{ **Authors** *Vivian Frick, Anne Mollen & Friederike Rohde*

DEBATE ARTICLE

WHY DESIGNING A SUSTAINABLE DIGITAL FUTURE REQUIRES POLICY-MAKERS TO INCLUDE CIVIL SOCIETY

The Bits & Bäume movement calls for a digital transformation that supports and protects people, livelihoods, and the environment **(Bits & Bäume, 2022)**. The movement also emphasises that the underlying social and ecological issues are closely intertwined. Many demands from digital rights groups worldwide, for instance those connected with data protection, privacy issues, feminist, or de-colonial perspectives or questions of digital self-determination, are deeply entangled with concerns about the environmental impacts of digital technologies and infrastructures. To give just one example, personalisation and ‹dark patterns› of online marketing are based on large and compute-intensive data sets. Thereby, they potentially burden the environment and the climate, could endanger people's privacy, and might lead to discrimination. The Bits & Bäume 2022 conference impressively demonstrated a plethora of similar entanglements that exist between digitalisation and sustainability.

Civic movements challenge a one-dimensional view of digitalisation as an engine for the economy. They point towards risks while, simultaneously, offering perspectives on what role digitalisation could play for a social and ecological transformation. For example, transparent and sustainable supply chains, modular product design, repairability, and the use of public and free source codes exemplify how a more participatory

technology development aligns with processes of socio-ecological transformation **(Pohl et al., 2021)**. These measures not only contribute to reducing environmental strains but can also foster social equality and the democratisation of digital infrastructures.

This critical perspective, pushed by civil society actors, then eventually builds the foundation for a democratic debate on what role digital technologies could play in processes of socio-technical change. In short, digital media technologies become politicised – a political issue that can be debated and commonly shaped by a multitude of actors.

GERMAN AND EUROPEAN POLICY PROCESSES LACK CIVIL SOCIETY

Essential for a ‹sustainable digitalisation› is that civil society can participate in digital policy processes on a national and a transnational level. It is therefore paramount to establish structures that include civil society in digital policy debates.

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In the past, digital rights groups across Europe often suffered under a lack of institutionalised and inclusive legislative consultation processes. Furthermore, while big tech companies spend more money annually on lobbying in Brussels than the oil and pharmaceutical industries combined **(Corporate Europe Observatory, 2021)**, civic actors have often lacked sufficient financial resources. They are thus impeded in adequately responding to the enormous digital policy proposals currently happening on the European level. Instead, in the past, digital policy decisions have had to be revised after civil society actors had strategically litigated successes in court (e.g., state surveillance, Safe Harbor/Privacy Shield), engaged in massive protests and campaigns (e.g., chat control, facial recognition), or even mobilised wider publics (e.g., upload filter, ACTA) **(Spielkamp et al., 2021)**. This process is inefficient – for both policy-makers and civil society actors. A way forward would be for digital rights actors and environmental and climate-protection actors to be invited and enabled to participate in political processes to the same extent as industry stakeholders are.

On the German national level, the governing coalition of Social Democrats, Greens, and Liberal Democrats promised in its 2021 coalition treaty to include civil society in digital policy debates. But almost 18 months later, not much has changed. Despite the strong digital civil society scene in Germany, legislative consultations still lack participation. The most prominent example is the government's ‹Digital Strategy› launched in 2022, which was beforehand heralded as including many diverse voices, especially from civil society **(Rudl and Biselli, 2022)** – the strategy has now been designed without any civil society involvement.

STRUCTURAL CHANGES TO INCLUDE CIVIL SOCIETY

These examples reveal structural obstacles that prevent civil society voices from being adequately represented in digital policy processes. First, and above all, civil society actors must be empowered to participate effectively. The following structures and instruments may address existing barriers:

- **Equal representation:** To strengthen their participation on an institutional level, an equal representation of civil society, economic actors, and science representatives on governmental advisory bodies must be institutionalised.
- **Transparency:** More transparent policy processes and decision-making procedures need to be implemented.
- **Consultation and feedback periods:** Institutions must set adequate public consultation periods that give civil society actors enough time to produce statements on legislative processes.
- **Compensation:** There should be a provision for compensating civil society actors for the time they invest in hearings and consultation procedures.
- **Funding and coalition building:** Funding must be provided for civil society organisations to form coalitions with each other. The funding would allow them to benefit from synergies and work more efficiently. Additionally, it would support the inclusion of civil society actors not currently focusing on digital policies but increasingly seeing their mandate extend to the digital realm (for instance long-established welfare and environmental organisations).
- **Citizen councils:** To promote inclusiveness in the digital policy-making process, support should be provided for citizens' councils on digital issues. These councils could introduce to discussions new perspectives from the people affected.

These steps to strengthen civil society voices in digital policy processes will be especially important when tackling growing global and national inequality as well as when confronting climate change and environmental crises. Some consequences of unsustainable digitalisation are only starting to emerge, and they are doing so in unpredictable ways depending on the societal domains and groups of people affected. For digital policy to serve the common good instead of representing particular economic interests, it is essential that civil society is much more involved and that its perspectives are proactively considered. We will only be able to steer digitalisation into a sustainable future if this multiplicity of societal perspectives is considered in digital policy-making.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

/// **Anne Mollen** is a senior research associate at AlgorithmWatch and researcher in Communication Studies at the University of Münster.

/// **Friederike Rohde** is a spokesperson of the Alliance Digital City Berlin and Researcher in the field of Science and Technology Studies and Sustainability at the IÖW.

/// **Vivian Frick** is a social and environmental psychologist and researcher at the IÖW. She was part of the research group that launched the first Bits & Bäume Conference.

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