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The politics of micro-decisions, or: visions for the democratic control of movement

FLORIAN SPRENGER 23 May 2016

What does it mean to be human in digital cultures? How has the ideal image of a life in and for a community, which always constitutes the core of politics, changed?

Today the movement of goods, money, data and people is being organized in increasingly non-transparent ways. This is a great threat to the international community. After all, our communal spirit and our shared structures arise from how we connect and communicate, how we work and make politics, and also how we flee and start anew.

All this is made possible by movement that takes place within a network of interdependencies. Such movement depends on sites of logistical control, which in turn are a prerequisite for preventing this network from breaking down. While societies cannot manage without this vital ingredient – let us provisionally call it the control of movement – one may rightly suspect that whoever now exerts this type of control will also programme our common future.

That is why it is high time to ask whether decisions about the control of movement should be made non-transparently. Shouldn't societies claim democratic oversight of sites of movement control instead? And if so, what should be the imperatives to reimagine these sites accordingly?

In order to address these issues, under the title [TACIT FUTURES](#), the [Berliner Gazette](#) has embarked upon an annual project that will culminate in a three day conference October 27-29 at Volksbühne in Berlin, including a great number of activists, journalists and thinkers. Here, the philosopher and media theorist Florian Sprenger is looking for answers to the project's pressing questions.



Container ship and tug. Flickr/Ingrid Taylor. Some rights reserved.

In the presence of digital cultures only incomplete perspectives prevail, for no one is close enough to this presence to get a whole picture of it.

What I believe myself able to discern from my limited perspective is the growing importance of micro-decisions. I mean by that all the small, in themselves rather insignificant decisions, reached by means of algorithms which ensure that data packages, but also postcards or ship containers - and of course human beings injected in these logistical processes - can reach their destination.

These micro-decisions constitute a core of the digital cultures we live in. They include the order, the speed, the priority, the addressing and the direction in which something is being redirected at a junction in the network.

These decisions relate to the following matters: who is connected with whom and who is separated from whom? Who has access to which information and who doesn't? But above all - and this is particularly relevant in the current phase of migration - who is allowed to stay where and who isn't? These decisions also comprise the way social ties are established and how people are dispersed in space. They are increasingly made by computers for computers.

Therein resides, in my opinion, one of the elements of epochal technological change which lie ahead of us. Their area of application reaches from the transfer of digital data by means of Packet Switching to the trading of algorithms on the stock exchange and the location-based services of so-called Smart Cities, which from a logistical point of view are not so different from the technical instruments used to control the movements of refugees. Thanks to robotics and the Internet of Things, the area of application will expand even further.

The decision-making processes under discussion are put into effect so rapidly and in such large amounts, that they by far exceed human capacities and can only be carried out by protocols and algorithms. Even though humans don't play a role in the process of micro-decisions, I'd nonetheless like to opt for the helpful instrument of counter-intuition and refer to them as decisions. It is important to insist on this concept supposedly linked to a human entity, for it is the only way to keep the focus on the political dimension of these processes. To understand them as unconscious, hands-off executions of human decisions taken in advance - that is, as a secondary proxy of a higher entity at best, an execution of orders that have been given beforehand - bears the risk of losing sight of their political magnitude. It is indeed just as obvious that human beings continue to create protocols, standards and algorithms, that institutions determine them and that this requires long and tough negotiations. Institutions like the International Telecommunications Union or the more self-organised compilation of Requests for Comments, which prepare protocols for the internet, but also the Electronic Frontier Foundation or the Chaos Computer Club, play a bigger institutional role than they have occupied so far.



Container ship Texas MSC. Flickr/Daniel Ramirez. Some rights reserved.

The significance of these micro-decisions appears all the clearer given that they are closely connected to two fields of discussion that have become crucial in the past few years and will most likely continue being so in the years to come: on the one hand the debate around net neutrality and on the other hand the dimensions of surveillance uncovered by Edward Snowden.

Micro-decisions constitute the starting-point in both cases. Net neutrality means nothing other than the comprehensible neutrality of those micro-decisions, which have to be made at the internet-junctions that data-packages are passing through. And it is precisely here, at the time and location where micro-decisions are taken, that the surveillance measures of intelligence services operate. Furthermore, I don't think it is exaggerated to consider the politics of these micro-decisions as consisting of challenges regarding how we want to live in digital cultures. And in this regard, the same applies to the logistical handling of migration movements.

At present, micro-decisions are becoming important and powerful for all of us. Beside the aforementioned concrete political level they also engender a de-centering of the human being as decision-maker. The fact that humans don't play a role at this microtemporal level any more necessitates a reassessment and a re-designation of our own position. Otherwise we run the risk of clinging to a conception of humans and of technology which puts both in opposition to one another. This hostile posture will make it difficult to face up to the challenges, for we will then lose sight of the gravity residing in the inseparability of sociality and of technology. Therefore the momentousness of these micro-decisions should not be underestimated even though they may seem quite trivial individually: they determine who is connected to whom and who is separated from whom.

Now, one might assume that all bureaucracies rely on such acts of abstraction, that in all bureaucracies such decisions are taken by humans following determined protocols, but that the humans step back behind the system of rules concerning these decisions. This affects all of us attending official appointments, and it particularly affects refugees today, who are confronted with our bureaucracy and the logistics linked to it. That's why we need to ask ourselves what happens when these decisions turn into micro-decisions.

This is not necessarily a bad thing, for these decisions need to be taken. Just as there is no internet without micro-decisions and net-junctions, so there is no bureaucracy without these processes. Correspondingly, what is crucial is to keep the decisions open and to challenge preliminary decisions.

A constraint to begin with: if we find ourselves in a present which is being massively turned inside out by streams of distribution, then it becomes difficult – theoretically as well as practically – to stand on firm ground so as to observe these movements. However, to merely acknowledge them and go with the flow cannot be a solution either. Rather, we should commit ourselves in the first place to the elaboration of terms and concepts which allow us to better communicate about this current practice – this, at least, is what I consider to be my task as a media and cultural scientist.

Thus, if I have to say which movements and distributions I feel most affected by, I have to say: all of them. I don't think data streams can be separated from commodity streams. I don't think traffic management systems in smart and

less smart cities should be separated from the infrastructures related to the diffusion of digital data or ship containers with RFID-chips, nor that the Internet of Things should be separated from migration flows. They all rest on the same technical shift, which constitutes the basis of our digital cultures in the form of digitalisation, miniaturisation and microtemporalisation - they are based on infrastructures of distribution which we should keep in sight. Infrastructures, in turn, belong to someone, are no neutral means of transportation and have a biopolitics inscribed into them – they provide for the distribution of people and things in space.



Bayport container terminal, Port of Houston. Flickr/Roy Luck. Some rights reserved.

Instead of regretting the loss of something we should try to better understand the present. Whenever there is talk about a democratic deficit, the real issue is probably rather the fear of losing a privileged position. Maybe instead, we should start to ask ourselves what it means to be human in digital cultures. To use Hannah Arendt's wordings: how has the *Vita Activa*, the ideal image of a life in and for a community, which always constitutes the core of politics, changed in the last decade? What does it mean today when an active person gets involved in the political processes surrounding her?

Instead of pouncing on any flaws, we would do better to take the oft-evoked 'nightfall' seriously by asking how democracy is changing due to digital conditions. We should remember that democracy distinguishes itself from dictatorships precisely because it is imperfect. Maybe it is not the worst solution, to live in a deficient democracy, for defects can be repaired.

As already mentioned, I'd like to plead for a conception of democracy as something moving and changing, agitated presently by the massive changes caused by digital media which have been ignored all too long. On the one hand there is an intense debate concerning copyrights, personal rights, the social aspects of social networks. But in my opinion we are not dealing enough with the impact this has on our self-understanding: what does it mean for me if machines communicate with machines, when computers decide for computers? The point is not if I disappear in the process or if I am being replaced but that I should find a new place and a new self-description.

Since I am not a politician but a scientist I naturally struggle with recommending concrete actions to take. What I can offer are concepts, terms and maybe a descriptive language, even though it may only be fractional. This very abstract level shouldn't simply be discarded: actions also depend on our language and our concepts. I'd like therefore to underline that, at least since the Internet of Things, the concepts we have used to describe digital networks don't only affect virtual space - all these technologies have very real consequences, because it is about the flow of things, data, and humans. This seems to me to be the point where network policy and migration policy intersect.

I don't know if it makes sense, or if it's even possible, to conceive the state as something we can detach ourselves from, as something – so to speak – adverse. Furthermore, I am appalled at the democratic deficits, from [NSU](#) to [NSA](#), from [TTIP](#) to [LaGeSo](#), and I would like to contribute with all my strength to changing this. But does this therefore imply that it's possible to become autonomous from the state and to abandon a democratic state – purely imaginarily – without also entering another state?

We should stand up for our rights (and duties) and turn our ire against the democratic deficits, denouncing them for what they are and trying to improve

them.

A perfect democracy should be an unreachable goal, for democracy can never be perfect but will always be a matter of negotiation. Aren't we running the risk of trying to duck out of addressing the democratic deficits in order to pursue an ideal image of a perfect state – whether this image raises a negative or a positive standard – if we try to make ourselves autonomous from the state? Who would want to live in a perfect state, where nothing can be discussed, negotiated or changed any more?

This edited text is based on an interview with Florian Sprenger by the Berliner Gazette conducted by [Krystian Woznicki](#) on the topic of their annual project in 2016, [TACIT FUTURES](#).

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