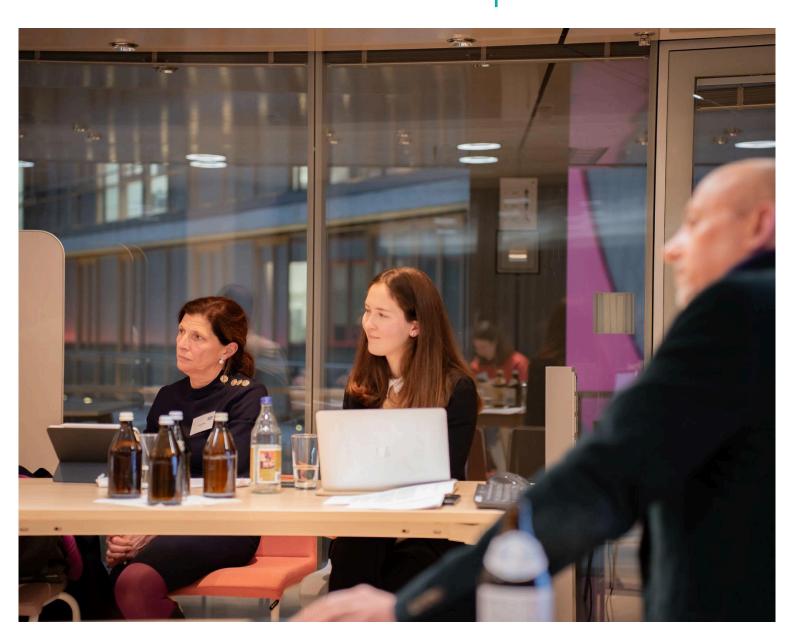# TUM THINK TANK

Digital Sovereignty Talks.

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The art of balance: ambidexterity as the key to sovereignty in our digital world

The "Food4Thought" series is our contribution to elevating the discourse on digital sovereignty and its associated challenges. This collection of texts is designed to provoke thought, encourage dialogue among decision-makers, and support informed decision-making in an increasingly complex digital world. Our aim is to provide a platform for the exchange of ideas, thereby creating a guide for shaping a sovereign and collaborative digital future.

Introduction

In the face of growing geopolitical tensions and economic uncertainties, the Munich Security Report 2024 emphasizes the critical need for decision-makers to overcome the dichotomy of gain and loss. The report calls for a balance between national resilience and international integration - an ambidexterity that is crucial for securing digital sovereignty and the ability to act in a turbulent world. This balanced approach enables states to effectively address current challenges without sacrificing the benefits of international cooperation.

The five theses on digital sovereignty, developed at our first Digital Sovereignty Talk, reflect this necessity by emphasizing the indispensability of digital sovereignty for the state's ability to act in a world marked by crises. They emphasize the importance of cultivating both technological independence and a willingness to cooperate globally in order to shape our inclusive, resilient digital future.

Decision-makers must therefore master ambidexterity by both investing in national digital infrastructures and competencies and actively participating in international cooperation and standardization processes. This balance is crucial in order to fully leverage the opportunities of digitalization without undermining sovereignty.

The five theses developed as part of the Digital Sovereignty Talk offer direct approaches to avoid the 'lose-lose' scenarios described in the MSC report and show ways to realize digital sovereignty in a networked world. We invite you to join the debate to advance this thinking together.

1. The need for digital sovereignty in a turbulent world

In today's global situation characterized by polycrises, in which climate change and geopolitical tensions - such as those between China and the USA as well as various interstate conflicts - prevail, the importance of digital sovereignty as a pillar of the state's ability to act is becoming increasingly clear. The resilience of our society and security in digital networks form the foundation of state action. The Federal Government Commissioner for Information Technology, the IT Council and the IT Planning Council have set out their declarations of intent in the form of a key issues paper on the digital sovereignty of public administration (2020) and a strategy to strengthen digital sovereignty (2021). As historical experience shows, a balanced and forward-looking approach is essential to prevent strategic missteps.

After all, digitally sovereign action does not take place in a vacuum: The restriction to German solutions, during the COVID-19 pandemic has led to challenges in accessing online educational resources and widened existing social disparities by leaving students struggling to cope

without adequate digital educational resources. Digital sovereignty is the ability of an organization to maintain agency and make the best use of available resources in given contexts without creating dependencies that could lead to new problems in the future.

2. Sovereignty as a changeable concept

The concept of sovereignty has changed over the centuries. Jean Bodin's concept of absolute sovereignty differed fundamentally from medieval ideas. Westphalian sovereignty, which emerged from the Thirty Years' War, shifted the focus to territorial integrity and state strategic autonomy. In the age of globalization and interdependent networks, the idea continues to evolve. Sovereignty in the digital age is thus a dynamic concept, shaped by the relationships and interplay of forces between different state and non-state actors. As early as 1995, Manuel Castells argued that in the digital space we are moving from a "space of place" to a "space of flows", which means that we need to approach the management of space differently.

3. The influence of information technology on political and social processes

Information technology as a carrier of standards and culture has a transformative effect, as described by Larry Lessig in "Code is Law". Technology leads to standardization and automation and thus to global scaling. The creation of isolated digital "silos" may enable control, but often results in inefficiency and a lack of innovation. A balance between control and openness is necessary to effectively shape digital sovereignty.

4. The framing of digital sovereignty

Digital sovereignty is framed by different models and metaphors. From the simple notion of territorial boundaries - "German cables in German soil" - to comprehensive control of the technology "stack", as proposed by Acatech, different approaches are reflected. In the public sector documents, digital sovereignty is defined as "the ability and opportunities of individuals and institutions to exercise their role(s) in the digital world independently, self-determinedly and securely" (IT Planning Council, 2021, p.1). For Bitkom, "digitally sovereign [...] is a country that has its own substantial capabilities in key digital technologies and can decide for itself from which third countries it obtains digital technologies" (Bitkom, 2024, p. 3).

Modern interpretations, such as Stephen D. Krasner's concept of interdependency sovereignty or Gregor Hohpe's management of lock-in effects, emphasize the importance of networks and risk management

5. Roadmap to Sovereignty

The realization of digital sovereignty is a complex undertaking that takes time. "A strong, slow drilling of hard boards with passion and a sense of proportion at the same time" (Max Weber). It requires a deep understanding of the interactions between different perspectives on sovereignty and the games being played inside and outside the digital sphere. Navigating this environment requires risk-aware and principled action as well as the ability to respond adaptively and flexibly to changing conditions. In our future discussions, we will further flesh out this form of agency in order to develop pragmatic and effective strategies for digital sovereignty.

Conclusion

The art of balancing national resilience and international integration, highlighted in the Munich Security Report 2024 and reflected in the five theses on digital sovereignty, is fundamental to overcoming the challenges of our time. Decision-makers are faced with the task of navigating the duality of technological independence and global cooperation in order to secure an inclusive and resilient digital future. Ambidexterity - as the key to digital sovereignty - requires a deep understanding of the complex interactions in the digital sphere and adaptive, risk-aware action. Through the ongoing debate and the development of pragmatic strategies as part of the Digital Sovereignty Talk, we are helping to realize the vision of a sovereign digital future.

Acknowledgments

Authors

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