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Political Geographies of Data

Exploring digital territories, sovereignties and borders ,

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The geographies of digital transformation were initially described primarily through images of networking and the dissolution of borders. In recent years, however, discourses as well as techno-material, legal and organizational practices have come to light that transpose supposedly conventional politico-geographic techniques of territorialization, border delimitation and sovereignty to the regulation of data production, circulation, storage or processing. In terms of international repercussions, the Snowden revelations in 2013 reinforced these processes around the world but also the ongoing datafication of more and more processes and the rise of platforms as a new organisational structure are stimulating debates about digital sovereignty.

In practice, the politicization and territorialization of the digital domain appear in different ways and at different levels.

1/ Discourses on digital sovereignties have multiplied over the last decades - and the digital transformation has become part of a broad political debate. Thus, more and more voices question the configuration and use of digital technologies with regard to the shift in power balances.

2/ The configuration of digital infrastructure becomes increasingly linked to questions of national security and competitiveness. States such as Russia and China have made colossal investments to build data centers on their territory, in order to counter the domination of American companies in this field. Another example is the case of the "Internet routes", i.e. the terrestrial and submarine cables through which data transit. Until recently, more than 90% of trans-oceanic cables passed through the United States. Today, many state initiatives have developed their own cables in order to free themselves from the American attraction (such as the SAIL and SACS cables that link Brazil to Cameroon and Angola).

3/ The dynamics of data territorialization also concern the routing of data. This political and organisational process, which aims to modify technical routing procedures, has consequences for the very architecture of the Internet. Indeed, the network was initially conceived as "neutral". However, the introduction of territorial frameworks for data routing implies defining data paths that take into account geographical and political criteria.

4/ Furthermore, many States have implemented a logic of "legal territorialization" of cyberspace by adopting data localization laws, i.e. laws restricting the free circulation of data. This type of law has multiplied throughout the world in recent years. Such laws have been passed in countries as diverse as Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Vietnam, Indonesia, Brunei, Iran, China, Brazil, India, Australia, South Korea, Nigeria, and Russia.

We welcome contributions that explore these political geographies of data through empirical and/or conceptual case studies. Contributions could explore the following aspects:

- Discourses and practices of digital sovereignty (e.g. in comparison, in their contestations...).

- Legal and organizational techniques aiming at a territorialization and a delimitation of digital interactions - and their effects.

Material and technical practices aiming at the territorialization and delimitation of digital interactions (e.g. firewalls) - and their effects.

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