# 10. A New Vision for a Shared Digital Europe

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Digitalisation has led much of our interaction, communication and economic activity to take place in the digital space through data or over online intermediaries. What kind of space should this digital sphere be?

For the last 10 years, Europe has focused on regulating the digital space towards building a Digital Single Market in Europe. This approach does not suffice to address challenges that are ahead of us. We believe that seeing this space as a market place only does not do it justice. This space is in effect our society – a society that is experiencing a digital transformation. Therefore we cannot accept the digital sphere as a place where only market dynamics rule. Society is more than an interaction between market players and people are more than entrepreneurs or consumers.

Today, market orthodoxy limits our ability to deal with the domination by corporate monopolies that constrain both individual freedom online and the emergence of a truly European civic space. This market focus needs to be replaced with an approach that is society-centric at its heart.

We believe that Europe needs to establish its own rules for the digital space, which embody our values: strong public institutions, democratic governance, sovereignty of communities and people, diversity of European cultures, equality and justice. A space that is common to all of us, but at the same time diverse and decentralised. This requires Europe to enable self-determination, to cultivate the commons, to decentralise infrastructure and to empower public institutions.

## Enable self-determination

Self-determination in the digital environment refers to the right to privacy and the need for more democratic models of data governance and algorithmic transparency. The call for self-determination in the digital environment is a reaction to the growing market power of a handful of platform providers who increasingly control the digital space. It is also a call for using digital tools to support sovereignty at community, municipal and regional levels. Technology should serve the common good and support broad citizen participation, instead of solely aiming for purely commercial objectives and outcomes.

Our daily lives are impacted by a globalised market in which such commercial entities are exceptionally wealthy and powerful. We not only use their products and services, but, especially within the digital space, share data about ourselves in exchange for free or discounted use of these products and services. Data-driven corporations extract value from users to process, trade and commercialise for maximum profit. Within this process, data is used to manipulate users and to further increase the consumption of products.

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At the level of individuals, this translates into challenges with regard to users’ personal data and privacy. At the level of the society, this becomes an issue of a market capture of data as a resource that is shaping our education, our housing, our transport, our environments, as well as our identities, according to commercial interests without any democratic debate on the direction taken. Citizens have no agency in this process and lack control.

This lack of control over data is not just an in issue with regard to commercial products and services. The public sector is increasingly relying on data analysis and algorithmic decision-making. There is a growing body of examples of detrimental effects from this type of automated decision-making on people in marginalised positions - and algorithmic bias can ultimately adversely affect all citizens.

By calling for self-determination in the digital environment we ask for something more fundamental than the individual legal right to privacy. It must be possible to fully participate in (online) social life without having to give up your (personal) data to commercial entities. The role of data and how it is used in surveilling and influencing users needs to be made transparent to the general public and users need to have meaningful opportunities to minimise data collection and control its use.

Yet, self-determination cannot be achieved by only thinking about protecting privacy in terms of individual rights. We need to rethink privacy as a public good, because the increasing use of personal data by tech companies and governments is not only impacting the individual, but has larger societal consequences. More broadly speaking, there is need for democratization of data governance aimed at improving our standards with respect to personal data extraction and processing. We need more robust oversight of these practices.

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In this context we also see self-determination relating to solidarity. Solidarity in terms of not leaving everything to the individual but facing these challenges of the digital transformation as a collective. Collectively and in solidarity with each other we can set standards for a society that is democratic and where citizens are protected from commodification, privacy intrusion and surveillance. We should collectively work to realise a digital environment that instead facilitates self realisation, creativity and diversity.

## Cultivate the Commons

The digital age has opened the door to many collaborative forms of creating, remixing and sharing knowledge and culture. The success of free and open-source software, tens of thousands contributors to Wikipedia and the flourishing open-design and manufacturing community are notable realms in which collaborative activity has transformed 20th century models of knowledge production. Hackerspaces and fab labs are massively pioneering new forms of distributed local production while tapping into a global knowledge ecosystem.

Creative Commons licenses use intellectual property law to place knowledge and culture in the commons. Developments in open science and innovation are changing the way science is being performed. Open science makes scientific research, data and publications accessible to all levels of inquiry: society, amateur, or professional. A key vehicle for disseminating scientific knowledge and maintaining it as a commons is open access publishing. The platform cooperativism movement, which sees digital platforms themselves as forms of the commons, is another example.

The digital-networked environment allows us to put a bigger emphasis on supporting commons-based alternatives to the market that have the potential to create huge social value. Developing digital spaces that are managed as a commons with appropriate governance structures is essential to creating a digital environment that is democratic and supports values at the heart of European societies. Spaces, resources and projects managed as a commons need to be seen as equal alternatives to market mechanisms.

Yet today, the digital commons are pushed to the margins of the online environment by commercial monopolies that over the years have overtaken the open sharing and peer-to-peer communication channels of the Internet. For each success of the digital commons - such as Wikipedia, which remains one of the most popular non-commercial, online platforms in Europe - we observe even more places where market logic limits the potential of the commons. The potential of digital technologies to offer open access to crucial knowledge and cultural resources is not being fulfilled. Similarly, spaces in which digital technologies are employed to share resources are quickly captured by dominant market platforms thant seek a commercial rent on the basis of the contributions of users.

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The commons approach overlaps with or feeds into an emerging political discourse where wellbeing and social wealth are not defined in terms of narrow economic criteria like GDP or corporate profit. Instead it looks to a richer, more qualitative set of criteria that cannot be easily measured: moral legitimacy, participation, equity, resilience, social cohesion and social justice. It promotes a regenerative economy based on circular principles and its primary aims are to maintain a sustainable system for people and the planet. Local community and participatory culture are core building blocks of such a system.

Europe has the opportunity to strengthen, promote and facilitate commoning activities and commons-based production. European policymakers need to adopt a hybrid approach, in which market-based and commons-based solutions are considered side-by-side as governance models for core aspects, spaces and layers of the Internet stack. We need to identify situations in which a "commons-first" approach should be adopted. European policies that support open science and open access to scholarship and data in the European Research Area are a great example of such an approach. Supporting a decentralised, community-based sharing economy that supports local commons is something that can be legislated at the EU level and which will have a real impact on the ground.

## Decentralise Infrastructure

Decentralisation is the basic shift caused in the past by core network technologies, from the original packet-switching networks, through peer-to-peer content networks, to currently developed blockchain-based solutions. Decentralised infrastructure is open, distributed and shared. It is an infrastructure that can also function as a commons, and can be governed in a democratic and self-determined manner.

In the last decade, centralised and even monopolistic services have been built on top of the decentralised infrastructure of the Internet. Since these are all very large and often non-European commercial entities, the centralisation of control over the digital networks is a form of market capture of a resource that should be treated as a universal basic service that needs to be governed as a commons. Centralisation of the Internet and the creation of online monopolies has been fueled by a successful shift to business strategies that focus on monetisation of data instead of content. This development has led to a concentration of power in the hands of a few dominant platforms, most of which are located outside of Europe either in the US or China. As a result, much of the development of the Internet and related areas of information technology is being shaped outside of the EU.

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As the Internet becomes more and more ubiquitous, with Internet-of-Things solutions diffusing in the real world, the issue of (de)centralisation concerns more than just online data and content flows. The urban environment is intertwined with the way we manage knowledge and our web-based economies. Similarly, the current wave of technological change and disruption related to the broad class of artificial intelligence technologies has the potential to exacerbate centralisation.

In the last few years, Europe has attempted to counter the dominance of big technology companies by leveraging antitrust regulatory policies, which can be seen as targeting centralisation of the Internet within the boundaries of market-focused policies. Yet, decentralisation policy cannot function solely on the basis of regulation aimed at managing market competition - although it is a step in the right direction. Decentralisation is also a necessity because it can contribute to increasing democratic control. At the same time decentralization will not be the answer to all challenges, and should be regarded as being a rule that allows exceptions where it makes sense.

A decentralised approach to digital infrastructures should be applied at different levels of the technological stack of the Internet: First, decentralisation should remain a basic principle of the Internet. Second, decentralisation should be applied to the level of online services and should be seen as an alternative to the current model, in which data and content flows, communication and social interactions is captured by monopolistic aggregators.

An effort to decentralise the digital infrastructure must provide more room for public institutions and abstain from traditional approaches to solving societal challenges built on top-down control. We see public institutions as important drivers of a decentralised network of actors, who cooperate on ‘missions’ to face societal challenges at grand scale. Decentralisation of digital infrastructures that increasingly govern our societies could be such a mission.

Decentralising our technological infrastructure must aim at increasing Europe's technological sovereignty by reducing dependency on non-European technology providers and to enable fair competition and ensure accountability of service providers. It must also take into account democratic traditions and historic diversity. As such it should provide more agency to European cities - cooperating in the municipalist movement - that are looking for ways to develop decentralised solutions that gain from the relative power and independence of cities as actors.

## Empower Public Institutions

Europe has a long and rich history of delivering public goods and services through public institutions. Publicly-funded cultural heritage institutions contribute to our identity, and encourage learning and creativity. Public libraries serve as knowledge hubs and play an important role in providing access to marginalised groups. Public schools and universities are the bedrock of our educational systems and public service broadcasting organisations ensure the provision of quality news and information and allow for diversity of cultural expression. Public institutions are also best placed to assure broad democratic civic participation on how our knowledge, science and culture are governed.

The digital revolution has created the preconditions that would allow these institutions to better fulfill their missions by actively involving communities in decision making and the generation of culture. The Internet provides them with more ways to reach (new) audiences and to decouple their activities from the restraints of place and time. At the same time these institutions and the values that are embedded within them are under attack. This challenge comes in two different forms. In many countries, there is increasing pressure on the independence of these institutions by governments. In parallel, large commercial market players question the very logic of public provision of public goods and services in attempts to grow their own markets. As a result, the potential of public institutions and small and medium sized digital companies to uphold inclusivity, democracy, and equality of our societies in the digital age has been largely dormant; many of these institutions struggle to find their role in the digital environment.

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If we understand the Internet as a market-driven platform dominated by global conglomerates and not as a basic universal service and a public infrastructure, we abandon our ability to protect our democratic systems and to shield citizens from over-commodification. Our current policies in the digital area fail to empower public institutions, and instead hold them back from innovation in the delivery of public services. Outdated and inflexible copyright laws are limiting research and education and prevent cultural heritage institutions from sharing their collections online. Public service broadcasters are reduced to continue providing linear programming that mimics the radio and television channels of the 20th century instead of developing online-first strategies that can challenge the attention-monopolies of social media platforms. Education and learning is confined to formal educational institutions instead of embedded in the fabric of everyday life.

The majority of these limitations are undertaken in order to "protect" the market from undue competition. Instead of envisioning the Internet as a true public space in which publicly funded institutions play an important and visible role as producers of content, they are confined to the margins. The lack of strategies for a digital transformation of public institutions means that we have largely surrendered the digital environment to the ever-increasing influence of commercial online platforms that erode our democratic values.

A Europe that seeks to develop its own position in the digital age that is true to its decades-old tradition of public institutions needs to empower these same institutions to provide meaningful services and to provide the public with shared online spaces that are protected from the surveillance practices of commercial platforms.

Instead of slowly eroding these institutions in the interest of an ever-expanding market sector, it is necessary to create strong public institutions that can compete with commercial platforms when it comes to access to information, knowledge, culture. Public institutions should take the lead in ensuring that our values and democracy can flourish in the digital age.

## Towards a Shared Digital Europe

Combine these four elements with a truly European set of values and a new strategy presents itself. A strategy that understands the digital space as a hybrid space, both a market and a public space where the commons can also thrive. A strategy that policy makers and civil society actors can use to counter the current lack of democratic oversight in the digital space, the deteriorating online debate, the monopolisation of the digital sphere, the enclosure of knowledge and the means of knowledge production and the increasing violation of human rights in the digital space.

Most importantly our Vision for a Shared Digital Europe provides policy makers with an opportunity to work towards a truly European idea about how society should function in the digital age.

*(This text is an abbreviated version of the vision published in April 2019 on* [*https://shared-digital.eu*](https://shared-digital.eu)*1)*