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Post-digital, post-human sovereignty: Combined imaginaries in current political communication

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The invention of digital sovereignty springs from reactions to perceived extensive technological transformations of our environments. But as the experience of these transformations continues, do our ideas about digital sovereignty have to change as that environment grows post-digital and post-human? Can existing notions of individual humans' struggle for self-determination in digital environments prevail as digital environments can no longer be cleanly separated from their non-digital, 'analog' or 'real life' counterparts, or as the identity of individual humanity becomes fragile? These questions are explored through a paradigmatic example of resistant communication at a protest about internet governance, showcasing a motif of post-digital and post-human imaginary that negotiates the challenges posed to concepts of digital sovereignty.

Introduction

If digital sovereignty is real, who are the sovereigns? Proponents and critics of the concept have discussed[1] the roles of nations and governments,[2] transnational corporations as well as NGO collectives,[3] and individual humans—the citizens of those states, customers and members of those collective agents, and denizens of the digital networks that surround us—,[4] as carriers of the claim to, or realizers of, that sovereignty. As each such agents' empowerment threatens to restrict the freedoms of any other, their rivalry has been at stake in negotiating the usefulness of the concept. But with the rise of post-digital and post-human experiences, these tensions have been met with another, differently disposed challenge to any discourse seeking to reinvigorate an early modern notion of individual and collective self-determination for the networked global present. That challenge is expressed in doubts about the essential humanity of sovereign subjectivity, as individual humans find themselves in a rivalry not only with human collectives and human governments, but with non-human and more-than-human agents and potential carriers of sovereignty.

I take my point of departure from rhetorical appeals to such post-human uncertainty involved in political contest about post-digital sovereignty. In 2019, German protesters opposing the new European regime of copyright control in social media would sometimes emphasize that "Wir sind keine Bots!," "We are not bots!" (as seen on protesters' placards), while in a seeming paradox embracing the role of more-than-human agents, celebrating the idea that "Wir sind die Bots!," "We are the bots!" in protest songs. Certainly, the question of whether large tech companies such as Meta, Google, or Twitter should be forced by national laws to enforce other corporate copyrights against the intentions of their individual human users posting material on their networks takes up the very rivalry between national, collective, and individual agents vying for sovereignty. But the rhetorical staging of doubt about the humanity of the protesters makes it clear that that political contest was seen to be interlaced with the aesthetics, if not the straightforward realities, of post-human identities and agentialities. That interlacement, however, was experienced as paradoxical: The affirmation and the refusal of post-human identity were equally mobilized for the

[1] Stephane Couture and Sophie Toupin, "What does the notion of 'sovereignty' mean when referring to the digital?," *New Media & Society* 21, no. 10 (2019): 2305–22, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819865984.

[2] Enrico Peuker, *Verfassungswandel durch Digitalisierung. Digitale Souveränität als verfassungsrechtliches Leitbild* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020).

[3] Milton Mueller, *Will the Internet Fragment Sovereignty, Globalization and Cyberspace* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2017).

[4] Christian Ernst, *Der Grundsatz digitaler Souveränität* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2020).

same political goal, i.e. opposition to the government-mandated corporate control of individual communication.

On the following pages, I want to detail this convergence between post-human and post-digital challenges for the discourse on digital sovereignty. I will argue that a close examination of such political interventions reveals a close tie between the post-human and the post-digital tendencies of current social and technological transformations. Recurring motifs in certain kinds of political strife bring these three discursive strands—digital sovereignty, post-digitality, and post-humanity—together in conceptually often untenable, but politically lucidly motivated ways. The invention of digital sovereignty springs from reactions to perceived extensive technological transformations of our environments. But as the experience of these transformations continues, do our ideas about digital sovereignty have to change as that environment grows post-digital and post-human? Can existing notions of individual humans' struggle for self-determination in digital environments prevail as digital environments can either no longer be cleanly separated from their non-digital, 'analog' or 'real life' counterparts, or as the identity of individual humanity becomes fragile?

I want to begin with a deliberately generalized attempt at painting a conceptual landscape of the points of intersections between all three discursive formations, providing an overview of stresses in the prevalent discourses on digital sovereignty and their relationship to post-digital and post-human transformations as understood through ideas taken from Robert Pepperell and Michael Punt, Kim Cascone, David Berry, Karen Barad, and Michel Callon. Against this backdrop, I will choose as my point of entry that paradigmatic example of such intersection from a small 2019 protest at Cologne as well as its integration into debates about legislative regulation of digital communication at the time. Having observed the political aesthetics of these interruptions, I will then turn to Nancy Fraser's deliberation on the legitimacy and the efficacy of interventions into the public sphere to argue that models of post-digital sovereignty expose new versions of old tensions between democratic ideals of participatory politics and their populist perversions. In these moments of dissensus, the symbolism of aesthetic anticipations of a post-human society may be employed to negotiate the attribution of political acknowledgement to human actors in the present. The 'hatred of democracy' as described by Jacques Rancière reappears in these recent tensions and connects them back to fundamental ambivalences of democratic contest.

Challenging Digital Sovereignty

Conceiving of digital environments either as threats or as opportunities for the struggle to defend or even expand individual liberties and self-determination, proponents of digital sovereignty have already followed the notion through a number of conceptual changes. From a summation encompassing the total goal of that struggle, the notion has shifted to a focused interpretation of specific preconditions of individual liberties grounded in individual technological competences and the education or training needed to instill it.[5] At the same time, a parallel shift towards greater attention for infrastructural conditions of individual freedoms has expanded and eventually returned the concept of digital sovereignty to the sovereignty of states and nations, extending the idea of governmental determination, autarky, or autonomy into issues of technological access, control, and security[6]—even though this may support nationalistic discourses that threaten both an adequate understanding of globalized technological infrastructures and of the individual as opposed to the integrated agent of a national collective.[7] Even as the idea is strained to cover its individual, corporate, and governmental variations, it has come under additional criticism for its reductive view of individual emancipation that falls short of earlier full enlightenment demands for rational and reasonable self-determination,[8] as well as for reproducing exclusions on the basis of class, gender, and especially postcolonial and racialized discrimination.[9]

This certainly has confused the discourse around the notion, calling for clarification wherever the term appears. But even if it has confused the concept, has it fundamentally weakened the discourse? One strength of the multi-dimensional array of aspects now attached to the term is that far from merely suffering from semantic confusion, each of these tensions complicating the understanding of the concept refers to a real component complicating the original struggle for self-determination in digitally transformed environments. Both the need for individual

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[5] Harald Gapski, ed., *Big Data und Medienbildung. Zwischen Kontrollverlust, Selbstverteidigung und Souveränität in der digitalen Welt* (Munich/Düsseldorf: kopaed, 2015).

[6] Julia Pohle and Thorsten Thiel, "Digital Sovereignty," *Internet Policy Review* 9, no. 4 (December 17, 2020), https://doi.org/10.14763/2020.4.1532.

[7] Jukka Ruohonen, "The Treachery of Images in the Digital Sovereignty Debate," *Minds & Machines* 31 (2020): 439–456.

[8] Cf. the contributions in Georg Glasze, Eva Odzuck, and Ronald Staples, eds., *Was heißt digitale Souveränität? Diskurse, Praktiken und Voraussetzungen 'individueller' und 'staatlicher Souveränität' im digitalen Zeitalter* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2022).

[9] Tahu Kukutai and John Taylor, eds. *Indigenous Data Sovereignty: Toward an Agenda* (Canberra: ANU, 2016), http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1q1crgf.

technological competence and the threat of individualizing and internalizing larger infrastructural issues into an overburdened requirement for individual education do attach to immediate practices involved in attempts to win, as well as to discourses engaged in politically negotiating, individual freedoms in digital environments. In parallel, the mutual dependency of individual, corporate, and governmental autonomy constitutes an important structural fact that shapes possibilities and necessities of the struggle for any kind of sovereignty in digital landscapes. This is true in Western-style liberal democracies, as governments are called upon to defend individual freedoms, but will fail to do so if they cannot exert any influence over digitally situated events,[10] while failures to account for class, gender, 'race', dis/ability and other discriminating factors threatens the efficacy and legitimacy of that defense. As for the other extreme, for totalitarian governments and political campaigns that foster discrimination the dependency of individual liberties on the extent of governmental power is obvious. The—often post-colonial—framing of such distinctions in turn points to relevant complications for any struggle for individual freedom. Indeed, bringing up any of these concerns in the course of clarifying the use of the term 'digital sovereignty' leads deeper into, not away from, the heart of the matter under discussion. It might then be valuable to hang on to the term as an expression of a shared but vague political ideal that cannot be realized without turning that vagueness into precision through political examination.

However, the concern that the very concept of individual freedom is compromised by viewing it *only* through the lens of sovereignty, as opposed to a more fully developed post-enlightenment concept of a self-determined individual person, the *Mündigkeit* of German idealism, is of a slightly different kind. Topicalizing this concern will again lead to important issues surrounding the degree to which the conceptually universal involvement of human individuals in the network of their intersubjective, inter-species, instrumental, material, and now specifically man/machine-interfacing environments becomes palpably problematic as digital environments foreground the dependencies of distributed agencies and the conscious experience of those dependencies. For typical challenges to digital sovereignty, some of the concrete shapes these problems might take include trying to argue the independence of an individual's memory if large parts of their personal notes and memorabilia are situated in digital devices; arguing their privacy in the face of most intimate communication being conveyed through various digital platform providers; or even defending a view of their politically independent self-determination as

[10] Karl-Nikolaus Peifer, "Digitale Souveränität und informationelle Selbstbestimmung am Beispiel der Kontrolle über die eigenen Daten," *UFITA* (2024).

networked targeted propaganda is suspected to excel in manipulating political thought.

After all, the enlightenment conception of liberated rational individual human actors has its own detractors. The challenge to individual *Mündigkeit* experienced in digitally reshaped environments solidifying and emphasizing social as well as material networks proceeds by redistributing the agency as well as the rationality of individual, potentially enlightened moments of decision among many and often more-than-human actors as well as many and often not entirely conscious moments of pre- and post-determination. The Deleuzian concept of *agencements* as developed by Michel Callon and adapted for an Actor-Media-Theory by Erhard Schüttpelz is well suited to summarize, for the purposes of the present article, one shape of the much larger array of associated problems. As Callon points out,

> Everything in these agencements that makes it possible to locate sources of action, establish origins, assign responsibilities, and account for profits and losses associated with a particular action, plays a strategic part in shaping agencies. In particular, I have in mind copyrights, property rights, human rights, etc.[11]

Consider the concrete example of the proposed new European regime for copyright enforcement in 2019. The concept of copyright is already subject to tensions between the vision of a subjective individual's creativity endowing that individual with rights of personality as well as property to the products of their supposedly unitary mind's work, and the opposing vision of individuals' private or public communications being subjected to the will of a corporate entity owning and enforcing the privileges connected to copyright as an immaterial, alienable good.[12] But an *agencement* view of the networks in which these actions take place will aptly confuse the issue further. Is the originality of that unique human mind better described as a confluence of technological tools, material and ideal archives, interactions between several humans as well non-human actors, calling into question the very foundation of individual creation, on which the legal conception of immaterial property rights flowing from that creation rests? That might be the case—but at the moment of perceived violation of copyright be a user uploading a remix to *YouTube*, then again at the moment in

[11] Michel Callon, "Why virtualism paves the way to political impotence: A reply to Daniel Miller's critique of the laws of the markets," *Economic Sociology: European Electronic Newsletter* 6, no. 2 (2005): 3–20, 4. Cf. Erhard Schüttpelz, "Elemente einer Akteur-Medien-Theorie," *Akteur-Medien-Theorie*, eds. Tristan Thielmann and Erhard Schüttpelz (Bielefeld: transcript, 2013): 9–67, 12.

[12] Joseph Loewenstein, *The Author's Due. Printing and the Prehistory of Copyright* (Chicago: UP, 2002); Lawrence Lessig, *Remix. Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy* (New York: Penguin, 2009).

which copyright principles are enforced against that material, and yet again in a different way at any moment at which humans take sides in the political struggle about the legal basis for those actions, decisions are made that separate the dense network of agencements into units whose borders have to allow, at the very least, for the lines of political opposition to be drawn along them.

This allows for a view that clarifies the role of the concept of the individual human in that struggle for said individual's freedom as an agential cut in the sense of Karen Barad,[13] i.e. a conceptually decisionist but practically situated act that decides to attribute agency along divisions that are often at once legitimized by an ontological interpretation of the cut. This cuts both ways: Questions on how to draw the defining lines around a human individual might reflect on the efficacy of defending that emerging actor's sovereignty, while at the same time the demands for sovereignty might be negotiated with an eye to a notion of the human individual's agency.

Often, shifts towards a post-human perspective in situations in which digital sovereignty is discussed will be connected to claims of trans-humanist technologies blurring the lines between human and non-human actors even from an essentialist rather than a perspective of agencements. These discourses currently rely more on imagination and desire than technology, as Robert Pepperell and Michael Punt's argument in their monograph on the *Post-Digital Membrane* suggests.[14] But the more precisely post-digital shift of the same concepts is of doubtless immediate relevance. If post-digital aesthetics, communication formats, and schemes of critique have now begun to move beyond traditional oppositions between digital and not-yet-digitized realms, how does this pressure notions of digital sovereignty? How are implicit contradictions of that notion between compromised individual would-be sovereigns, corporate, and government actors as well as between sovereignty and its stronger alternatives in conceptions of emancipation, enlightenment, and liberty further complicated by the obsolescence of the concept of the digital itself?

We are bots: Intersections of Digital Publics, Digital Sovereignty, and Post-digital Politics in Protest Communication

Let us consider the aforementioned staging ground of these intersections more closely. "Wir sind keine Bots!"—'We are not bots!'—A cardboard placard held up by a group of protesters at a demonstration in Cologne in February 2019 insisted on this prima

[13] Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2007).

[14] Robert Pepperell and Michael Punt, *The Postdigitial Membrane: Imagination, Technology and Desire* (Bristol: Intellect, 2000).

facie unnecessary assertion. The roughly 1,000 mostly young adults that had assembled in front of the cathedral at the city center were opposing plans for what was then discussed as Article 13 of the proposed European Union's new *Directive on Copyright in the Digital Single Market*. The criticized regulations were to place an onus on internet platform providers to enforce copyright by policing user-generated and uploaded content; they were adopted in June that year as Article 17 of the new legal framework against the protests of internet activists as well as the digital platform companies themselves. Seemingly paradoxically, the dialectics of the surrounding protest rhetorics has journalists report the Cologne demonstration's main slogan as "Wir sind die Bots," "We are the bots."[15] This rhetorically and ironically appropriated state of ontological suspension embraces political aesthetics that have shaped negotiations of internet governance at the time. Its use expresses a combination of several antitheses informing the flight lines of this specific kind of political communication.

On its surface, the slogan reacts to an accusation levelled against Google, Facebook, and other major platform providers, unified at the time by the lobbying group *Computer & Communications Industry Association* based in Silicon Valley. They were repeatedly accused of having engineered a seemingly grassroot protest online by employing social media bots that pretend to be individual human voices, thus engaging in 'covert lobbying' by replacing humans with machines.[16] This accusation neatly converged with the parallel indictment that the same companies had leveraged their monopoly over young people's news consumption habits to push a biased and perhaps false view of the content and expected consequences of the proposed regulations.

It is worth tracing the transference from the first to the second meaning in detail: On the grounds established by the primary accusation, no humans and thus no relevant political actors are acknowledged at the individual, grassroot level of protest. The two sides of the conflict are comprised of professional political and government actors on the one hand and CCIA members on the other, with the former accusing the latter of fabricating the mere appearance of a third group of individual activist protesters. A possible general mistrust of corporate actors in the public sphere might contribute to the more concrete distrust towards the apparent plethora of individual protestors agreeing with these commercial collective entities. By rejecting this

[15] Torsten Kleinz, "'Wir sind die Bots' – über 1000 demonstrieren gegen Artikel 13," *heise online*, February 16, 2019, https://www.heise.de/news/Wir-sind-die-Bots-ueber-1000-demonstrieren-gegen-Artikel-13-4311105.html.

[16] Matt Reynolds, "What is Article 13? The EU's divisive new copyright plan explained," *Wired*, May 24, 2019, https://www.wired.com/story/what-is-article-13-article-11-european-directive-on-copyright-explained-meme-ban.

accusation *on behalf of* Google & co, but *as* individual protesters, the propositional message that these individuals are not faked is accompanied by the performative emphasis on their own political voice as independent actors and communicators. If they can be accepted as communicative agents, the refutation of the primary accusation follows necessarily. It is then that the secondary accusation becomes prominent, which is levelled against CCIA corporations *alongside* individual protesters in different ways: The corporations are accused of manipulation, while individual protesters stand accused as dupes and victims of such propaganda. What was first framed as mechanical is then framed as all-too-human, and the human frailty threatening democratic processes through the populist susceptibility of the masses is brought into close vicinity with post-human surfaces threatening human agency as a whole. This motif re-appears several times as questions of post-humanity are brought into interference with post-digital forms of political communication and claims to digital sovereignty.

Reports that branded assemblies such as the one at Cologne as 'spontaneous' picked up on a special point of contention: Should the unexpected emergence of such demonstrations, explained as unusual feats of co-ordination among protesters, prove the human and the bottom-up element of political intervention, or should it be considered to reveal crowd manipulation by covert orchestrators? The analytically unanswerable question adds to the undecidable boundary objects expressing the deep dissensus fueling the political divergence of these events: Another motif that re-appears in many constellations in which the legitimacy and the efficacy of digital campaigning, digital freedoms, and post-human suspicions grounded on digital innovations have to be renegotiated. As Nancy Fraser has pointed out,[17] as the traditional political function of the public sphere has been imbued with normative expectations of testing political claims for rationality and acceptability, "it matters who participates and on what terms."[18] It is only by connecting actions in the public sphere to a conception of sovereign power that its normative legitimacy and political efficacy can be considered as mutually and systematically connected.

While Fraser discusses the precarity of this conception under the pressures of transnationalizing and globalizing forces, which are certainly involved in any situation in which Silicon Valley lobbies lobbying against a Brussels law shaping political protests in Cologne, I will argue that the pressures of digital and post-digital transformation of public communication parallel that destabilization. The 'post-Westphalian' perspective adapted by Fraser complements a post-digital perspective

[17] Nancy Fraser, "Transnationalizing the Public Sphere. On the Legitimacy and Efficacy of Public Opinion in a Post-Westphalian World," *Theory Culture & Society* 24, no. 4 (July 2007): 7–30.
[18] Fraser, "Transnationalizing," 7.

on individuals as well as collectives. Exclusions of local actors across global arenas and exclusions of digitally conveyed or simulated actors in globalized online arenas come together in many ways. At Cologne, protesters claiming that they were not bots were directly denying that the perceived masses of protest online were not backed up by individual humans in the first place; arguing for their normative legitimacy as well as grasping for political efficacy. At the same time, they were implying indirectly that the disregard of their political intentions as mere effects of a digital corporate alliance's manipulation was equally unfounded, repeating both struggles on a second level. That the catachrestic acceptance of the monicker 'bots' serves to express very much similar ideas even though it seems to be a direct negation of the former, places the central tension firmly in the dialectical realm of political strategic identification and essentialization which marks new forms of political engagement accompanying shifts in the implementation of digital technology. Against this background, the affirmative version has the protesters embrace a symbolic version of 'being bots' as a no longer merely ironic markers of their political identity, conceived as connected to a dense and extensive experience of online and digitally networked communication, a familiarity with automated communication formats even in political communication, and an appreciation for the potential of online public spheres.

Wir sind keine Bots also doubles as the title of a song that would accompany these protests throughout the year. Created and spread online as well as performed at rallies by parodist rapper Simon Will under the monicker 'Willboy,' the song's aesthetics take up the same dialectical tension. First published a few days after that protest at Cologne, the song's first line insists "Wir sind keine Bots, Bots, Bots," but undermines that statement with the seemingly mechanical repetition of the last word and a strong distortion effect that renders the singer's lines a parody of B-movie robot voices. Later lines repeat the accusations apparently without contradiction—"Wir wurden nur manipuliert / Und sind von Google programmiert," "We are merely manipulated / And have been programmed by Google," once again connecting the idea of political propaganda manipulating human agents to their replacement by digital automata. A suggested programmability of human political actors emphasize the trans-human genre conventions exploited for these rhetorics. But once again, the lyrics shift the post-human suspicion to an indictment of political devaluation, as they go on to align their opposition with a generational conflict: "Je mehr ihr uns ignoriert / Generationen provoziert," 'The more you ignore us / provoke generations.' Willboy identifies the younger party in that conflict with the use of the internet as a means of political communication: "Wir wollen kein' Filter, der verhindert / Dass uns das Internet verbindet," 'We want no filter preventing / That the internet connects us.'[19]

[19] "Willboy," *Genius*, 2018, https://genius.com/artists/Willboy.

Three tensions intersect in this moment that illustrate a re-negotiation of what has been referred to as 'digital sovereignty' under the pressures of post-digital experiences and conditions of communication. One such tension concerns a dialectical parallel between political action in traditional public spaces such as city center plazas and community building and protest formation through online channels. The conclusive argument of the performative political action involved crosses that divide in several ways: *Look, the posters suspected of being machines appear as real humans in the real world!* would stage the traditional public space as a testing ground for a more suspect surface communication online. On the other hand, *Our generation is connected by unfiltered online communication!* frames the new public sphere online as the genuine site of new political identity formation, taking away importance from established public spaces even as new publication formats might detract from the importance of media formats previously governing the public sphere itself. There is an echo of political self-declarations of newfound freedom and community online here that was far more prominent ten and twenty years earlier, expressed in political statements such as John Perry Barlow's *Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace*[20] as well as legal and political theories such as Clay Shirky's *Here Comes Everybody*[21] and Lawrence Lessig's *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace*.[22]

However, the extreme optimism of those earlier conceptions has long come under criticism by the frustrated experience of internet communications controlled by corporate as well as state actors, instrumentalized as new means of ubiquitous data collection and surveillance, and populated by new kinds of extreme populism supporting totalitarian and anti-democratic movements. A second tension thus emerges that problematizes the erstwhile ideal of an individual digital sovereignty enabled by digitized mass and personal communication by complicating it on three levels:[23] The direct confrontation with state actors has demonstrated how technological innovations surrounding digitally densely knit networks, ubiquitous communication, and progressive digitization of previously non-automatized political and personal actions can become tools for governance and suppression at least as easily as they may serve individualization and emancipation, as emphasized in Evgeny Morozov's *The Net Delusion*.[24] At the same time, these tools also serve to envelop individuals and bottom-up collectives in the exploitative commercial systems of the

[20] John Perry Barlow, "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace," *Electronic Frontier Foundation*, February 8, 1996, https://www.eff.org/cyberspace-independence.

[21] Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody* (London: Penguin, 2008).

[22] Lawrence Lessig, *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

[23] Stephan Packard, "Abhängigkeiten postdigitaler Souveränität: Schwundbegriffe individueller und kollektiver Handlungsmacht in transformierten Mythen," *UFITA* (2024).

[24] Evgeny Morozov, *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011).

'surveillance capitalism' described by Shoshana Zuboff.[25] The divergence between the two positions becomes obvious as Zuboff sees commercialized surveillance as an at least partially technology-driven deviation or at least arabesque of a potentially more emancipatory capitalism, whereas Morozov's critique sees the oppressive use of new technologies as a more direct continuation of existing means of political oppression. Morozov pointed out this distinction in a review[26] published only days before that small, possibly spontaneous protest at Cologne pitted individual human actors and consumers in support of corporate opposition against government plans to regulate usually corporately held copyright by forcing corporations to limit individual data uploads to their platforms. On the third, supposedly 'grassroot' level, then, the challenge to individuals' digital sovereignty by governments and by corporations is paralleled by a rhetorical if not ontological confusion about the individuals identities themselves, as they oscillate between a self-identification as personal human entities, post-digitally compromised networked actors, and consumers in shifting capitalist economies: Three prongs of descriptions of a new, digital populism that uses established forms of propaganda coupled with recent forms of political commodification and digitalization.[27]

It is difficult to separate the catachrestic, deliberate irony in some of the performances comprising such protests from the precarity of self-effacing, perhaps involuntary ironies as the precipitous placement of individual political actors has them struggle not only against governments and globalized corporate antagonists, but against the doubtful ontology of their own identity. When Willboy eventually goes on to sing, "Wir wollen Memes sehen (memes!) / Wir wollen Free sein (Free!)"—'We want to see memes (memes!) / We want to be *free*! (*free*!)'—the use of the English rather then the German word for 'free' showcases global dependencies even as the illustration of freedom by access to (potentially copyright-infringing) meme culture risks at least the appearance of trivializing the immensely relevant fight for access to equal active and passive participation in post-digital public communication formats. In fact, the lyrics seem to be carefully chosen to emphasize rather than avoid that risk. It is here that the third tension intersecting in these performances of protest becomes perhaps most explicit: That between the digital, whose public communication is already posed in potential contrast to traditional public spaces and public spheres, and its post-digital

[25] Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a human future at the new frontier of power* (London: Profile, 2018).

[26] Evgeny Morozov, "Capitalism's New Clothes," *The Baffler*, February 4, 2019, https://thebaffler.com/latest/capitalisms-new-clothes-morozov.

[27] Gianpietro Mazzoleni, Julianne Stewart, and Bruce Horsfield, eds. *The Media and Neo-Populism* (Westport: Praeger, 2003); Mojca Pajnik and Birgit Sauer, eds., *Populism and the Web* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

compromise, which expands the pervasive digitalization to a point at which that opposition, along with its symbolized opposition of generations and political stances, grows obsolescent.

What emerges from these intersections is a combined imaginary of post-digital, post-human sovereignty: in which a burgeoning post-human redefinition of individuals provides aesthetic motifs, and immediate confusion about the current post-digital state of human/machine distinctions provides a sphere of conceptual de-differentiation. Both are taken together to symbolically enact the negotiated attribution of democratic legitimacy and efficacy to individual and collective actors in public debate.

Post-Digital Sovereignty

Post-digitality has been invented three times in the last quarter century. At its historical—and recent—point of emergence, the concept of the post-digital has already connected to the concept of the post-human. In Robert Pepperell and Michael Punt's 2000 monograph on *The Postdigital Membrane*, the authors continue the project from Pepperell's 1995 book on *The Post-Human Condition*.[28] In both projects, Pepperell's and then Punt's approach combines a detailed look at the immediate media practices that shift not least in the environment in which they work as they write, collaborate, research, and publish, with a broad philosophical and psychoanalytical reflection on meanings and concepts that takes inspiration from the Toronto school. In the spirit of Marshall McLuhan's groundbreaking transformation of Romanticism's fascination with paradoxes of semiotics into a paradoxical account of new media,[29] Pepperell and Punt continuously question the relationship between the tools that encircle our communication with the ways we represent that communication through concrete messages, but also through the shapes of the imaginations with which we represent our conceptions of that communication in turn. Where McLuhan begged us to cast our glance sideways from the content of a telephone conversation to the material reality of copper wires spanning the continent to make it possible, he warns us against mistaking the phone call as a traditional conversation. Pepperell and Punt ask us to question both the media blindness of a writer dismissive of their writing software, *and* the visionary imagining writing styles that might become possible in a conceivable future. Mistaking the 2000's word processing present for a frictionless convergence of digital sources and actors in a networked realm of ideas is no more or less misleading than the revanchist mistaking their PC for a type writer. Finding that established

[28] Pepperell and Punt, *Membrane*; Robert Pepperell, *The Post-Human Condition* (Bristol: Intellect, 1995).
[29] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media. The Extensions of Man* (London: Sphere, 1967).

accounts of technological and societal transformation are oriented towards a set of social, economic, and technological cuts into their subject matter, the authors reorientate their inquiry towards a triangle comprised of technology, desire, and imagination: Hence, they take greater account of the role of merely desired and imagines aspects of technology that might go beyond a diapositive's concrete capabilities, but nevertheless informs the actions that surround it by shaping its interpretations. Examples include the at present merely imagined possibility of a quasi-human AI interlocutor which nevertheless gives direction to the development of future technology, the expression of wishes and desires towards current innovations, as well the account we give of previous shifts in the societal contextualization of automated algorithmic machines. As the fear as well as the hope that social bots might be able to simulate human political communicators has shaped the accusation against CCIA companies no less than it has informed the Cologne protestors' self-presentation, it equally clarifies the ways in which this discourse on post-digitality is set to continue the ideas of post-humanity when interpreted through the lens of trans-human technology.

This differentiation also applies to the central concept of post-digitality itself:

> The term 'Postdigital' is intended to acknowledge the current state of technology whilst rejecting the implied conceptual shift of the 'digital revolution'—a shift apparently as abrupt as the 'on/off,' 'zero/one' logic of the machines now pervading our daily lives. New conceptual models are required to describe the continuity between art, computing, philosophy and science that avoid binarism, determinism or reductionism.[30]

Thus moving the cultural and political concept of the post-digital outside of the binary coding wrongly attributed to any cultural treatment of digitality, this theory connects the shifting idea of the digital to corresponding shifts in conceptions of the human: "In the postdigital membrane, the inter-reaction between culture and technology produces a floating amalgam in which self image, artefact or system and generalised representations of desire coexist—albeit in competition."[31] While the previous work on the post-human condition is explicitly poised as a 'polemical manifesto,'[32] and the authors spend some time describing the conceptual conflict between different notions of the digital supported by different sets of desires and imaginations, the immediate import of the conception is so sweeping that it hardly connects back to an immediate political interpretation. The authors call in question

[30] Pepperell and Punt, *Membrane*, 2.
[31] Ibidem, 38.
[32] Ibidem, 3.

the idea that digital offerings from government agencies are "a response to people power,"[33] and perhaps more troublingly, they argue that "a basic antagonism throughout the twentieth century between powerful institutional authorities of rational science and the unorthodox beliefs of the vitalists, mystics and homeopaths" is set to be "rapidly revised as the authority of science [...] is increasingly questioned."[34]

But Kim Cascone's account published in the very same year has much more to say about the immediate connection between the post-digital and the possibility of emancipation. Perhaps surprisingly, Cascone's point of departure in new aesthetics of musical production focused issues of inequality and technological justice in much more concrete terms.[35] What is described as post-digital here is the end of the asymmetrical access to digital means among musical innovators. Not only do private and individual artists now find access to innovative digital tools, but these tools, once freed from the exclusive dominion of "researchers in academic centers,"[36] hardly return to those exalted spaces: "The post-digital music that Max, SMS, AudioSculpt, PD, and other such tools make possible rarely makes it back to the ivory towers, yet these non-academic composers anxiously await new tools to make their way onto a multitude of Web sites."[37] Cascone sees the beginning circulation of technology and resources on the web but mostly recommends CDs, of which he lists a set of recommended entries, as the vehicle to free technology for the post-digital future.

Both accounts see us move past the concept of the digital towards the post-digital not because digitalization ceases or is complete, and certainly not because there is a lack of digital technology, but because the use of the concept of the 'digital' as a distinction hardly manages to make any more difference. It is this central idea that is taken up once more when the concept is rediscovered one and a half decades later. In his claim for post-digital humanities doubling as an exhortation to move beyond the current trend of DH academia, David Berry writes in 2014:

> Today we live in computational abundance whereby our everyday lives and the environment that surrounds us are suffused with digital technologies. This is a world of anticipatory technology and contextual computing that uses smart diffused computational processing to create a fine web of computational resources that are embedded into the material world. Thus, the historical distinction

[33] Ibidem, 53.

[34] Ibidem, 112.

[35] Kim Cascone, "The Aesthetics of Failure: 'Post-Digital' Tendencies in Contemporary Computer Music," *Computer Music Journal* 24, no. 4 (2000): 12–18.

[36] Ibidem, 12.

[37] Ibidem, 12.

> between the digital and the non-digital becomes increasingly blurred, to the extent that to talk about the digital presupposes an experiential disjuncture that makes less and less sense. Indeed, just as the ideas of "online" or "being online" have become anachronistic as a result of our always-on smartphones and tablets and widespread wireless networking technologies, so too the term "digital" perhaps assumes a world of the past.[38]

Berry continues this line of thought in a manner that mirrors the shift of many account of digital education from a direct appeal towards individual freedom to the didactic resources needed to render individuals competent to perhaps defend, but certainly realize those freedoms.

It is here that these ideas connect directly to the equally shifting accounts of digital sovereignty, which underwent a similar shift from politics to education roughly at the same time.[39] In their overview of the various concepts of digital sovereignty, Julia Pohle and Thorsten Thiel actually reverse this order. For the discourse in political science on which they focus, the emphasis on "the importance of individual self-determination" as well as "the autonomy of citizens in their roles as employees, consumers, and users of digital technologies and services"[40] comes in third place after conceptions of digital sovereignty that reacted to challenges to state sovereignty either from 'cyber exceptionalism'—the intention to disconnect a liberated 'cyberspace' from the rule of nation-bound laws according to the pattern of Barlow's 'Declaration of Cyberspace Independence'—or from 'multi-stakeholder internet governance' that placed control over the internet in the hands of other than purely state institutions, while stull privileging institutions', organizations', and other collectives' ability to exert such control rather than personal individuals' quest for freedom.[41]

I believe the reverse relation of these ideas to be significant. From one point of view, digital sovereignty has always been about state sovereignty, now challenged by globalized technological infrastructure, and later devolving into parallel claims for citizens' autonomy; from the other, the demand for individual freedom has purloined the concept of an absolutist head-of-state's sovereignty early on, affirming individual rather than collective self-determination, and returning to state sovereignty only as the dependencies of individual agency in digital environments demands. Whatever a detailed historical research into the provenance of the term might yet yield, the

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[38] David Berry, "Post-Digital Humanities: Computation and Cultural Critique in the Arts and Humanities," *Educause Review* (May/June 2014): 22–26, 22.

[39] Gapski, *Souveränität*.

[40] Pohle and Thiel, "Digital Sovereignty," 11.

[41] Ibidem, 4.

histories told by various current accounts of the idea of digital sovereignty differ fundamentally in the roles that they ascribe to individuals, organizations, and governments, even as they differ in their attribution of direction: not merely from state to individual and back, but also from technology to human society or vice versa. Pepperell and Punt's model of the triad of technology, imagination, and desire is merely one of many conceptions that would be apt to describe the circumstance by which either resolution of that antinomy, in favor of technology or of human desire and imagination, falls short of a full account of their systemic and networked mutuality.

Each of the three conceptions of post-digitality force the discourse on digital sovereignty to return its precarious central concept to arenas in which it will be once again directly challenged by its individual, societal, and political others: Once the digital is no longer a separate realm from all other aspects of life, its goals in the formation of competently sovereign individuals can no longer be separated from the dependencies as well as the limits of scholarly and education interventions. Once a digital privilege for select institutions with greater access to recent technology is no longer naturalized, the direct challenge to individual self-determination that arises from the asymmetric relationships among individuals, corporations, and governmental actors can no longer be side-stepped. Finally, as the involvement of all, even and especially politically challenging discourse, on technologically driven shifts is understood and realized as negotiations of imagination and desire, the recurrent imaginaries we employ become key to understanding the treatment of these political challenges. In examples such as the small Cologne protest, the combination of the post-digital and the post-human is no coincidence.

Post-Human Digital Sovereignty

Crucially, it is the notion of the individual human that is constantly redefined as arguments shift from one history of technological and societal change to another. In terms of the concept of the human, this agential confusion may already point to a shift towards the post-human long before quasi-human robotic or cyborg actors take the place of the social bots denied and embraced by the protestors at Cologne. Placed sometimes in opposition to society, sometimes in opposition to technology, the individual human appears as a resolution of unresolvable binary oppositions, a means by which to insist that one side of an agential cut[42] is more real than another.[43]

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[42] Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2007).

[43] Schüttpelz, "Elemente einer Akteur-Medien-Theorie," 9–67.

The contradictions raised by the decisionism of these cuts attain at once to competing sides in political contest. The protestors' insistence on their humanity as a claim to political agency leads directly into their emphasis on the digitally conveyed network of their shared and distributed agency. At the same time, the challenge levelled both at the CCIA lobbying group *and* their individual supporters is, paradoxically, to deny the latters' involvement, either by challenging their ontological or their rational status: if they are not social bots pretending to be human, they remain humans pretending to a politically mature perspective they lack. The combined imaginary of the networked post-digital and ontologically suspect post-human individual recurs in treatments around recent populisms even beyond explicit topics of legislated digital regulation.

One striking recurring trope is the direct accusation levelled by one social media user at another, accusing the latter of being a social bot. Performatively, this seems contradictory: If the agent is a bot and if this disqualifies them as an intersubjective political interlocutor, there is no need nor advantage for any challenge directed at their person. In the public imaginary that makes sense of such communicative moves, however, associating political voices with automated voices *either* concretely *or* metaphorically amounts to the same suspicion of public discourse as being subject to covert lobbying. At the same time, the practical rhetorical use of the move make sense in the light of public communication: The actual addressees of the accusation would then be the onlookers, the audience that might follow the disqualification of one voice as they draw their own further conclusions about the debated and the issues under discussion. More specifically, a poster accusing another poster directly of being a bot for the benefit of other users is performing the very transformation of seemingly direct and tendentially private to public and potentially political communication that characterizes the emergence and the quandaries of social media environments as channels for political debate: A technologically and socially supported concrete enactment of the paradoxical status of 'latent publicness' as described by Niklas Luhmann, by which any individual human would have to take psychological account of the possible shift of their communication from private to public at any time.[44] The functions of social media underscore and superficially solve this paradox by making that shift if not predictable, at least prone to be experienced or indeed suffered; but equally prone to be instigated and sought. Only in this context does the direct challenge to an interlocutor's ontological aptness for debate become functional.

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[44] Niklas Luhmann, "Die Beobachtung der Beobachter im politischen System: Zur Theorie der öffentlichen Meinung," in *Öffentliche Meinung. Theorie, Methoden, Befunde. Beiträge zu Ehren von Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann*, ed. Jürgen Wilke (Freiburg, München: Alber, 1992): 77–86, 77–78.

The technological idiosyncrasy is mirrored by the sociological tendencies of recent transformations of protest culture as well as by shifts in the public sphere itself. As protest movements increasingly opt for 'horizontalism,' eschewing political leadership and focused representation as well as centralized organization in favor of a high and flat participatory culture, protestors have (probably wrongly, but explicitly) begun to associate this change with a turn away from dogma and even ideology.[45] This has rendered the very moment of public appearance for resistant movements potentially paradoxical, as Jan Beuerbach argues:[46] If polemical interventions replace unexceptional engagements in the rational political debate of a traditionally understood Habermasian public sphere, the dependency of interventions on spectacle might reduce the former to the latter. Turning to Jacques Rancière's description of political suspensions of the daily political order, the 'police' of quotidian institutionalized order, Beuerbach goes on to describe the interventionalist staging of equality, typical for horizontalist movements, as its own political efficacy 'despite everything', "trotz alledem."

I will follow the same argument in the next section. For now, the intention of the current investigation remains with the moment of unease as communicative actors stage their political engagement by taking notice of the potential transformation of private into public communication, which intersects with accusations as well affirmations of post-digital realities and post-human conceptualizations in the combined imaginary in question. In the paradigmatic case of digitally organized and emergent protest, the moment in which the always latently potential transfer from private to public becomes obvious will often converge with the moment in which the seeming reservation of the 'merely digital' proves to have been always already part of a post-digital assembly in which borders of the digital can be transgressed easily in either direction – protestors may become visible as well as exposed, political backlash may find them both publicly and in their private and intimate existence.

There is a larger discursive strand connected to these ideas that discusses a progressive or emancipatory potential of networked communication on the internet as a confluence between general emancipation and the need for a 'consent of the networked' in the governance of those communicative environments themselves, as Rebecca MacKinnon and Manuel Castells have each argued from different points of

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[45] Cf., e.g., Zeynep Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas. The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2017), here esp. chapters 3 and 4.

[46] Jan Beuerbach, "Öffentlichkeit trotz alledem. Polemisches Erscheinen und Archivarbeit postdigitaler Proteste," in *Affekt Macht Netz. Auf dem Weg zu einer Sozialtheorie der Digitalen Gesellschaft*, eds. Rainer Mühlhoff, Anja Breljak, Jan Slaby (Bielefeld: transcript, 2019): 291–314.

views as early as 2012.[47] Discussing the far more consequential protests of the 'Arab spring', which remain incomparable to an impromptu legal and safe demonstration at Cologne's cathedral in many ways, Evgeny Morozov has pointed out this ambivalence. He turns against "cyber-utopians who believe the Arab spring has been driven by social networks" to the point that they "ignore the real-world activism underpinning them."[48] And he goes on to defend the stance of Canadian journalist Malcolm Gladwell, whose insistence in a *New Yorker* website chat that while digital media played a large role in the organization of the Arab spring, they neither created the movement nor guaranteed its success. To refute Gladwell's argument, Morozov continues, "cyber-utopians would need to establish that there was no coordination of these protests by networks of grassroots activists—with leaders and hierarchies—who have forged strong ties (online or offline or both) prior to the protests," and Morozov concludes: "What we have seen so far suggests otherwise."[49]

It is not my intention here to draw a false analogy between the contextualized political struggle surrounding the European Unions's reformulation of copyright enforcement and its concretization in a protest outside Cologne's Cathedral in 2019 with the existential contest of the Arab Spring. Limited similarities are nevertheless obvious in the ways in which the imaginary instrumentalization of new technologies connects hopes surrounding the discovery of their potential with a general popular movement towards utopian politics while opening the doors to unbounded populist movements, as Zeynep Tufekci has argued in drawing a line from the Arab Spring to the political success of Donald Trump.[50]

However, Morozov's (persuasive) argument repeats the direct rivalry between conceiving of actors in a digital sphere as either properly digital or as fully human, with more-than-digital personalities, networks, social ties, and material conditions. In other words, it stages the post-digital turn at the very moment at which protests emerge into visibility. In Morozov's words:

> [W]hat we need to come to grips with is that, once the Internet is everywhere, a question like "What are the political implications of the

[47] Rebecca MacKinnon, *Consent of the Networked: The Worldwide Struggle for Internet Freedom* (New York: Basic Books, 2012); Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope. Social Movements in the Internet Age* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012).

[48] Evgeny Morozov, "Facebook and Twitter are just places revolutionaries go," *The Guardian*, March 7, 2011, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/mar/07/facebook-twitter-revolutionaries-cyber-utopians.

[49] Morozov, "Places revolutionaries go."

[50] Zeynep Tufekci, "How social media took us from Tahrir Suqare to Donald Trump," *MIT Technology Review*, August 14, 2018, https://www.technologyreview.com/2018/08/14/240325/how-social-media-took-us-from-tahrir-square-to-donald-trump.

> Internet?" loses much meaning, in part because it's like asking "What are the political implications of everything for everything?"[51]

This underscores the fact that the opposition between conceptual orders that sharply distinguish analog and digital ontologies and those that embrace a post-digital 'membrane' is available as a distinction on which political actors might project differences about attributing state, corporate, or individual sovereignty and agency, but does not substantially privilege any such projection. The imaginary that combines post-digital and post-human motifs at that moment of political emergence remains a choice—rendering its elective characteristics even more interesting.

I want to draw attention to three. First, the challenge to seemingly human actors as potential 'social bots' instrumentalizes a fundamental inability to distinguish one from the other to create a politically productive zone of de-differentiation. As media linguists and sociologists have long argued,[52] it is not merely technologically but conceptually impossible to clearly distinguish bots from humans, simply because there is no clear distinction between a human's or even collective's 'appropriately human' use of automation as a tool and the 'inhuman' shift towards a purely automated actor. However, referring to a scientifically provable fact about the status of an interlocutor is repeatedly staged as a political move that supposedly reaches beyond the normative contest of opposing opinions into the descriptive reference of factual preconditions. As Bernhard Pörksen has pointed out,[53] talk of 'filter bubbles' on social media is similarly empirically and conceptually untenable; and yet it has become a repeated reference point for the staging of actual 'filter clashes,' i.e. points of contention as opposed to descriptively distinguished pathologies of communication subject to legitimate disqualification. In her discussion of the mathematically grounded idea of 'homophily' as a standard feature of social networks online and offline, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun makes the stronger point that descriptively attainable facts, even where they exist, cannot relive the political pressure of normative debate: Even if certain procedures of building clusters and communities in social networks tend towards 'like' actors grouping together, the realization of that tendency remains a practical performance open to political criticism and rivalled by alternative practices.[54] Whether to arouse or to refute suspicions, the cultural enactment of ideas of 'social bots', 'filter bubbles,' 'echo

[51] Morozov, "Places revolutionaries go."

[52] Cf. e.g. Florian Gallwitz and Michael Kreil, "The Rise and Fall of 'Social Bot' Research," *SSRN* (March 28, 2021): https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3814191.

[53] Bernhard Pörksen, *Die große Gereiztheit* (München: Carl Hanser, 2018).

[54] Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, "Queerying Homophily," in *Pattern Discrimination*, eds. Clemens Apprich, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, Florian Cramer et al. (Lüneburg: meson press, 2018): 59–97.

chambers,' 'homophily,' and other real or seeming attributes of online communication renegotiates the attribution of political subject status through the combined motifs of the post-digital and the post-human.

Secondly, this has been accompanied by an interesting shift in the description of non-human, automated actors. If the traditional assertion about robotic agents would emphasize their logical, procedural, unemotional cognition and expression, the identification of the political enemy or opponent with a mere machine has opened the doors to the opposite assumption: because social bots are presumably used to instigate emotional and populist discourse, because filter bubbles technologically reinforce a tendency towards affective reasoning—the suspicious signs of machine communication are now more usually identified with strongly affective, emotional and irrational rhetoric.

The trope is not, however, new. In fact, as it appears here, it is considerably older than the public discussion of new networked public spheres that is supposedly connects to. At closer inspection, the parallel between the political aesthetics of this moment and the broader question of an indistinguishability between human and digital, robotic, or networked agents is rather more limited. With their playful mimicking of quasi-robotic voices and seemingly mechanistic co-ordination, their direct inspiration draws less on negotiations of an 'automation of sociality' more recently discussed as a serious concern of materialized social networks,[55] or deeper discussions of the ontological distinctions between man and machine:[56] As called upon in the present moment, the question is not one of ontology as much as of political rhetorics, not of a confused reality as much as of a contested social and legal intentionality. The uptake of ostentatiously superficial SF aesthetics places the topicalization of the question for human rights in the shape of the question for a humanity challenged by automated others in the much longer arc that David Gunkel has extended back to the distinction of things and persons in ancient Roman law, only to have it crystalized in Karel Čapek's seminal 1920 theatre play, which treated the plight of human and dehumanized industrial workers through the imaginary of non-human robotic laborers.[57] In the discourse of Science Fiction, the tropes employed here have been appearing for several decades in those cases in which the distinction between humans and machines is in question, or deliberately obscured. Consider the first paragraphs of Philip K. Dick's novel *Do Androids Dream, of Electric Sheep*, basis of

[55] Cf. e.g. Robert W. Gehl and Maria Bakardjeva, *Socialbots and their friends: Digital media and the automation of sociality* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

[56] Cf. e.g. James Boyle, *The Line. AI and the Future of Personhood* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2024).

[57] David J. Gunkel, *Person, Thing, Robot: A Moral and Legal Ontology for the 21st Century and Beyond* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2023), ix.

the 1982 movie *Blade Runner*. Despite the many differences between novel and movie, both repeatedly challenge their audiences to distinguish between man and machine ('replicants') while making it aesthetically and narratively impossible to do so with certainty. The first chapter of the novel begins as follows:

> A merry little surge of electricity piped by automatic alarm from the mood organ beside his bed awakened Rick Deckard. Surprised—it always surprised him to find himself awake without prior notice—he rose from the bed, stood up in his multicolored pajamas, and stretched. [...]
>
> At his console he hesitated between dialing for a thalamic suppressant (which would abolish his mood of rage) or a thalamic stimulant (which would make him irked enough to win the argument [with his partner]).
>
> "My schedule for today lists a six-hour self-accusatory depression," Iran said.
>
> "What? Why did you schedule that?" It defeated the whole purpose of the mood organ.[58]

The irony of this situation lies in two moves along the axes that integrate these persons into the agencement of their technological environment. On the one hand, emotional control is externalized to a machine; on the other hand, the shifting instance of who controls and programs the machine is thus rendered paradoxical. Crucially, that paradox in turn serves the function of raising doubt, but never quite answering the question, about which if any of the two persons mechanically controlling their emotion is actually human—or what that might mean.

I would suggest it is well worth examining how the irony, the paradoxical indistinguishability of man and machine, and the resultant ambiguity about the proper locus of emotions reappears in the combined imaginary of the post-human and the post-digital in political protest. In Willboy's *Wir sind keine Bots*, not only is the emotional fervor of political resistance coupled with the ambiguity about the actors 'programmed by Google' one way or another, but the erasure of digitized information as potentially caused by Article 13 appears as a bereftness of emotional content and value:

> Und jetzt stell dir vor
> Alles, was wir teil'n geht verlor'n

[58] Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (New York: Doubleday, 1968), chapter 1.

Und jetzt stell dir vor
Alles wird schwarz und ruhig wie bevor[59]

'And now imagine
All we have shared is lost
And now imagine
All goes black and quiet as before'

(Once again employing the English-adjacent term, 'bevor' assonating with 'before,' where German grammar would usually choose 'zuvor.') It is no coincidence that these lines evoke the speech of the replicant in *Blade Runner* who proves not his technological but his normative, politically engaging personhood by fearing a very similarly envisioned loss of emotional content:

> I've seen things you people wouldn't believe... Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion... I watched C-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhäuser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain... Time to die.[60]

The reversal of emotional and affective qualities as distinguishing factors from human to machine actors characterizes the combined imaginary of the post-human and the post-digital in current debates on digital sovereignty. This is mirrored in reinterpretations of the function of the 'Turing Test,' debates about automated or human moderation of social media and internet fora, and even the main accusation levelled at Article 13 itself, i.e. the suspicion that its implementation would force platform providers to employ automated content filters, and that these would be fundamentally unable to gauge the intended, possibly fair, use of uploaded material due to their restrictions in interpreting human communication.

Thirdly, the main topic of the Turing Test is of course the issue of deception itself. In the test,[61] a machine must attempt to pretend to be a human; but of course, a machine, if conceived as ontologically irreconcilable with a human, cannot pretend, as it lacks the internal state that would have to differ from its pretended intention. Here, a last crucial shift takes place in the accusation of the political opponent as employing social bots to stand in for humans: The state of deception shifts from the supposed covert lobbyist to the imagination of a machine that cannot form intentions intending to deceive other actors about that difference. This puts the irony employed

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[59] Willboy, *Genius*.

[60] Ridley Scott, director. *Blade Runner*. The Ladd Company, Shaw Brothers, 1982, 117 minutes, TC 1:47.

[61] Jack Copeland, ed. *The Essential Turing: The Ideas that Gave Birth to the Computer Age* (Oxford: UP, 2004), 558.

by the catachrestic appropriation—*We are bots*—into much clearer relief: It functions not least by renegotiating the idea of deception, in which an intended communicative outcome and a communicated intention differ, through the ironical simultaneity of a ostentatious and an actual communicated intention.

Conclusion: Post-Digital and Post-Human Hatred of Democracy

Who then is deceiving whom in the combined post-human and post-digital imaginary as a motif in the debate on digital sovereignty?

It is here, I believe, that the current trope connects back most clearly to the underlying political ambivalences of discourse on democratic contest as a whole. Jacques Rancière has described the notable confluence of two kinds of 'hatred of democracy,' which, as he emphasizes, "is certainly nothing new":

> Indeed it is as old as democracy for a simple reason: the word itself is an expression of hatred.[62]

> So, confronting democratic vitality took the form of a double bind that can be succinctly put: either democratic life signified a large amount of popular participation in discussing public affairs, and it was a bad thing; or it stood for a form of social life that turned energies toward individual satisfaction, and it was a bad thing. Hence, good democracy must be that form of government and social life capable of controlling the double excess of collective activity and individual withdrawal inherent to democratic life.[63]

The ambivalences of the post-digital and post-human imaginary in the debate on digital sovereignty encapsulate this fundamental ambivalence towards the human individual that fails to satisfy democracy. Either by expressing the failures of a system that privileges private and anti-social intentions, or by poisoning the politically and communally directed intentions of the system with private and selfish needs.

As emotion, deception, and agency are redistributed in the fantasy of the social bot masquerading as a political subject, or metaphorically expressing the subversion of that subject through targeted propaganda, the fundamental confusion of that hatred of democracy reappears. The selfishness of the all-too-democratic or the failed democratic citizen is taken up by the idea of the political agenda unfit for political debate because it is entirely selfish—or because its origin lies entirely outside

[62] Jaceques Rancière, *The Hatred of Democracy*, trans. Steve Corcoran (London: Verso, 2006), 2.
[63] Ibidem, 8.

the self. It is taken up again by the quandary of the political performance itself, when acknowledging a person having stated that they are no bot implies the acceptance of their statement; and this is again reversed in the mere performance of mutually acknowledged communicative subjectivity in the appeal to a public sphere latently potential and perhaps readily emergent from individualized communication on social networks, in which the unlimited possible reach of post-digital communication, beyond an imagined mere digital sphere, at once counters the selfish ideal of a purely private realm for the citizen to prosper as the polis crumbles. The ambiguity of the hatred of democracy returns as the citizen stepping pout of the private shadows into the public sphere is equally brandished as a threat, a populist incursion that threatens the polis in the first place, even as the optimism of an egalitarian cyberspace is replaced by fears of new tools for totalitarian movements and governments. The irony with which abject monickers are turned into catachrestic self-descriptors is often tinged with an ironic self-effacement of the possibly private and selfish needs materializing the quest for freedom—*we want to be free* turning into *we want to see memes*. In what are perhaps its worst discursive forms, the motif cans serve to detract from substantial issues and distract from equal debate, obscuring important distinctions such as those between international infrastructure and nationalistic discourse behind a similar façade of sovereignty, or between individual, corporate and government actors behind a façade of individual versus algorithmic actors.

But the reverse interpretation of the motif remains equally plausible. *We want to see memes* can turn into *we want full participation in public debate*; it can reverse the limitation of 'merely' digital campaigns by showcasing their post-digital reach and turn the act of the less-than-human bot into the successfully networked agency of a more-than-human activist. The question of post-human and post-digital individuality depends on decisionist agential cuts and hence remains is inherently undecidable: choosing who is a true human remains descriptively impossible in most circumstances and normatively unsatisfying in all political contest, as affect and deception become shifting markers among political opponents. Likewise, the motif takes up the destabilizing effects of post-digital transformation, complementing and showcasing rather than replacing or displacing the destabilization of global political order in what Fraser calls a 'post-Westphalian' perspective.

The confusion of all of these ideas in one combined motif remains, of course, a confusion. It remains undecidable and destabilizing. This renders it a potent vehicle for the descriptively undecidable decisions posed for normative political debate.

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