

# Digital Sovereignty in the Pandemic City

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## Introduction

The raging public health emergency that the COVID-19 pandemic brought upon the world in March 2020 profoundly affected how each of us live and work. The isolation prescribed through lockdown mandates in many places moved even the most basic social interactions online, ranging from exercising, to having dinner with family members, or worshipping. It also shifted how we connect as communities.

How this phenomenon unfolded in New York City was the focus of Terra Incognita NYC. This qualitative research project, grounded in digital ethnography, focused on how citizens of New York City created digital public spaces. The project ran over two months in the summer of 2020 and across a diverse range of communities in all five boroughs in New York City: Manhattan, Brooklyn, Staten Island, the Bronx, and Queens. The qualitative data collected over this relatively short period of time generated rich insight into the ways in which individuals and communities experienced and dealt with the sudden move of much of social life into the digital realm, and how they connected with and through technologies in different ways.

What I want to offer in this short piece is a reflection on this data through the lens of “digital sovereignty” and inequality. For better and for worse, the pandemic provides an important opportunity to re-examine and expand the notion of digital sovereignty – sovereignty,

in this digital context meaning the capacity for self-determination of individuals and communities (Pohle and Thiel 2020), particularly in cities.

The idea of *digital* sovereignty, more recently, has been linked to notions of “individual self-determination” focused on “on the autonomy of citizens in their roles as employees, consumers, and users of digital technologies and services” (Pohle and Thiel 2020, 11). Citizenship, it seems, is positioned as *conditio sine qua non* for (digital) sovereignty. Very broadly, “citizenship” refers to being “a member of a political community who enjoys the rights and assumes the duties of membership” (Leydet 2017). It is often used interchangeably with “nationality” and is defined as providing “people with a sense of identity, [and entitling] individuals to the protection of a State and to many civil and political rights” (Feller 2005, 4). Basing the right to internet access on the status of citizenship is not new. In 2016, the United Nations declared internet access a human right by making an addition to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), Article 19, stating that the right to freedom of opinion and expression includes the promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the internet (United Nations 2016).

### Access

The COVID-19-induced shift of social life into the digital world was, by no means, an equal one, particularly in New York City. Citizenship did not guarantee internet access: “going online” was easy for some and incredibly difficult for others, for a wide range of reasons. Illness, duties as caretakers or family members, bad broadband access, no or outdated hardware, job demands, precarity, tech literacy – these intersecting dimensions, and more, made for very different experiences of our new “online lives.”

Education, in fact, became a new frontier of this divide. In pandemic-New York City, internet access did not mean the same thing for educators and students alike. “Remote instruction” was challenged by a multitude of aspects that affected people and communities in different ways. Some students were able to comfortably shelter-in-place with family, dialing into the virtual classroom via a broadband connection from their own rooms, using their own laptops. Others were challenged by not only a lack of a high-speed internet connection, but also by hardware issues, family obligations

and responsibilities, as well as economic hardship. These challenges were diverse, manifold and compounding, and in New York City, they tended to map onto geographies of race and class divisions, with poorer neighborhoods – disproportionately inhabited by communities of color – lacking access to conduit or utility poles at greater rates than in wealthier neighborhoods (NYC Mayor’s Office of the Chief Technology Officer 2020).

These overlapping cartographies are not accidental, but the result of longstanding and powerful social imaginaries about what communities are deserving of “scarce” resources, and what communities are not (Eubanks 2018). These imaginaries are solidified in public policies that impact infrastructure provision and maintenance, and that amplify the disproportionate impact disasters have on historically oppressed communities in the U.S., especially the African American and LatinX communities.

Disasters ranging from the current pandemic to the hurricanes Katrina and Sandy and the 1995 Chicago heat wave have shown that this is a social breakdown by choice, as sociologist Eric Klinenberg reminds us (Klinenberg 2002). In that sense, vulnerabilities of (technical) infrastructure become social vulnerabilities, and disasters become social and political phenomena, as much as medical or natural ones (Nelson 2020; Shah 2016).

While simple access was a core element in this dynamic, the varying conditions and qualities of access threw up even deeper divides. The individuals and communities that we studied over the summer of 2020 all had vastly different abilities of “connecting,” many of which were conditioned on the provision of largely privatized broadband infrastructures that were unevenly distributed across the city. In order to participate in the various digital public spaces that emerged over the city and within and across communities – places of worship, exercise, culture, mutual support, and more – people depended on a much wider variety of aspects: the availability and quality of access devices, the ability to use the them at the time needed, and access to the relevant services and platforms.

## Maintenance

The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown into sharp relief another major challenge to digital sovereignty: the fact that the infrastructures that make the digital city possible and that enable a continuation of social

life are mostly privately owned. This ranges from the cables in the ground to the platforms and softwares that allow for schooling, work and more: Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Slack and many more.

What we've learned in the Terra Incognita NYC project is that these privately owned socio-technical systems – and the digital public spaces they create – depend on what Alexandra Mateescu and Madeleine Clare Elish (2019) call “human infrastructure,” the – typically precarious – human labor that is needed to make systems and infrastructures function. In the pandemic city, this “human infrastructure” was not just the well-paid labor that was needed to maintain broadband cables in the ground or the electric grid but also labor that was needed to maintain the proper functioning of the city as a complex socio-economic organism as a whole. The “human infrastructure” of NYC is often recruited from vulnerable communities.

And in the context of the U.S. and New York City, the members of these communities are not necessarily those who are afforded the label “citizen.” In New York State, 70 percent of the state's undocumented labor work force works in essential businesses (Nicholson and Alulema 2020) – those jobs that make the “digital city” possible by way of maintaining the “physical city” – as healthcare workers, grocery workers, delivery workers, public transport workers and more. The point here is that the maintenance of the private infrastructures for the sake of digital sovereignty for a few meant systematically putting these communities at a higher risk of contracting a deadly virus.

We can and must put this against the backdrop of the mechanics of capitalist extraction that rule big tech, ranging from warehouse and delivery workers that maintain and grow Amazon's online retail empire, a company that was valued at \$1.49 trillion in July 2020 (Klebnikov 2020) to the data extraction that occurs simply through the use of online platforms, from Zoom to Gmail to WhatsApp, TikTok, MeetUp or Twitter. As Shoshana Zuboff outlined in detail, this constant data extraction has created a somewhat global state of “surveillance capitalism” which trades in “behavioral futures” (Zuboff 2019).

What we also learned from the Terra Incognita research is that the maintenance of digital space has even more nuances and goes well beyond this “essential” labor. We observed a form of social maintenance that took multiple forms. For example, it took the form of providing access to the digital social spaces for people who were unable to generate that access for themselves, often elderly community

members. A rabbi of a synagogue in Queens bought webcams for elderly members and recruited volunteers who safely installed them in their homes. Community members in their eighties and nineties were able to join Shabbat services with their webcam on, “seeing” the rabbi, as well as other members.

### Curation

The social maintenance was also made up of what we call “curation”. This curatorial labor was often focused on maintaining a sense of normalcy, to continue with well-established routines and ways of doing things that often are the social glue holding communities together. These routines would range from anything from worshipping to exercising, public programming, playing, volunteering and much more. For example, runners organized in running clubs continued to “collectively” run by posting their individual runs on Instagram or sharing their running data over Strava, an exercise app.

The curatorial labor that underpinned these virtual spaces was often focused on “translating” practices into their digital form, and directing and controlling the flow of activity and interaction in the digital space, as well as holding the space when disruptions occurred.

For example, the host of an open mic poetry night run via Zoom enforced strict rules about when people were allowed to unmute themselves. The Queens rabbi followed a similar strategy. Community members were only allowed to unmute themselves when they were scheduled to read a prayer or to give a performance or when it was time for collective prayer. Only at the end of the service was everybody allowed to unmute and just talk to one another, an element people enjoyed as they were able to informally connect (“Good to see you! How is your mother?” or “Congratulations on your engagement!”).

Similarly, the curatorial labor often also extended beyond the core social practice – worshipping, exercising, volunteering, etc. – and was explicitly focused on building and maintaining social connection in general. For example, some of the running clubs also organized virtual social events that were not running-related to encourage socializing with peers and keep up motivation.

Moderators and facilitators, those doing the curatorial labor, often viewed their work as a form of service to their community. As the significance of creating and holding online spaces grew over

the course of the pandemic, so did their sense of duty and care. Moderators and administrators saw their work as a service to their communities.

The Terra Incongnita research also showed that maintenance was a political matter, because curatorial labor, particularly when it took the form of moderation, was a political practice. Moderating a digital space was all about controlling the space, determining and enforcing who can come in and who cannot, as well as monitoring behavior and speech. This became particularly apparent in the Staten Island Facebook groups, where administrators and moderators were often confronted with having to enforce group guidelines around political speech.

### Digital Sovereignty

As this data shows, the maintenance of digital sovereignty – often for some, not all – is dependent on different kinds of (often uncompensated) labors that, in a global public health emergency, disproportionately put communities at risk. We must ask: Who maintains the infrastructures needed for digital sovereignty? Who bears the risks associated with this maintenance? Relatedly, what is the cost of digital sovereignty? And who pays?

Against the backdrop of these questions, tying the notion of digital sovereignty to the status of being a citizen is a weak theoretical suggestion at its best, and a harmful policy at its worst, because it is exclusionary, potentially not affording digital sovereignty to those who maintain crucial socio-material and -political infrastructures.

It may be more appropriate, and more equitable, to ground the notion of digital sovereignty in the notion of “community” or “population,” rather than citizenship. We can take a cue for such an intervention from artist Hans Haacke. His artwork “Der Bevölkerung” (2000) is located in the north courtyards of the Reichstag building, where the German parliament, the German Bundestag, resides. It was commissioned by the German parliament and consists of a trough bounded by wooden beams that has at its center the words “Der Bevölkerung” (“To the Population”). The typeface is the same as the inscription “Dem Deutschen Volke” (“To the German People”) which was installed on the Reichstag building in 1916. The artist Haacke keenly underlines the difference between “Volk” (people) and “Bevölkerung”

("population"), pointing to a broadened notion of citizenship as based on place of birth, not ethnicity.

New conceptualizations of digital sovereignty must learn from these critiques and develop a more holistic view for the conditions needed for individuals and communities to gain and maintain the capacity for self-determination.

If we take this commentary against the backdrop of digitization, and the question of if and how internet access is central for being a citizen and for sovereignty in terms of self-determination, then we can start developing a more expansive notion of digital citizenship that is grounded in belonging, and that serves as precondition of "sovereignty" over and above legal status.

## Conclusion

In this short piece, I have offered a critical reflection of the notion of "digital sovereignty" in the context of inequality and the COVID-19 pandemic. To do so, I have drawn on qualitative data collected as part of the Terra Incognita NYC research project, which I led in the summer of 2020, and which sought to understand how New Yorkers maintained social ties under lockdown mandates and created different kinds of digital public space. I have argued that the pandemic has shown that participation in digital sovereignty – and the notion of "autonomy" it purports – is not simply conditioned on "access" to broadband internet, but on a multitude of socio-economic conditions that are unevenly distributed across society.

In the second and third part of this chapter, I have focused on the infrastructures and maintenance regimes needed to maintain digital sovereignty, both in terms of material maintenance, and in terms of the social maintenance. I have introduced the notion of risk distribution as a necessary condition for the maintenance of often privately owned digital infrastructures, and argued that, particularly in a pandemic, already vulnerable communities are often the bearers of this risk. I have also shed light on the many ways in which curatorial labor becomes maintenance infrastructure in a pandemic, and how it is often related to who holds power in a space. I have used this empirical material to argue that the existing notion of digital sovereignty is too narrowly focused on "citizenship" and therefore creates an exclusionary dynamic. To remedy that, I have suggested to develop a more expansive notion of citizenship that can inform digital sovereignty,

and that is grounded in belonging and community, rather than legal status.

Overall, I want to underline that these observations must be read as commentaries and suggestions for conceptual expansions of the idea of digital sovereignty, not as critiques. If the global public health emergency brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic has shown us one thing, then it is that we can and must rethink how we address the intersection of inequality, technology and society. Digital sovereignty can be a tool for creating more equitable futures. But only if it is grounded in empirical observations, with a focus on community wellbeing.

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