P176 / Digital Technology and the Governance of the Social Order: Critical Policy Perspectives

Topic : Discourses, Ideas, and Narratives

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Digital technologies have now come to occupy the dominant site where states define and locate policy problems, sort populations and produce order. Biometric identification, algorithmic eligibility systems, predictive analytics and platform-mediated service delivery are often presented as neutral instruments of efficiency and “evidence-based” policy. This panel proposes to explore the promise of platform-based governance beyond its instrumental premise: that it represents technologies of social ordering. Under this premise Digital Technology decides who is visible to the state, who counts as deserving, and which behaviours are normalised or treated as deviant.

Critical policy analysis has long argued that policy is a value-laden political process of problem construction and not a technical response to given problems (Bacchi 2009; Fischer 2003; Yanow 2000; Schön and Rein 1994). Work on governmentality and datafication shows how quantification makes populations governable (Foucault 2007; Rose 1999; Desrosières 1998; Porter 1995; Scott 1998). Recent scholarship shows these logics intensified by digital infrastructure: system-level bureaucracy (Bovens and Zouridis 2002), automated welfare and policing (Eubanks 2018; Dencik et al. 2022), algorithmic discrimination (Noble 2018; Benjamin 2019), opacity (Pasquale 2015; Danaher 2016; Ananny and Crawford 2018) and data colonialism (Zuboff 2019; Couldry and Mejias 2019). Studies of India’s Aadhaar show how infrastructures of inclusion also produce exclusion (Khera 2019; Rao and Nair 2019; Singh 2019). Yet mainstream policy studies often treat digital governance as a question of implementation capacity, and reinforces the dominance of the datafication discourse.

We develop the notion of social order through Fischer’s (1995) logic of policy deliberation. Fischer links four nested levels of policy deliberation: the technical verification of programme outcomes, the situational validation of the programme in its context, the societal vindication of the policy’s contribution to the wider social system, and social choice, where the fundamental values underpinning that system are examined. A defensible strategy at the level of social choice must be consistent with the social order the policy upholds. Digital governance isn’t just an artefact of the level of technical verification but seeks to reshape the social order within which it assumes centrality.

The panel’s central question is: how do digital technologies of governance construct, stabilise and reshape the social order, and what happens to equality, legitimacy and democratic accountability? We invite contributions to explore three themes within these broad questions :

Problematisation: Digital systems embed particular representations of social problems and target groups, narrowing the policy alternatives that can be imagined, yet appear as neutral data management projects.
Differential visibility: Data infrastructures redistribute state recognition and create hard-to-contest exclusions that appear technical and diffuse.
Foreclosing higher order policy deliberation and counter-politics: When values and political alternatives are reduced to digital singularity how does counter-politics to technological governance emerge and what forms do they take?

CALL FOR PAPERS

We invite papers that treat technology as a constitutive element of governing and not as a neutral tool. Contributions should engage critical policy analysis, interpretive policy analysis, governmentality studies, science and technology studies, or related critical traditions.

Our aim is to bring together scholars who ask not only what digital systems do but what kind of social world they presuppose. We encourage papers that connect the technical detail of a system, such as its data categories, eligibility rules and audit trails, to the wider political order it enacts.

We are interested in how digital identity systems, biometrics and population registers shape citizenship and access to rights, and in how algorithmic decision-making operates in welfare, health, education, policing,

migration, voting etc. Papers could examine how problems, target populations and rights are constructed through data, metrics and dashboards, or how quantification and datafication both govern and erase. We also welcome work on platform governance, gig work and the privatisation of public functions, on surveillance and predictive governance, connecting to the politics of efficiency that emerged under New Public Management and digital-era governance.

Papers that engage Fischer's levels of deliberation, exploring how technology reshapes the social order, are especially encouraged. With such a theoretical orientation, we seek critical-empirical studies of street-level bureaucracy under automation, that may engage with postcolonial, decolonial, feminist and intersectional critiques of digital states, and methodological reflections on how to study opaque digital systems and infrastructures interpretively.

Papers might ask whether technological systems close down deliberation about the values policy serves, or leave room for contestation, discretion and repair. We welcome analyses of how citizens, frontline workers, civil-society organisations and courts refuse, negotiate or re-purpose technological governance.

We particularly welcome work from the Global South. Digital governance is too often narrated from the experience of the Global North, while countries in the South are cast as sites of technological "leapfrogging", where biometric identification, digital payments and data-driven welfare are assumed to bypass institutional constraints and deliver inclusion at scale. We invite contributions that treat these settings instead as sources of theory, where colonial administrative legacies, informality, uneven state capacity and contested citizenship shape how technologies are designed, resisted and repurposed, and where concepts developed elsewhere may need to be revised. Comparative work across regions, sectors and policy domains is encouraged where it attends to context and to the different social orders that technologies help to sustain.