

European Public Sphere

Towards Digital Sovereignty for Europe

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(Eds.)

Digital sovereignty

Digital sovereignty is not just a question of technological competitiveness. It is also a question of Europe's political and social autonomy, innovation in business, and the freedom of research institutions. A European brand of digital sovereignty must have its own distinct identity that is not guided either by State intervention and isolationism in the mould of a Great Firewall or by a laissez-faire approach that leaves everything up to market forces. Instead, the concept of European digital sovereignty pursues a vision of digitalisation based on freedom of choice, observance of European legal principles and values, strengthening education and solidarity, openness towards the rest of the world and the promotion of fair competition.

Europe lacks a common digital infrastructure for the key areas of the public sphere

The coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the potential of a digital society. But it has also starkly exposed the lack of a sovereign European digital infrastructure in areas such as e-government, healthcare and education. Europe must now take bold action to develop a comprehensive solution. The aim is to create a digital ecosystem that reflects our European values and guarantees principles such as transparency, fairness and the protection of private data against misuse – in other words, a sovereign European ecosystem that is democratically accountable to its citizens. The proposal for a [European Public Sphere \(acatech IMPULSE 2020\)](#) sets out a concrete path for European policymakers to strengthen Europe's digital sovereignty in the public

sphere, based on an understanding of digital sovereignty not only as an industrial policy goal but as a goal that helps to strengthen democracy. If it is to make any inroads into the monopoly of the major providers, this technology infrastructure must be conceived as a public service.

- Government and public institutions must play an active role in shaping the European Public Sphere –regulation alone is not enough. The digital world should follow the same principle as the analogue world: the State should guarantee a public interest infrastructure, provided as a public service, that facilitates cultural, social and societal life and individual economic activity in Europe. In this context, science has a particularly important role in promoting socio-technical innovations.
- The European Public Sphere must therefore have a participatory governance structure that strikes an appropriate balance between government control and initiative, civil society participation, scientific advice and commercial development. This governance structure is essentially envisaged as a pan-European project. However, Germany could lead the way in partnership with France, initiating the relevant developments and creating the first, adequately resourced structures.
- The European Public Sphere must also create synergies by connecting the numerous European initiatives that already exist in the field of digital sovereignty. These include the GAIA-X¹ cloud infrastructure project, the Digital Agency provided for in the German government's coalition agreement, various digital identity initiatives and the Prototype Fund² of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research.

1 | GAIA-X is a proposal for a next-generation European data infrastructure, developed at European level by representatives of government, science and industry.

2 | The Prototype Fund is a project of Open Knowledge Foundation Deutschland, funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF).



The concept of a European Public Sphere could help to realise the goal of digital self-determination and participation in Europe in several different areas.

- **Strengthening public opinion-forming in an open digital sphere:** The European Public Sphere employs transparent, open and participatory technologies, standards and terms of use. This allows it to achieve the delicate balance between avoiding the viral spread of misinformation and hate speech and protecting the right to freedom of expression. Fake news, filter bubbles and polarisation are prevented, and an open debate is ensured. The EPS offers Europe's citizens access to a diverse range of media content from providers such as public service and private broadcasters, publishers, scientific and cultural institutions including universities, theatres and museums, and many others besides. AI-based translation allows this content to be consumed by speakers of all European languages, enabling direct debate between people in different countries and with different mother tongues. Citizens right across Europe gain new perspectives on topics that are relevant to all of them, leading to the emergence of a European public.
- **Protecting valuable data:** The governance structure and technologies used by the European Public Sphere combine to ensure high data protection standards. Unlike on current platforms, users retain control over their data and are completely free to decide how it is used. Providers can still make data available so that it can be used to create innovations, but they must follow strict rules and use open and accountable technologies. The EPS thus supports a number of other current initiatives such as the data strategies of the German government and the European Union and the proposal for a Data Governance Act.
- **Accelerating European solutions in other areas:** The modular, open technologies of the European Public Sphere can also help Europe to develop its own digital solutions to current challenges in the fields of education and science. Moreover, digital solutions can allow European citizens to engage more directly in e-government and the political process.

- **Reducing the dominance of powerful foreign actors in digital markets:** The European Public Sphere will provide a growing range of attractive alternative offers to the existing platforms. Companies, civil society organisations and cultural and educational institutions can use the European Public Sphere's modular technology and the network effects in the EPS ecosystem to create a diverse array of attractive digital solutions that combine a values-based approach with user-centred development.

Decisive action is required now to build a common digital infrastructure in Europe without delay.

Concrete next steps:

- The first step involves the establishment of a Digital Agency. The agency would be governed by public law and charged with the public interest mission of building a digital ecosystem, for instance by establishing norms and standards, holding innovation competitions and awarding funding.
- This funding would support the members of the second pillar – a European Public Sphere Alliance (EPS Alliance) that brings together the relevant actors from science, industry, culture and civil society. In return, these actors (e.g. companies, start-ups, projects and public entities) would develop technologies and offers for the EPS ecosystem.
- The actors would have to commit to European values and to acting in the public interest. In particular, they would have to commit to an open-source strategy for EPS technology, in order to enable its use by third parties and ensure its public accountability.
- There are a number of additional measures that can support the establishment of a European Public Sphere, albeit only in the medium term. For instance, there is good reason to hope that the European Commission's Digital Markets Act and Digital Services Act³ will require a more responsible approach from the dominant international platforms in terms of their gatekeeper role and the content that they disseminate.

3 | The Digital Markets Act aims to ensure that these platforms behave fairly. Together with the Digital Services Act, the Digital Markets Act forms one of the key pillars of the EU's Digital Strategy.



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