on a case study of Canada's Global Case Management System (GCMS) — created in the early 2000s and still used to process all visa and immigration applications — this paper documents a considerable gap between official state discourses on advanced digital technology deployment and the operational realities of implementation. Drawing on interviews with actors who designed and used GCMS, the paper highlights three dynamics associated with legacy devices: increased stratification of immigration implementation labour; infrastructures limiting rather than enhancing possibilities for rapid reform; and shortcuts developed in the field being paraded as high-tech solutions.

## **Jessamy Perriam**

In 2014, then Australian Communications Minister Malcolm Turnbull visited the UK to look at the Government Digital Service and their approach to digital transformation, with the intention to emulate it within the Australian context. This paper traces the attempts by the Australian Government to replicate the British approach to digital transformation in 2015–2016, drawing on interviews with both Australian and British staff drafted in to set up the Digital Transformation Agency according to the GDS blueprint. It examines the frictions that occur when attempting to translate an approach from one national context to another, even when they share similar public service and political systems, and presents lessons learned from this extreme example of transnational knowledge sharing.

## **Margarita Boenig-Liptsin**

State sovereignty today is intertwined practically and symbolically with digitalization. To examine how sovereignty tied to digitalization configures the social contract linking citizens and the state, this paper contrasts two historical periods of sovereignty linked to digitalization in Ukraine. In the 1990s, international development experts envisioned digitalization as supporting the rule of law and fighting corruption. In the second period, from the start of the Russian full-scale invasion to the present, the Ukrainian government has strongly developed digital government functions in response to war — notably the 'Diia' app. In both periods, the paper shows how digitalization has not only a practical but also an aspirational purpose, integrating digital capacities with the sovereign functions of the state to bring about a specific form of citizenship.

## **Digital Transformation III**

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### **Mait Kask, Andra Siibak & Maris Männiste**

AI has become a force through which governments imagine desirable futures and reorganise state-citizen relations. Estonia's emerging personal state vision illustrates this shift by presenting a form of welfare and administration that becomes anticipatory, personalised, and dependent on automated inference. This paper examines Estonian policy discourse through a combined framework of sociotechnical imaginaries, dataism, and critical discourse analysis, drawing on a corpus of Estonian authoritative strategy documents. The analysis shows how imaginaries of an anticipatory welfare regime are actively produced, with dataist assumptions legitimizing both the use of data and the anticipation of citizens' needs. These developments coexist with dependencies on global cloud providers, creating tensions between aspirations for nationally grounded digital capability and platform-based dependencies.

### **Sruthi Vanguri**

Digital Public Infrastructures have rapidly emerged as globally circulating templates for organising state-citizen interactions. This paper examines how DPIs are visualised, framed, and transferred as models of public governance across countries. Beginning with the DPI Map developed by IIPP at University College London, treated as a visual artefact constructing a global field of DPIs, the paper investigates how these imaginaries travel transnationally through networks of multilateral institutions, technical experts, consulting groups, and state agencies. A comparative focus on India Stack and the emerging Euro Stack illustrates how different configurations of DPI-enabled statecraft take shape: one grounded in financial inclusion and development-oriented digitalisation, the other oriented toward digital sovereignty and regulatory harmonisation.

### **Carina R. Nasser & Mattéo Bard**

This paper offers a comparative analysis of how digital identification infrastructures are used for and give shape to digital sovereignty in Brazil and the European Union. In Brazil, biometric integration into the new digital ID infrastructure is framed as curbing internal threats of tax and welfare fraud. In the EU, the interoperability initiative integrates several migration and policing databases through digital identification infrastructures justified as a response to external threats from the migration crisis. The comparative design reveals how digital identification technologies mediate different sovereignty claims depending on political structure and threat perception, while also showing interregional continuities in how these technologies build sovereignty through security concerns.

## **Alexei Tsinovoi & Ask Greve**

International delegations that come to learn about Danish digitalization are typically taken to Digital Hub Denmark, an award-winning visitor centre showcasing Denmark's digital journey. This paper examines the ephemeral nature of digitalization efforts as nation branding exercises, considering how digital history is brought into the present through the Digital Hub exhibition space and historical antecedents of nation branding in Denmark. Regarding these efforts as performative — enacting an economy for foreign investment while signposting a policy field of national importance — the paper also suggests that the impermanence of IT systems and global rankings may be unwittingly attenuated through historical juxtapositions, at a time when digital leadership is problematized by emerging concerns around digital vulnerability, sovereignty, and international interdependencies.

## **Digital Sovereignty in Theory & Practice I**

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### **Janine Patricia Santos**

Digital Public Infrastructures have become a newfound strategic obsession in digital infrastructure development across the globe. This paper explores the 'discursive politics' of concepts such as 'digital sovereignty' and the 'public', upon which sociotechnical imaginaries of DPIs are anchored. Through a critical juxtaposition of DPI strategies in the EU and Togo, the paper argues that DPIs are complex systems embedded in the material conditions within which they are developed, containing inherent contradictions that animate the paradox of 'digital sovereignty' being negotiated at various scales. It views 'digital sovereignty' as a multi-scalar concept and discursive practice that reconstitutes the 'public' in the process of its reclaiming.

### **Sandeep Mertia**

This paper theorizes derivative sovereignty as a way to understand how postcolonial and Global South states pursue digital autonomy while remaining structurally entangled in the architectures and political economies of global techno-capitalism. Drawing on India's Digital Public Infrastructures and emerging 'sovereign AI' stacks, the paper argues that contemporary digital government must be approached as a mode of statecraft in which the state and techno-capitalism actively reconstitute one another through layered dependencies, speculative design, and shifting configurations of authority. Sovereignty becomes derivative — asserted through architectures the state neither fully owns nor governs but must strategically inhabit. In a world where dominant AI models are trained on datasets that are more than 90 percent English, the pursuit of sovereignty by multilingual and postcolonial states raises urgent questions about epistemic autonomy.

### **Frederik Schade**

As digital sovereignty discourse gains prominence in international geopolitics, this paper aims to clarify its political rationality. Across international discourses, a unifying tendency can be identified whereby the technological consistently replaces the human as the primary problem and object of politics. Drawing on examples from US, Chinese, and European policymaking, the paper traces the particular technopolitical rationality underlying current digital sovereignty agendas. It argues that this emergent rationality signals a novel convergence in international politics towards a techno-centric political orientation, focused on creating and sustaining technological ecosystems as its primary objects of intervention, aiming to strategically enable widespread techno-social transformation while avoiding undesirable technical constraints.

### **Ida Marie Iversen & Maja Hvarregaard Pedersen**

This paper examines how digital sovereignty is enacted, negotiated, and experienced through infrastructural arrangements in Greenland — a context where digital government depends on a small number of fragile and geopolitically significant communication systems. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork across multiple sites in Greenland, including hospitals, cable landing stations, control rooms, harbors, and airports, the paper examines how submarine cables, radio chains, and satellite connections function as the arteries of Greenlandic digital government. Rather than treating digital sovereignty as a predefined policy objective, the analysis shows how it emerges empirically through infrastructural encounters involving technicians, health workers, public institutions, and global technology providers.

## **Samuele Fratini**

This paper examines how digital sovereignty is achieved not just through state mandates but also through the alignment of infrastructures, institutions, and cultures. Conceptualizing digital sovereignty as a hybrid black box — a provisional assemblage of technical, legal, and cultural components — it presents a case study of Threema, a Swiss privacy-focused messaging app, to analyze how non-state actors co-produce digital sovereignty with public institutions. Through interviews and document analysis, the paper identifies three frictional dynamics (privacy, seclusion, and territorialism) that destabilize the hybrid black box, revealing how sovereignty is negotiated amid competing forces. Threema's privacy-centric design and alignment with Swiss frameworks has made it a key tool for Swiss institutions, reducing foreign tech dependencies.

## **Digital Sovereignty in Theory & Practice II**

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### **Joao C. Magalhaes & Edemilson Parana**

This paper explores the case of Brazil to argue that answering why governments do not act decisively to break up their dependence on US companies demands attending to political factors beyond technological development, investment capacity, or sociotechnical path-dependencies. The argument builds on three key moments: the 2013 Marco Civil da Internet, which established both privacy guarantees and legal immunities for platforms; the Bolsonaro presidency, combining protection of platforms with embrace of PIX as a publicly managed payment system; and the return of Lula da Silva, intensifying criticism of Big Tech while actively pursuing data center investments from the same companies. The analysis suggests that the exact meaning of digital sovereignty is in constant flux and dispute, shaped by non-technical complexities of ideology, electoral incentives, and economic interests.

### **Marguerite Borelli**

Research on platform governance and digital sovereignty has largely developed as separate fields. This paper contributes to bridging this gap by drawing on the governance of 'terrorist and violent extremist content' (TVEC) as a particularly revealing site of (inter)dependencies between actors. The analysis draws on an empirical investigation into the governance of TVEC by Meta, Google, and Twitter (now X) and the public-private relations it generates, combining stakeholder interviews (n=31) with grey literature. In a context where states disagree on what constitutes terrorism, the governance of TVEC on quasi-global platforms raises sovereignty-relevant questions: whose terrorism designations are implemented on mainstream social media, and what tools do states possess to ensure platform compliance?

### **Clara Iglesias Keller & Julia Pohle**

Digital government initiatives increasingly hinge on complex data infrastructures procured from private actors, raising core questions about digital sovereignty and statecraft. This paper argues that software procurement — often treated as an administrative formality — is in fact a formative moment in the configuration of digital sovereignty goals. It is during procurement that states exercise or relinquish infrastructural power, define long-term data dependencies, and negotiate accountability structures. The paper draws on the contrasting procurement trajectories of two German Covid-19 contact tracing systems: the publicly oriented, open-source Corona-Warn-App and the vendor-driven Luca App, highlighting three dimensions of procurement dynamics central to data governance: degrees of privatization, openness to participatory arrangements, and influence on legitimacy and public trust.

## **Digital Sovereignty: Alternatives & Lock-ins I**

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### **Roser Pujads & Daniel Curto-Millet**

The global race to lead in AI development has intensified debates over digital sovereignty in Europe. This paper analyses how visions of sovereign AI are materially and discursively constructed in the case of Mistral AI, a French generative AI start-up widely positioned as a flagship example of 'European AI sovereignty'. Using a mixed qualitative approach combining discourse analysis and technography, the analysis shows that while Mistral AI symbolically embodies European ambitions, its development is deeply entangled with global infrastructures and venture capital logics that complicate claims to autonomy. The paper argues that digital sovereignty should be understood not as a fixed regulatory endpoint but as a contested and discursively grounded sociotechnical formation shaped by conflicting economic, political, legal, and infrastructural forces.

### **Lasse Uhrskov Kristensen**

This paper examines the intersections between open-source software, international collaboration, and digital transformation in public sector contexts.

## **Emilie Mørch Groth**

The interest in open source in the public sector is growing alongside concerns about digital sovereignty. Policy debates increasingly frame open-source software as a strategic counterweight to Big Tech. This paper elicits how open source plays into notions of digital sovereignty by exploring how it is framed as alternative infrastructure in public institutions in terms of dependency, organisation, and regulation. The question is examined through an empirical case: OS2skole, where municipal actors seek to construct an open source-based platform as an alternative to Big Tech in public schools. Drawing on Science and Technology Studies and Actor-Network theory, the case is explored qualitatively through project documents and interviews with project stakeholders, aiming to contribute to debates on digital sovereignty and Big Tech alternatives.

## **Gianmarco Cristofari**

This paper examines how Latin American states are experimenting with 'public stacks' and quasi-sovereign clouds as they navigate geopolitically fraught digital infrastructures. Based on more than forty semi-structured interviews with academics, social movements, and public servants in Brazil, Colombia, Argentina, and Uruguay, the paper develops three case studies: Brazil's PIX payment system and national identification systems; Brazil's Cadastro Ambiental Rural; and Uruguay's state-owned telecommunications company Antel. On this basis, the paper theorises 'functional digital sovereignty' as a situated, piecemeal, and contested practice, enacted through specific infrastructural functions, arguing that regulatory measures must be complemented by creative forms of industrial and infrastructural policy capable of shaping, owning, and operating the underlying technical systems.

# **Digital Sovereignty: Alternatives & Lock-ins II**

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## **Oscar Arruda d'Alva, Rodrigo Santaella-Gonçalves & Edemilson Paraná**

This paper examines the contested terrain of statistical sovereignty through a comparative analysis of Europe and Brazil — two critical sites where state and corporate forces converge to reshape official statistics in the digital age. Defining statistical sovereignty as the democratic capacity to socially control the production, dissemination, and interpretation of public statistics, the paper shows how it is being undermined by Big Tech's enclosure of data, platform logics of commodification, and supranational governance frameworks. The European case reveals a recent movement to protect official statistics against corporate platform power through new data regulations. Brazil's experience illustrates both the fragility and resilience of Global South statistical institutions under datafication pressures, with actors mobilising professional ethos, legal reforms, and sovereignty discourses to defend public control over data infrastructures.

## **Eva Iris Otto, Sofie Flensburg & Signe Sophus Lai**

Recent geopolitical tensions have elevated digital sovereignty to significant political interest in Europe. In response, open-source software has re-emerged in several national contexts, including Denmark, framed as an antidote to US and Big Tech dependence. However, examining the software underpinning open-source solutions reveals a relationship fundamentally constituted by dependence. This paper explores the paradox of dependence as a socio-technical relation by ethnographically and netnographically mapping debates and current open source software solutions mobilised within Danish municipal and state systems. Drawing on digital materialities, platform studies, and anthropology, it examines the role of dependence and its relation to how we might conceptualise power in digital state infrastructures.

## **Damiano Razzoli & Nicola Casucci**

This paper reframes digital sovereignty not merely as geopolitical competition, but as the capacity to inhabit digital spaces as full citizens rather than extracted users. The contemporary crisis of digital platforms reveals a fundamental tension: when platform rules diverge from democratic principles, exclusion follows. Reclaiming this capacity requires forms of civic digital statecraft: the strategic design and governance of digital infrastructures for the public good. Drawing on Floridi's tripartite framework of supranational, national, and popular sovereignty, the paper focuses on popular sovereignty exercised by proximate communities. It analyses the Hamlet project (Reggio Emilia, Italy): a civic digital platform structured as public space addressing neighbourhood needs through community-driven governance, demonstrating how public digital infrastructure can extend physical public life and enable online citizenship.

## **Pedro Burity, Rafael Grohmann, Kenzo Soares Seto & Rafael De Toni**

Since 2023, Brazil's federal government has increasingly centralised political discourse around digital sovereignty. This paper examines how two public enterprises — Serpro and DataPrev — have been engaging with, and failing at, practices of digital sovereignty, conceptualising failures along two dimensions: persistent infrastructural dependency on Big Tech despite sovereignty-oriented rhetoric; and failure as malfunction or 'glitch'. Based on analysis of cloud computing and data governance projects and interviews with company representatives, the paper shows that Serpro articulates a discourse of sovereignty while purchasing 'sovereignty services' from Amazon, while DataPrev attempts to build its own infrastructure yet remains prone to recurrent glitches and ultimately relies on Big Tech in moments of urgency. The paper also demonstrates how Brazil has become a strategic terrain of dispute between US and Chinese Big Tech companies.

## **Digital Sovereignty: Alternatives & Lock-ins III**

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### **Matilde Bro, Rebecca Adler-Nissen & Kristin Anabel Eggeling**

This article examines how digital sovereignty in the European Union is designed and co-produced by EU institutions, member states and private consortia through public-private partnerships. Through a case study of the EU Commission's launch of AI gigafactories — public-private partnerships to establish supercomputing ecosystems across five EU member states — it contributes new insights into how the processes, relations and practices of building AI infrastructure co-produce digital sovereignty in Europe. Drawing on STS and IR's infrastructural 'turn', the paper conceptualizes these gigafactories as (geo)political infrastructures that (re)order space, authority and identity, identifying three sovereignty dilemmas of control, territorialization and membership. The empirical basis combines participant observation, semi-structured interviews with EU digital policymakers and industry actors, and document analysis of official material from 2023 to 2025.

### **Dr Paloma Viejo Otero & Dr Eugenia Siapera**

While debates on European digital sovereignty focus on state-level alternatives, this project responds to a challenge posed by an Occupy activist: 'The ongoing mistake lies in seeking catharsis instead of asking: What is already working?' The paper examines community-based media infrastructures that have persisted despite Big Tech pressures, asking whether networks demonstrating strong cosmological and organizational continuities show greater resilience against platform capitalism. Innovating with the concept of Media Persistence, the paper traces sustained organizational, technical, and ideological continuities in four community and mesh networks: Guifi.net (Catalonia), Freifunk (Berlin), Nodo50 (Madrid), and B4RN (Ireland). Through archival material, website analysis, and in-depth interviews, it documents sustained socio-technical imaginaries that provide evidence-based models for digital sovereignty beyond Big Tech dependency.

### **Matt Spencer**

In this paper, digital government is understood through its instruments, with the 'principle' identified as an increasingly important tool of digital government. The paper offers an analysis of the history and policy narratives associated with the 'principles based' approach to product security assurance in the UK developed over the past five years. Examining the challenges of valuing security and the fate of previous assurance schemes, the paper looks at the influence of cloud computing and the enablement of its adoption via the UK 'cloud security principles', and the influence of 'goal-based assurance' in safety as a model for security. Principles are imagined to afford a distinctive, more flexible kind of control over design processes, procurement, markets, and infrastructures, but create tensions between action and value that the paper argues are also the source of the instrument's virtues.

### **Gro Stueland Skorpen**

This paper studies Norway's first tentative moves to nationalise cloud storage of data, reading these efforts as a claim for digital sovereignty. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in the National Audit Office of Norway at a time when discussions on moving audit data to commercial cloud providers were taking place, it traces this talk to a broader public conversation about cloud storage of state data. The case troubles what is inside and outside the state: Big Tech contributes cloud capacity inside states like Norway, yet also represents an outside, even a threat. The paper provides a multi-scalar analysis from 'small' bureaucratic practices in the NAO to grand declarations of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, revealing deep disagreement within Norway's digital state about the premises of digital sovereignty.

## **Citizens, Users & Citizenship**

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## **Rachel Humphris & Nika Mahnič**

This paper builds a conceptual bridge between digital welfare state research and digital migration studies, arguing that both 'failed citizens' and non-citizens are organised through a shared moral economy centred on deservingness and contribution. The paper introduces the concept of digital deservingness: a datafied moral order through which welfare recipients and migrants become classifiable and governable. Welfare-AI systems extend border logics into welfare administration by sorting individuals via behavioural proxies and predictive risk scores, while migration management technologies draw on welfare datasets, embedding external border priorities within domestic institutions. The paper reconceptualises the digital welfare state as a site of internal bordering, where welfare eligibility operates as an instrument of statecraft with international effects.

## **Zhou Pei**

This paper analyses the Safe City project in Kenya through a socio-technical and infrastructural politics perspective, treating Huawei's system not merely as a technological product but as an assemblage that reconfigures governance, security, and civil agency in post-colonial urban environments. The paper reviews the technological components of Safe City within the broader smart-city discourse, examines Kenya's social context and the complex conditions that create demands for technological solutions, and argues for a model of 'meaningful international cooperation' that shifts from techno-centric to social-centric approaches. Drawing on civil society contestation in Kenya, the paper highlights the urgency of transparent, inclusive regulatory processes governing 'governance technologies'.

## **Oisín O'Brien**

Estonia is often cited as a place where digital and social systems intersect. But what happens when people struggle to access these 'simple digital services'? This paper argues that the forced option of digital public services in Estonia allows the state to assume a blameless position. With fewer options to complete appointments in person and fewer options to navigate services in Russian — the mother tongue of more than a quarter of citizens — citizens are left relying on reluctant digital mediators. Using ethnographic intervention and textual analysis, the paper argues that the Estonian state presents itself as blameless for digital exclusion, while elderly and Russian minority citizens who do not fit the narratives of e-Estonia are blamed for their own exclusion. It also explores how even objective failures like the ROCA chip card scandal are immediately mobilised toward narratives of success.

## **Keren Weitzberg, Margie Cheesman, Aaron Martin, Hanna Stoll & Isadora Dullaert**

This paper examines how Europe's digital identity infrastructure reorders the governance of membership, mobility, and rights through a comparison of the European Digital Identity Wallet (EUDI) and the European Asylum Dactyloscopy Database (Eurodac). Extending Lydia Morris's concept of 'civic stratification' to the digital domain, the paper shows how identity systems function as tools of political ordering that differentially position citizens and non-citizens. The EUDI wallet frames EU citizens as digitally mobile subjects with market-oriented data rights, while Eurodac governs asylum seekers through mandatory biometric registration that prioritises traceability over data agency. The paper identifies three dimensions of digital civic stratification: divergent constructions of Europe as circulation or restriction; contrasting governance models; and tiered digital rights.

## **James Rosenberg**

How does digitalization shape relations between states, markets, and citizens? This case study of Singapore's Smart Nation digital government initiative draws on archival research, ethnographic fieldwork, and interviews with government officials, policy experts, academics, and activists. The paper follows Singapore's Singpass app, where digital identity and digital payment systems meet, as an ideal site to study how digitalization affects the triad of state, market, and citizen. It attends to how pursuing these initiatives affects relationships among actors and institutions, shaping the theory and practice of governance and producing new institutional configurations. The paper grapples with a disquieting question about what type of society emerges from a system wherein opting out of digital government means, as one leading sociologist described, 'you don't have citizenship'.