Digital Civil Society:
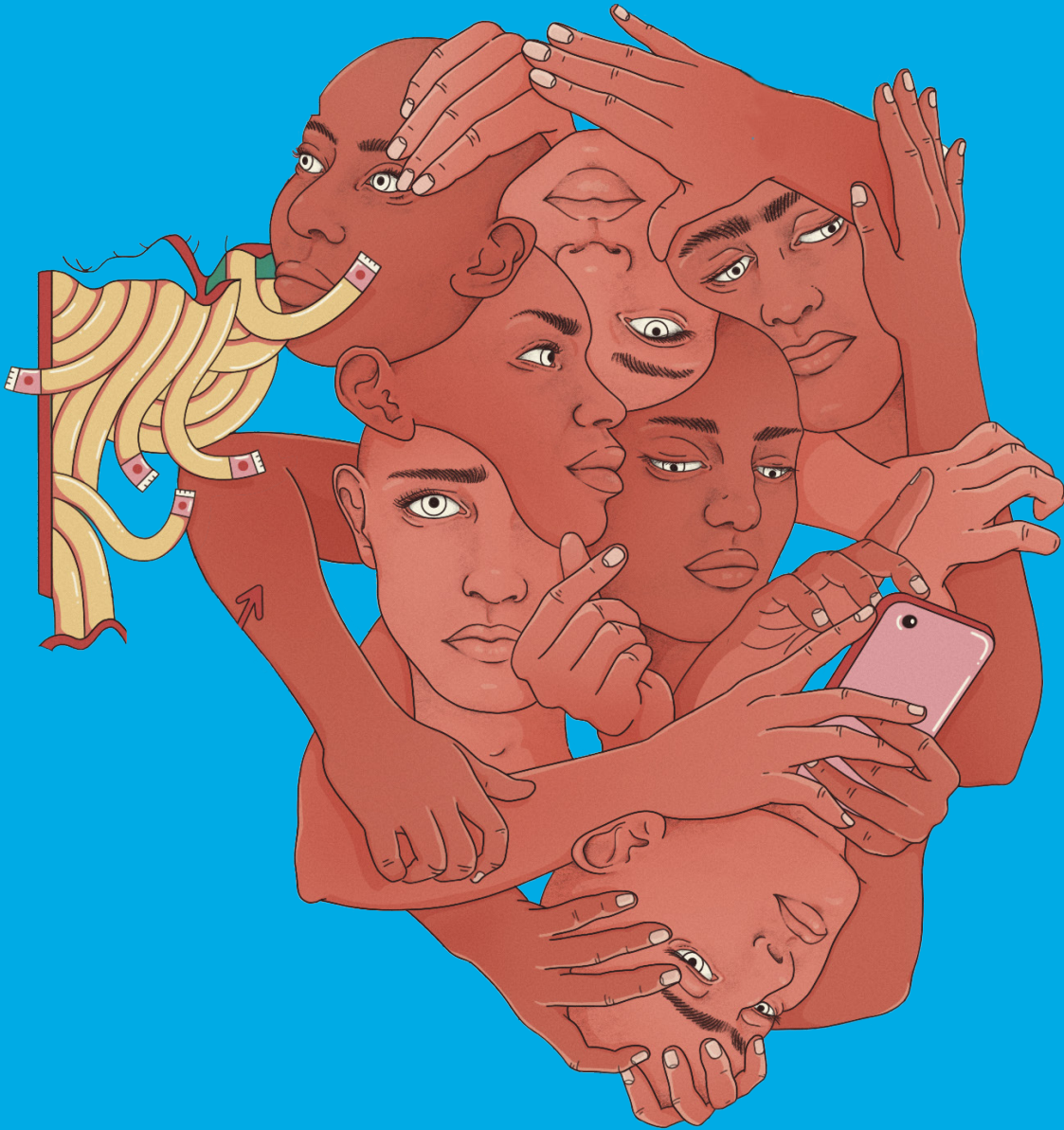## A Maturing Field

April 2024

STIFTUNG
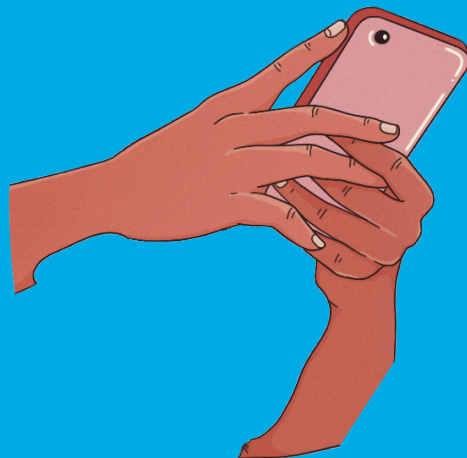**MERCATOR**

Digital Civil Society: A Maturing Field

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Executive Summary

1. Executive Summary

This field study aims at understanding the current landscape and future developments of digital civil society in Germany, with a particular focus on policy-making and advocacy work. Conducted on behalf of Stiftung Mercator's Centre for Digital Society, this document examines the role of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in shaping digital policies by understanding how the ecosystems sees and describes itself. It delves into the challenges CSOs face today, and the opportunities and developments that are anticipated today. It is intended to inform and guide CSOs, funders and practitioners towards supporting a resilient and democratic digital policy ecosystem.

This work is rooted in Stiftung Mercator's commitment to a society characterised by openness to the world, solidarity and equal opportunities, and to the Centre for Digital Society's mission to ensure that digital technologies in Germany and Europe to be developed and used in accordance with democratic rights and values. It aims to provide a point of reference that can serve as a future benchmark to understand the field's development, successes, and persisting challenges, and could thus be a building block toward more evidence-based and impact-oriented grantmaking.

Key findings:
The civil society ecosystem in Germany has been maturing. This process can be observed along several dimensions:

- **Diversification:** The digital civil society ecosystem has become more diverse. On one hand, this means new actors from other policy fields and with different professional backgrounds are entering the field. On the other hand, digital rights organisations are increasingly starting to work across organisational or thematic borders.

- **Evolving expertise & different roles emerging:** As the public debate and the policy-making around digital rights issues advances, there is an increasing demand for actionable policy inputs and recommendations, for enforcement-focused work and in parts for pragmatic approaches (for example, issue-based coalition work with industry). At the same time, digital rights CSOs need to expand their existing professional skills, particularly to include strategic communication, campaigning, and a deepened understanding of (and access to) policy-making processes of digital policies. We can see different roles emerging within the ecosystem as some strategies work better for some organisations than for others.

- **Strategic alliances and collaborative impact:** As the digital civil society ecosystem matures, we see a marked trend towards forging strategic alliances, underscoring the power of collaboration over competition. This shift highlights the recognition that complex digital challenges require collective action, pooling resources, and shared expertise. It signifies a move away from isolated efforts towards a more unified approach, leveraging networked strength to amplify advocacy impact and drive systemic change in digital policy landscapes.

- **Work towards a shared vision is slowly starting:** CSOs have increasingly acknowledged the need of formulating positive and forward-looking visions to move from reactive to more proactive digital policy-making. Yet, to this point, a relatively small subset of actors are engaging in vision-building, with their initiatives frequently characterised by a narrow scope of focus. There is a demand for narratives that are not only comprehensive and inclusive but also embody a multifaceted approach. These narratives should serve as a beacon, offering both guidance and boundaries for actions in the immediate and more distant future.

Against this background, a set of **recommendations** for funders and foundations emerges:

→ **Provide dedicated funding for strategic collaboration, actively support coalition building and conflict resolution:** To further increase impact, encourage CSOs to adopt a systemic perspective, focusing on building alliances and collaborative networks that span sectors and disciplines. This approach should aim not only at amplifying collective impact but also at fostering an ecosystem where knowledge, resources, and expertise are shared freely. Funders and policymakers are called to support initiatives that facilitate such collaboration, recognizing it as a cornerstone for driving meaningful and sustainable change in the digital society. With growing diversity across the field, funders should also prepare for possible conflicts of goals and priorities within the field and among potential grantee organisations. Funders should be aware of and prepared for this, and could potentially function as mediating and coordinating instances in the field.

→ **Prioritise skill development and professional growth:** Invest in the professional growth of civil society actors, emphasising the importance of diversifying skills beyond technical expertise. This includes developing capacities in strategic communication, narrative building, policy analysis, and stakeholder engagement as well as new skills that are needed for the implementation phase of digital policies. Funding models must evolve to directly support these efforts, providing essential resources for training, workshops, and ongoing development of staff. Funders should keep in mind that not every organisation needs to develop every one of these capacities to the same degree. For instance, depending on their mission some organisations might do the groundwork on problem analysis and awareness raising that serves others as a basis for their own, more implementation focused work. Funders should look at the field from an ecosystem perspective, where different organisations play different roles.

→ **Innovate evaluation and impact measurement:** Shift towards more dynamic and nuanced methods of evaluating the impact of digital civil society initiatives. De-emphasise traditional rigid quantitative metrics and move towards approaches that appreciate the complexity of digital transformation and its societal implications. Funders and CSOs alike should evolve their evaluation frameworks to build on discussions and joined understandings of visions, missions and theories of change. They should regularly reflect on working methods and approaches and the way they help in achieving their partners' missions. This approach has not only the potential to provide a more accurate and actionable reflection of impact. It also encourages maturation and adaptability in advocacy strategies through demanding new levels of trust, transparency and honest reflection regarding power imbalances in the relationship between funders and grantees. In foundations, all departments, including administrations, should ideally be included in this process.

2

Introduction

2. Introduction

Since its inception, Stiftung Mercator has been committed to a society characterised by openness to the world, solidarity and equal opportunities. To achieve these objectives, it supports and develops projects in four areas of work: 1. participation and cohesion; 2. climate change mitigation; 3. Europe's ability to act through constructive relations for a more inclusive international order; 4. the digital transformations impact on democracy.

Civil society takes a central role in all these areas of engagement and forms a critical infrastructure for democracy. In an era of multiple interconnected challenges, deeply anchoring public decision-making and policy-making in the public interest is not just expedient for responsible governance and collective action — it is vital. Addressing the complexities of interconnected crises requires a diverse, robust, and dynamic ecosystem of civil society actors. Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and movements are more than mere instruments for achieving political causes, such as mobility transitions or other social issues. They are essential to a healthy democracy as they allow for continuous reflection, support, and critique of political decision-making and administrative implementation processes.

This is particularly true in a digital society: CSOs hold deep expertise in digital policy and are an important voice in political discourses that are often dominated by few big international tech companies. They are also an essential part of social innovation ecosystems, provide help to people effected by digital harms, and build and maintain digital infrastructures. More than most other groups, civil society is credibly rooted in the everyday experiences of a broader public.

At Mercator's Centre for Digital Society, we support a wide range of partners from academia, think tanks and civil society in their analysis of the effects digital technologies and infrastructures have on democracies. We fund the development of solutions for the democratic design and governance of communications infrastructures as well as for the digital transformation of the public sector with the goal to strengthen democracy, social justice, cohesion and participation, and we hope to contribute to a more nuanced and diverse discourse on the digital transformation. Ours is a bird's eye view, an ecosystemic perspective. This study reflects this perspective and serves as a foundational piece for grantmaking decisions that are more impact-oriented as well as understanding of the perspectives and needs of the civil society field itself.

A healthy ecosystem first and foremost needs to be a diverse ecosystem. This means, among other things, a wide range of actors and organisations that play different, complementary roles: from grassroots movements to think tanks, from academia to watchdog organisations. Our role as a funder in this space is to support these various actors in their growth and development in the way that serves them best. At the same time, we will continue to scrutinise our own role as a funder in the ecosystem and the inherent power dynamics at play.

This field is relatively young, and hence it is still growing. Growth rarely happens in a linear fashion, and occasionally it comes with growing pains. As a field and ecosystem, more support — financial and otherwise — would be useful in almost all areas. That said, we are aware that the German digital civil society is comparatively well developed and funded. We hope and believe that many of the insights gained here will still be useful and applicable in other regions and contexts.

We are looking forward to continue to learn from others and to continue an open exchange about these issues which are so essential to a healthy society and democracy. In this spirit we invite you to peruse this document at your leisure and to reach out to us to continue the conversation.
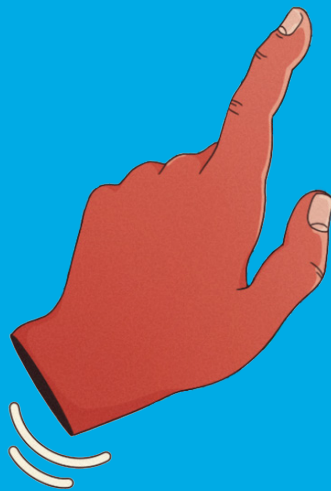
Carla Hustedt
Director Centre for Digital Society, Stiftung Mercator

3

Intention

3. Intention

What are we trying to learn through this document?

3.1 Purpose of this document

This document serves to inform our own work and potentially that of other funders, and as a foundation for further debate and development across the ecosystem. It aims to provide a resource for future evaluation of progress within the ecosystem, and for mutual growth. Explicit assumptions, especially regarding development paths and promising interventions, are highlighted to allow for strategic learning and iteration. We hope that this document can itself become subject to iteration and adjustment that drives mutual understanding about the ecosystem and conceives of Stiftung Mercator as a participating observer of the ecosystem itself, leading to insights about the effects and patterns of our own work.

Intended as both a cornerstone and a starting point for forthcoming inquiries, this document also aims to serve as a reference for future research endeavours within the digital civic ecosystem. By scrutinising these findings and juxtaposing them with comparable outcomes through a similar approach in the mid-future, approximately five years from now, we seek to construct a comprehensive and holistic understanding of the evolving landscape – and our own contributions. It should be noted that even before that, a continuous (eg. yearly) evaluation and iteration of these findings seems promising, allowing for a more dynamic response to events, developments, or newly emerging questions or technologies.

3.2 Understanding the status quo of the ecosystem digital civil society

This document offers a differentiated perspective on the present state of the digital civic society ecosystem in Germany, with a particular emphasis on digital policies (interpreted in the sense of the German term Digitalpolitik). As part of this effort, we delve into essential areas of focus and thematic priorities while seeking to identify existing connections and dynamics. We identify and analyse key factors related to the financing, scale, and evolution of prominent entities. The study sheds light on ongoing narratives and discussions. Where there are insights to be gained, we draw parallels between this study and other civic ecosystems, such as the climate movement, especially in terms of funding structures and organisational configurations.

In addition to literary review and desk research, a core part of our research was qualitative data gathered through an interview process for which we spoke to experts from a selected list of organisations. We selected these experts to allow for deep dives from three complementary perspectives: a) descriptions from an *internal perspective,* b) a bird's eye view with *specialised knowledge,* and c) an outside view to learn from *related fields* (eg. climate). In open and deep discussions we explored these perspectives with eleven experts:

Markus Beckedahl, netzpolitik.org

Jon Cracknell, The Hour Is Late

Jack Gallastegui, European Climate Foundation

Anna-Lena von Hodenberg, HateAid

Christian Humborg, Wikimedia Deutschland

Prof. Dr. Swen Hutter, FU Berlin

Elisa Lindinger, Superrr Lab

Catherine Miller, European AI & Society Fund

Katarina Peranić, Deutschen Stiftung für Engagement und Ehrenamt

Malte Spitz, Gesellschaft für Freiheitsrechte

Anna Wohlfarth, Stiftung Neue Verantwortung

In our conversations, we invited our interviewees to self-reflect and evaluate the current trajectories and developments from their respective points of view. The intention here was to get a qualitative notion of how the ecosystem sees itself in order to derive prominent and recurring themes, questions, challenges and blind spots. We deliberately allowed for priorities and topics of relevance to be set by our conversation partners and subsequently reviewed, consolidated, and synthesised our discussions. Additionally, we drew on relevant research done as part of another internal Mercator project based on dozens more expert interviews.

3.3 A new perspective: mapping transformation pathways

This study identifies potential key trajectories (pathways) for the future development of the ecosystem and maps potential tipping points along the way. Contrary to fixed snapshots of reality that suggest a static status quo, we understand an ecosystem as continuously evolving. We are dealing with dynamically changing systems of transformation, and our models should genuinely account for these dynamics. This means a shift in perspective from static data points to pathways of change and related tipping points. These tipping points are where our engagement could have the most impact by nudging the ecosystem from one potential development path to another, more desirable one.

We think of observable development paths as developments that are either currently projected or can plausibly be expected in the near future, as perceived today by core actors within the ecosystem. The task of mapping the status quo thus becomes an exercise in making explicit current notions about where we, as a collective and diverse ecosystem, stand today and where we are heading. This involves an underlying intent (mission) that differentiates between desirable and non-desirable futures and allows us to identify tipping points along the way. These points, where ecosystem resilience is low and hence more receptive to outside influence, are moments that allow for targeted intervention to change course—from elections to funding cycles to temporarily dominant public discourses.

We chose this approach because it aligns with contemporary academic discourse on designing the transformation and resilience behaviour of complex systems, especially regarding transition design and governance innovation (e.g., Elmqvist et al., 2019; Irwin et al., 2015; Mazzucato, 2018). In our view, for an ecosystem as highly dynamic as this, this approach holds the most potential for informing strategic choices going forward. Understanding dynamic trajectories and continuous changes is essential for grasping the themes explored below. It allows to account for different types of changes, from directed transformation (rooted in collective action and intervention) to abrupt transformation (often due to unforeseen internal or external events), distinguishing desired from undesired development pathways, and accounting for systemic resilience (i.e., the capacity of a system to absorb external perturbations).

We invite readers to join in this perspective shift toward a more dynamic understanding of the ecosystems we are all part of, and toward discerning the three critical questions of transformation: Where do we want to go, where are we now, and where are we going?

**FIG. 1: Mapping transformation pathways and tipping points of change**
(cf. Elmqvist et al. 2019: 270)

● Tipping points (low resilience)　— Potential pathways
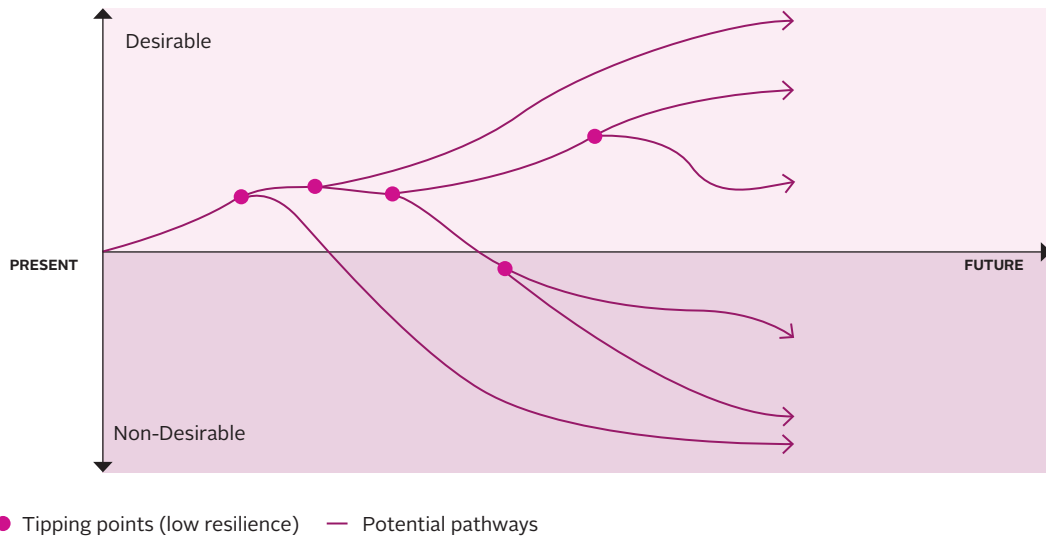
3.4 Scope & geographical focus

When we refer to the digital civil society (in German: digitalpolitische Zivilgesellschaft) we mean civil society organisations that are neither market nor state driven, and formed around addressing matters of digital transformation for public interest. As such, we are especially interested in the intersection of digital transformation work, civil society organisation and policy-making processes, including advocacy work in fields such as digital rights, digital policies, tech policy, civil society, digital transformation, etc. It should be noted that a broader understanding of policy work is relevant here, encompassing aspects like campaigning work and strategic litigation, insofar as they aim to change regulation or to influence policy-making processes.

**FIG. 2: Focus point of this paper**
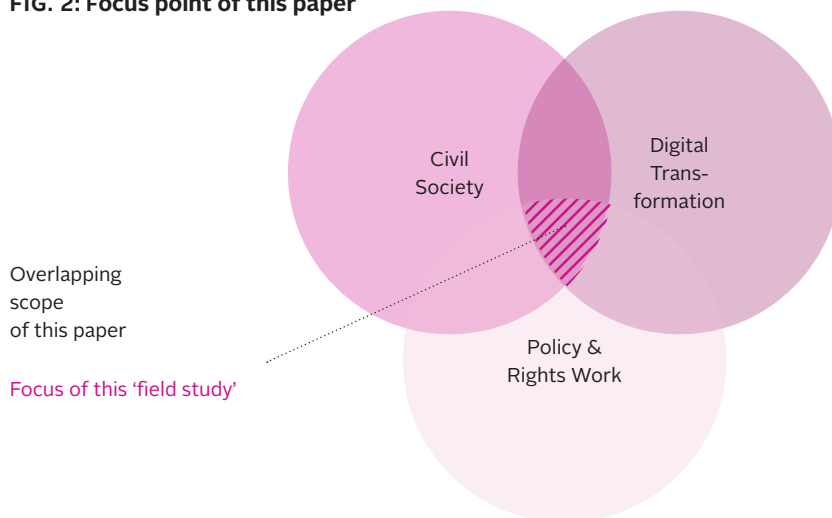
While the emphasis of this report is on civil society in Germany, it acknowledges the fact that – especially in the context of digital policies and networks – national and geographical boundaries are structurally questionable differentiators. To that end, a differentiated and nuanced scoping is applied that, while rooted in the German domestic ecosystem, takes into account a post-geographical setup (a "stack", cf. Bratton 2016) of software, policies, actors, funding structures, and more. An obvious example are CSOs that also work at the EU level.

Observations from the authors: It is essential to acknowledge that this report on the digital civil society in Germany is not exhaustive in its coverage. While we have diligently sought to provide a comprehensive overview, certain relevant topics may not be encompassed within its scope, which can be attributed to our interviewee selection, the focus of the interviews, or the subsequent sense making processes which are necessarily selective. Notably, diversity within the digital rights field and the representation of affected communities in the digital rights debate, as highlighted by organisations like the Digital Freedom Fund, are not a prominent part of this report even though they merit attention. We recognise the importance of ongoing efforts to address diversity concerns and ensure equitable representation in the discourse surrounding digital rights.

4

Digital Civil Society in Context
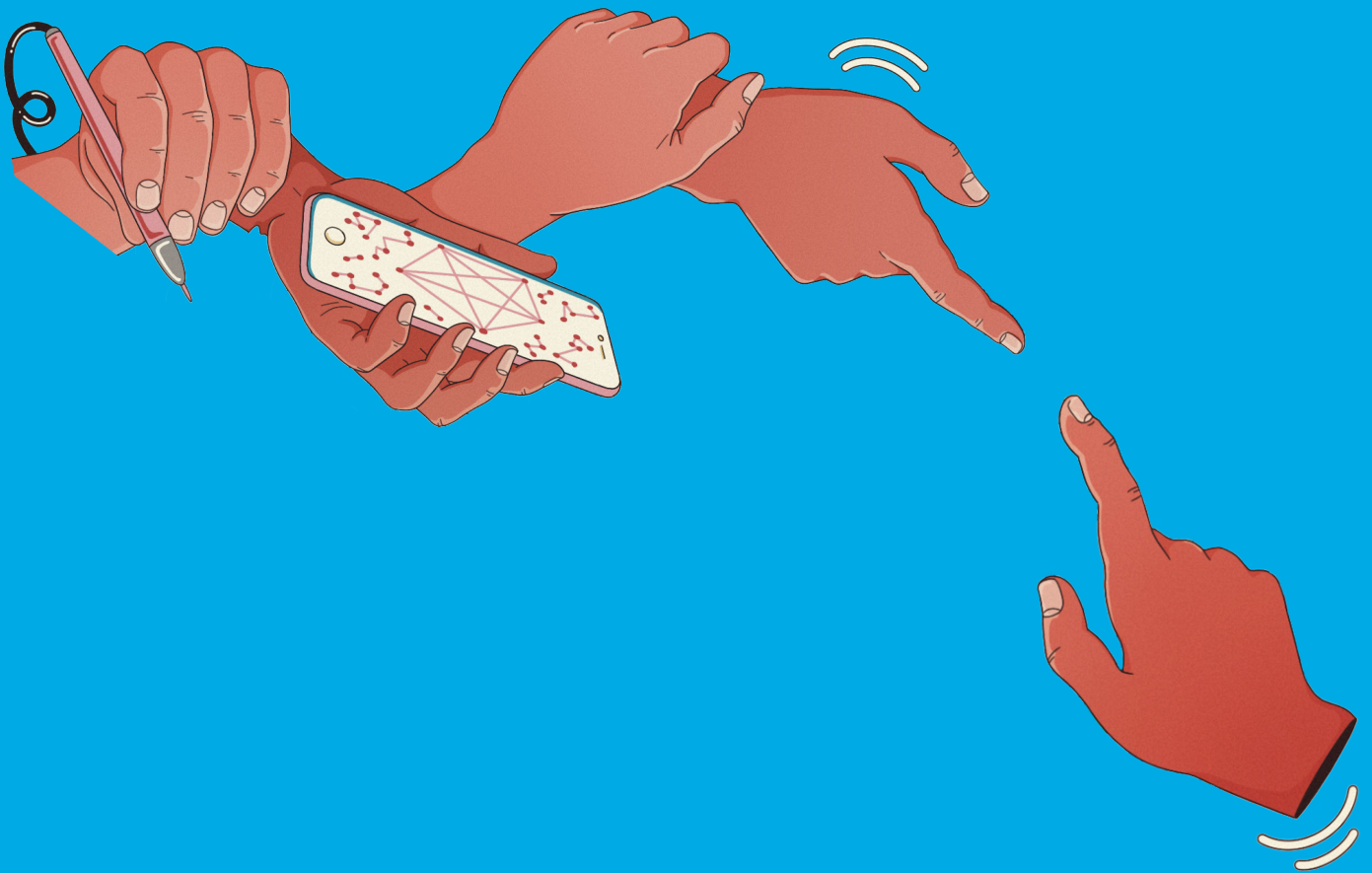
4. Digital Civil Society in Context

What is the context and structure of what we are looking at?

4.1 Critical functions within the ecosystem

Taking a structural lens, looking at the above intersection of civil society, digital transformation and policy & rights work, we can discern a number of vital core functions that most CSOs fall into (cf. in the following Beining, Bihr, Heumann 2020). Note that these are often not mutually exclusive and subject to change over time, even within a given organisation.

....

AlgorithmWatch, a non-profit organisation in Germany, operates across various domains under one organisational umbrella. Their work ranges from policy analysis and advocacy to investigations, all centred around the critical topic of automated decision-making (ADM) systems. This diversity of focus areas allows them to comprehensively address the multifaceted challenges and opportunities presented by ADM today.

....

- **Policy & lobbying:** Navigating the processes and mechanisms through which policies, laws, and regulations get made, and how to influence these processes.

- **Investigation:** The ability (including research methodologies) to investigate how technological systems work, not least in order to provide relevant insight for other organisations like watchdogs, policy makers and strategic litigation organisations.

- **Watchdog:** Watchdogs research and expose problematic developments or behaviours by technological systems or the actors that use and run them.

- **Strategic litigation:** Strategic litigators help enforce, test or challenge laws and regulation in court.

- **Campaigning and outreach:** Societal decisions require a well-informed public debate. Campaigners help put salient issues on the agenda and inform that debate.

- **Research:** Beyond understanding technological systems, researchers explore how these systems interact with society and their potential impacts.

- **Promoting digital literacy & education:** Education raises the level of digital literacy, which is key for an informed public discourse as well as individual decision-making.

4.2 CSOs in between policy makers and corporations

While civil society plays a pivotal role within the broader ecosystem, it constitutes merely one segment of multiple stakeholders, and the smallest by most quantitative measures. In examining the contributions of civil society and the supportive role of philanthropy, it is important to also consider two other groups of actors: policy makers and industry.

Policy makers: Our prior investigation revealed that those policy makers concentrating on Digitalpolitik in Germany tend to share relatively similar positions across the political spectrum but often lack prominence within their respective parties. Historically, there has been little political capital to be gained with digital policy in Germany, with perceived high risks and limited political gains. Consequently, experts in this domain may divert their attention to other areas to avoid being politically side-lined within their own parties. On the one hand, the topic needs to be put on the agenda. For this to happen, it needs to be emphasised, promoted and campaigned for. On the other hand, a core problem of digital policy remains that the

topic is not being looked at in a sufficiently differentiated way. Increasing attention runs the risk of simplifying positions and for less well thought-out policies being advanced.
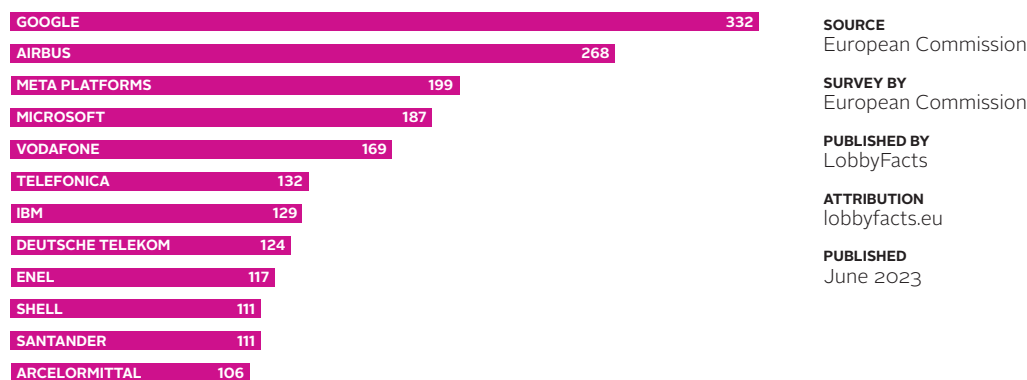
Tech industry encompasses a diverse array of stakeholders, for whom digital policy holds significant relevance. Their interests at times align with those of civil society, spanning various domains such as maintaining public discourse, developing efficient methods for data analysis and interpretation for public benefit, harnessing the potential of AI and other emerging technologies, and providing essential digital infrastructure. Despite these commonalities, tech industry players and civil society are frequently perceived as antagonists in policy debates, which is not always helpful as it risks overlooking the areas of mutual interest and collaboration, potentially hindering constructive dialogue and progress.

That said, a small number of global tech companies — the so-called Big Tech — represent more of a known quantity due to the limited number of major corporations overseeing large digital platforms. These corporations boast substantial resources and deploy efficient global and national structures not only for product development and marketing but also for engaging with policy makers to advance their interests. Their political interests frequently align on various political issues like regulation or limiting liability for content posted on their platforms.

Big Tech lobbying is not just hugely dominant in terms of resourcing. It's also highly professional and takes a multi-pronged approach. There is the on-the-book lobbying: In terms of registered lobby spend, Big Tech companies are some of the biggest lobby spenders in Brussels. But this is just the tip of the iceberg. To complement their lobbying, Big Tech also significantly finances think tanks and academic research, engages in industry groups and associations, initiates multi-stakeholder processes and runs campaigns. Especially at the European level, industry also supports their own lobbying by bringing in business owners from EU member states to meet with their representatives to speak in support of industry positions. In other words, Big Tech has the resources to work from all angles at all times, something that civil society will never quite be able to do, at least not in a coordinated fashion. But since civil society is often perceived to have more political legitimacy than corporate lobby efforts, this will not be necessary to solve through just more resources. Instead, the solution appears to lie in smarter advocacy and better coordination and collaboration.

FIG. 3 : Big Tech lobby resources directly translate to access: According to LobbyFacts' data, Google, Meta and Microsoft are among the companies that have the most lobby meetings with members of the European Commission

Source: Statista

Company	Value
GOOGLE	332
AIRBUS	268
META PLATFORMS	199
MICROSOFT	187
VODAFONE	169
TELEFONICA	132
IBM	129
DEUTSCHE TELEKOM	124
ENEL	117
SHELL	111
SANTANDER	111
ARCELORMITTAL	106

SOURCE
European Commission

SURVEY BY
European Commission

PUBLISHED BY
LobbyFacts

ATTRIBUTION
lobbyfacts.eu

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4.3 Quantifying context

The playing field of shaping public discourse and regulatory frameworks is fiercely contested. Not only are financial stakes and business models on the line, but so too are political and regulatory power dynamics, civil and human rights, and ultimately, the health of democracy itself. To contextualise the forthcoming findings, it is crucial to highlight three areas:

Digital civil society a comparatively young policy field: The data reveals that strengthening civil society's contribution to policy-making is a relatively new endeavour. As our internal research[1] highlights, this manifests in significantly lower funding levels compared to other fields like climate philanthropy. Note that these numbers refer to the donor side, not the recipient side.

FIG. 4: Funding committed by seven of the key digital rights funders in Europe to climate mitigation vs data & digital. Internal research committed by seven of the key digital rights funders in Europe

Source: Internal research committed by seven of the key digital rights funders in Europe

DATA AND DIGITAL 2021
126
US$ MILLION

CLIMATE MITIGATION 2021
390
US$ MILLION
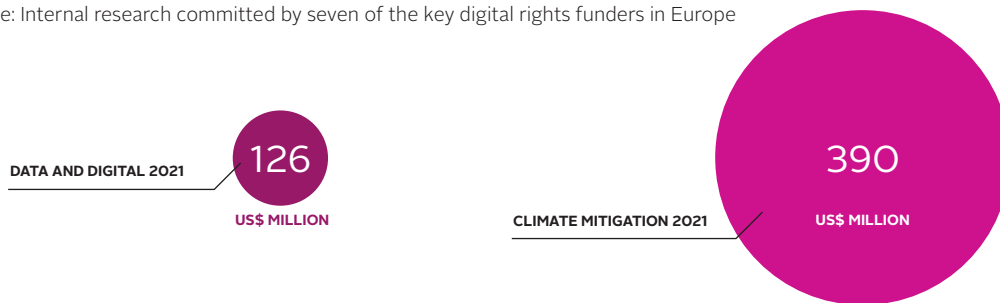
Climate grants more than 3x those on data & digital rights (in Million US$)

Available funding for Germany's digital civil society ecosystem has been growing: Our sources show that, on an international scale, Germany's civil society funding in 2021 and 2022 ranks impressively, trailing only behind the US and the UK. This suggests a solid foundation for civil society support within the country. These funding levels are, however, still dependent on a relatively small number of funders. Going forward, diversifying and stabilising funding will be essential.

FIG. 5: Source: Internal research committed by seven of the key digital rights funders in Europe

Source: Internal research committed by seven of the key digital rights funders in Europe
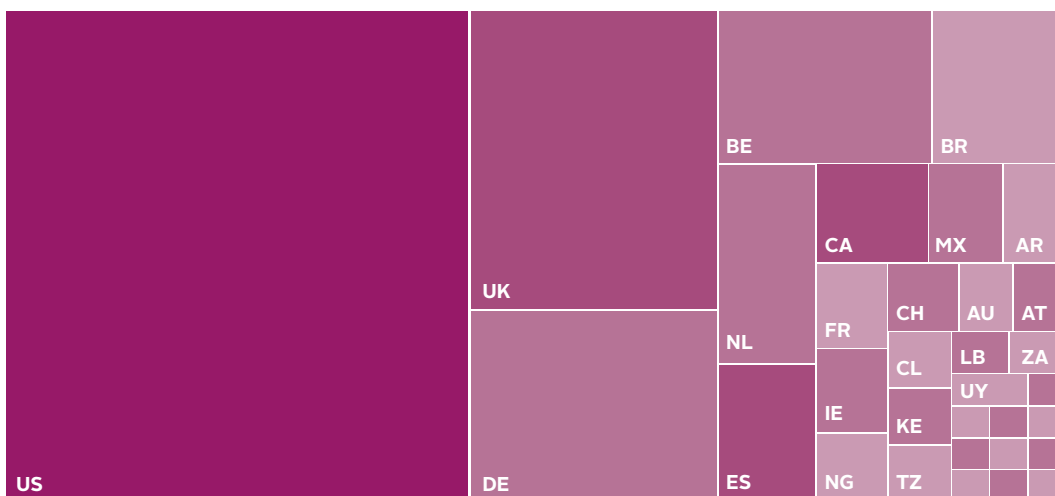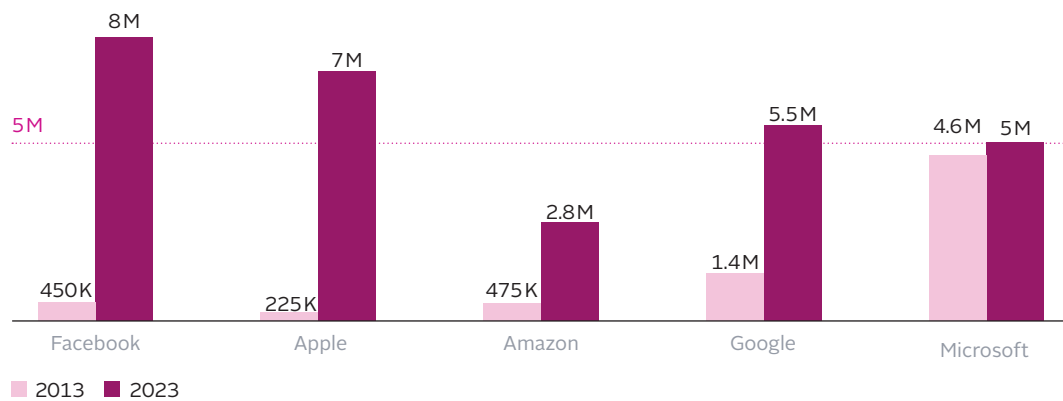

1 Based on internal research commissioned by and about seven international foundations that are among the key digital rights funders in Europe.

Big Tech's lobby dominance is growing rapidly: An alarming trend emerges from the data on lobbying expenditures by Big Tech in Brussels, which dwarf those of any other actor in the sector. The GAFAM group (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, and Microsoft) has seen an average increase in lobby spend by more than tenfold over the last decade. This surge creates a profoundly imbalanced playing field for civil society organisations and donors. Although this dynamic opens the door for strategic and tactical alliances, the overarching implications for democratic policy-making and decision-making processes are troubling.

FIG. 5: GAFAM EU lobbying expenditure.
It is worth noting that a) the numbers, while some of the highest in the EU, are comparatively compact compared to the overall budgets of the organisations and b) how these budgets have increased massively over a relatively short time.

Source: Corporate Europe Observatory/Lobbyfacts.eu

	Facebook	Apple	Amazon	Google	Microsoft
2013	450K	225K	475K	1.4M	4.6M
2023	8M	7M	2.8M	5.5M	5M

■ 2013 ■ 2023

5

Findings:
where we are today

5. Findings: where we are today

What is the current state and development of the digital civil society?

5.1 Indicators

To conceptualise the status quo of the ecosystem of the digital civil society in Germany, we employ a framework of four levers for evolving ecosystems, as laid out by Charles Leadbeater and Jennie Winhall (2020: 31ff.). This allows to account for both current trajectories and future dynamics of a system while understanding core drivers for transformation processes:

- **Purpose:** A central lever to effect change in an (eco-)system is to change its purpose. This means changing the inherent goals, desired outcomes, or values a system is geared toward. In other contexts, this type of shared and collective intent is being understood as a mission. See for instance Mariana Mazzucato's review of the European Commissions' recent shift toward adopting Mission Governance in the European Union (European Commission 2019). For the context of a digital civil society, this poses the question about the quality (and existence) of a shared intent, be it a common narrative, a future vision for the digital public, or even a decentralised network of complementary smaller micro missions.

- **Power:** Both, soft and hard power come into play when translating purpose into practice. This includes cultural power through shaping and influencing collective behaviour, allocating resources, voicing dissent and shaping public narratives. In the field of digital civil society this can mean visibility and relevance of the voices of actors, influence on and adoption of policies and in regulatory frameworks.

- **Relationships:** Understanding digital civil society as a social ecosystem, connections and relations become an essential quality. Aside from collaborative networks this also includes potential competitive dynamics (e.g. regarding availability of funding resources), siloing and access to decision-making processes and policy makers.

- **Resources:** The allocation, introduction, constraint and regulation of resources such as budgets, knowledge, skills and personal capacities. In the context of this report this specifically includes funding structures, regimes and typologies.

The following chapters illustrate the trajectories (potential pathways) we see today.

5.2 Meta trend: a policy field comes of age

Our research reveals a policy field approaching maturity, characterised by an increasingly sophisticated understanding of leverage points, structural shifts, and the value of strategic collaboration. This evolution signifies a shift towards impactful and informed action, emphasising the importance of learning from past mistakes to refine strategies. This maturation reflects a deeper grasp of the complexities involved, paving the way for transformative change through collective effort and adaptive learning.

Evolving networked civil society: the landscape of the digital civil society ecosystem is undergoing a significant transformation, moving towards more diverse and interdependent structures, processes, topics, and fields of activity. This evolution towards interconnectedness reflects a paradigm shift in how civil society organises itself and engages with its various stakeholders, embracing the complexity and richness that a networked approach offers for addressing contemporary challenges.

Strategic adaption of new themes & approaches: These changes are also reflected in the development of novel thematic programmes, the establishment of new reporting standards,

and the type of questions that CSOs are facing in a new landscape – from shaping platform economics to data governance and policy-making processes. Such strategic reflections and applications signify a mature approach to leveraging the interconnected nature of the digital age, ensuring that these CSOs remain relevant, responsive, and resilient in the face of evolving demands and opportunities.

CSOs undergoing transformation: Alongside these developments, CSOs are increasingly adopting more networked patterns themselves – from working in dynamic alliances to strategic coalition building and strategic redundancy. This focus on self-transformation highlights the adaptive capacity of CSOs to rethink and reconfigure their operational models in alignment with a rapidly changing ecosystem.

5.3 Purpose

A shared intent to move toward a desirable future

Coherence: toward a shared vision?

CORE FINDINGS

➜ **Intrinsic motivation:** CSOs are driven by intrinsic goals and focus on long-term political programmes and current social issues.

➜ **Specialised focus:** Organisations often focus on specific issues such as hate speech or digital privacy and provide in-depth expertise to their stakeholders.

➜ **Shift to an integrated approach:** Trend towards cross-sector collaboration that goes beyond isolated issue-based strategies.

➜ **No unified vision (yet):** The need for a coherent, long-term vision for digital civil society is recognised, but is not currently being met.

> **"We started off fighting fires, now we're working for systemic change."** [2]

We learned that in today's landscape of digital civic society, most actors are driven by an intrinsic motivation and individual purpose: from advancing dedicated issues and policy programs in the long-term to addressing timely themes in present public discourse. Many organisations are focused on specific thematic areas – from hate speech to digital privacy rights to AI regulation and beyond. These issue-based organisations coordinate around a relatively clearly-cut area of interest and employ rigorous expertise to go deep and solve in their work for, first of all, creating value for their immediate stakeholders and interest groups: victims of online harassment, marginalised groups and communities, specific product or developer communities, etc. In the past, this allowed many actors in digital civil society to generate deep technical or subject area expertise in their respective field and make a dent through consistent and continuous work.

2 This and all the following quotes, unless indicated otherwise, are from expert interviews conducted for this study. All interview quotes are used anonymously in this text.

Our research interviews show that there is a development taking place that complements this form of issue-based organisational coordination with a new type of organisational focus that some are already embracing. This approach tries to work systematically towards cross-sectoral conceptual work, re-imagining principles and targets of public interest across organisational or thematic borders. Growing from an organisation with a strong focus on core issues towards one with a more integrated approach means understanding other actors in the ecosystem as key as one's own work. We see this emerging development toward more broad, collaborative organisations across the digital civil society ecosystem. And it makes sense: It is a logical response to the realisation that even multiple single-issue organisations cannot necessarily address the interconnected complexity of these types of issues. Instead, it requires coordination and collaboration. This includes concerted public campaigns to advance regulatory projects as well as coordinating effective collaboration within the ecosystem to unlock synergies of shared and complementary intentions. **In short: there is a development taking place that increasingly builds upon networked and coordinated action, rather than strongly constrained issue-based organisational strategies.**

"There is just no Big Vision."

To advance and strengthen this trend, however, many of the interviewed practitioners underlined that a unifying and overarching narrative is needed to provide a desirable long-term vision for collective orientation. It still remains vague what shape such a proposed digital civil society might take. This holds especially true for emerging transformational shifts in digital, political, economic, and ecological ecosystems. **As of today, the implicit underlying question for civil society "what are we working towards?" remains largely unanswered collectively.** Accordingly, this lack of a big vision is notable regarding both the conceptual and imaginative potential of an organising narrative, as well as the practical level of political and regulatory realities. If an organisation does not know what larger goal it wants to work towards, how can it guide its stakeholders and align its partners to get there?

We are in the middle of a shift where well-informed but uncoordinated civic action becomes problematic, while a new shared understanding of what to aim for has not yet emerged. In this liminal space of digital civic action, an overarching vision or narrative is much-needed. However, today we only see too few weak signals3 to yet identify what such a potential overarching vision might look like.

3 The term *weak signal* here refers to the concept from foresight and future studies: a subtle or early indication of a potential trend, change, or emerging issue that may have significant implications in the future. These signals are often faint, ambiguous, or not widely recognized, making them challenging to detect and interpret.

Impact: embracing messy realities

CORE FINDINGS

→ **Traditional grantmaking struggles with dynamic impact:** Traditional metrics for funding impact often miss the complex, nonlinear transformations in the digital civil society ecosystem.

→ **Quantitative metrics fall short in capturing subtle changes:** True impacts in digital policy are better reflected in shifts in attitudes and power dynamics, often eluding pre-defined quantitative assessments.

→ **Focus on real-world impact over predefined success metrics:** Emerging effective evaluation approaches today should prioritise tangible outcomes and adapt to unforeseen results, emphasising real-world change over static benchmarks.

→ **Need for flexible, outcome-focused evaluation methods:** Looking ahead, a balanced approach requires integrating clear assessment criteria with adaptable evaluations to truly capture transformational changes over time.

"Reporting is a funder's logic."

The above quote illustrates a fundamental tension in the world of public interest work and grantmaking. It arises from the need to account for the specific functions of a grant, often including concrete, objective evidence for assessing funding and for evaluating the ultimate impact of initiatives before the actual work is done. The definition and tracking of metrics and indicators that track planned activities, predefined metrics and estimated impact are agreed upon by donors and partners *beforehand,* and make for an essential aspect of advocacy work in the digital context. After all, these measures are in many cases instrumental to assess the success or failure of programs, and in justifying ongoing or shifting focus of attention on the side of donors after the project has been concluded.

However, this conventional approach offers limited insights in the context of indirect, dynamic, and nonlinear processes of transformation – which eventually applies to all work within the digital civil ecosystem, especially around policy. Here, *impact* often is not well represented by measurable statistical outcomes that can be defined beforehand. Instead, it often resides in subtle changes in attitudes, behaviour, and power dynamics that can best be pieced together only in hindsight (cf. prominently Rittel and Webber 1973: 161ff). For instance, in stakeholder interviews we repeatedly encountered arguments that off-the-record or sometimes informal conversations between policy makers and civil society experts were attributed with significant impact, yet they would not have shown up in most quantitative assessments nor can they be treated as a reliable descriptive metric for likely impact. Notions like *change, impact, efficacy,* or *influence* tend to shift and re-align with time passing, undercutting attempts of objective and quantifiable definition of relevant success criteria before a grant is made or a program is launched. This can lead to two challenges: One, extremely time intensive reporting activities for grantees, with entire roles exclusively staffed to cater to donors' needs. And, two, the risk of tracking vanity metrics that might turn out to be not substantial after all.

In our conversations, it transpired that it is vital to address and avoid the prospect of spending inordinate amounts of time on bureaucratic but ineffective reporting. CSOs that are in many cases under-resourced are additionally stretching their resources to write reports that serve the internal logics of third parties. **There is a growing interest in an updated perspective that centres around tangible, real-world outcomes that genuinely matter to the intended beneficiaries of the funding – while withholding from premature judgement on** *success* **and** *impact.*

> **"Tangible efficacy is better than an abstract 'we accompany a discourse'."**

In practice, this does not mean to reject impact assessment altogether and to refrain from attempting to track and account for impact. Far from it, it implies the need to go beyond the mere documentation of predefined activities and outputs to focus on the transformational change achieved through a grant or program during and after it has been concluded. This includes allowing for unforeseen positive and negative outcomes to be accounted for, and a genuinely open stance toward learning what matters when and why. For instance, instead of measuring the number of workshops conducted or publications issued, the focus of evaluation reports then shifts towards understanding how these activities led to enhanced knowledge, skills, or changes in the lives and work of the beneficiaries. In many cases this retrospective evaluation can and should be repeated more than once as past processes and activities can turn out to appear in a different light with time progressing.

While more in tune with real change in the field, the challenge here of course is to find a balanced configuration that understands clearly defined assessment criteria to orient action and planning as genuinely complementary to flexible and outcome-open post-factum evaluation that is subject to constant change.

5.4 Power
The capability to influence resource flows, priorities, evaluation, and directionality

Understanding: translating relevance to the wider environment

CORE FINDINGS

→ **Digital policy foundation:** Civil society actors are key in shaping digital norms and rights, but face challenges in engaging public interest due to the abstract nature of digital issues and corporate influence.

→ **Focus on education:** Recognising a gap in communication, civil society prioritises making digital rights relatable through education, addressing the need for broader engagement and understanding.

→ **Navigating political complexities:** CSOs excel in issue analysis, yet frequently fall short in grasping political contexts and dynamics, rendering their recommendations less applicable than the targeted lobbying of major technology firms.

→ **Strategic engagement:** Adopting new strategies like deliberate coalition-building and integration of complementary interests, CSOs seek to bridge the influence gap and enhance their role in shaping digital infrastructure.

**"We're doing basic work here.
For many that seems just unsexy."**

Many civil society actors working on digital policies are doing groundwork: Establishing basic rules, precedents, and safe spaces in the midst of a process of digital transformation. This often leads to issues being quite abstract and hence less tangible, less emotional. Combined with extremely strong interest by international corporations to shape perception and discourse around rapidly evolving digital technologies, this often makes for a general public disinterest and lack of knowledge in abstract or fundamental issues from digital civil society. Consider things like the translation of basic civic rights into the digital sphere, including fields like privacy, defamation, intellectual property, and access to basic digital public services: Protecting these basic rights in the digital spaces often just seems less attractive compared to new marketing spins, exciting AI-developments and applications, or in the context of heated online debate. Without strong narratives, it is inherently hard to lend these issues salience.

CSOs increasingly realise that it takes translation and education work as a basis for broad collective interest and engagement. As many experts stressed in our conversations, **advocacy work also requires stakeholder engagement that revolves around a didactic and educational skill set.** This intent centres around providing literacy of core concepts, implications and developments and how they relate to everyday experiences, and addressing narratives and public perception of related issues. There is still a long way to go, however, as many actors in CSOs come from a background of computer science, law, political sciences – often lacking the strong communicative expertise found in marketing, public relations, and journalism.

This is relevant when relating to the policy sphere as well: What is true for the general public applies just as much to political leaders. They are actively seeking informed perspectives, including from civil society. But even where there is political consensus, often there is a lack of subject matter expertise that gets in the way of better policies. This is in contrast to the climate domain, where lacking political will oftentimes prevents the necessary practical implementation of new policies. Although the vital role of digital civil society in promoting the common good is widely acknowledged, the translation into specific policy areas remains selective and inadequately niche. Notably, the focus tends to be narrowly tailored to single issues like privacy, hate speech and digital violence. **A crucial gap persists in recognising digital civil society as a *critical infrastructure of our democracy* and implementing corresponding structural policy parameters in terms of access, resources, and organisational frameworks.**

On the flip side, **CSOs are skilled at analysing the issues but often lack a thorough understanding of political processes, making their advice less actionable compared to the influential lobbying efforts of Big Tech.** To increase their impact in shaping policies, CSOs need to improve their comprehension of political processes and intricacies. This can enable them to provide more actionable and effective recommendations, aligning with the influence wielded by major technology corporations whose public affairs staff know exactly when and where to insert their inputs for maximum effect. It is crucial for CSOs to bridge this gap and play a more significant role in the policy-making landscape. We have observed a shift in the approach of leading CSOs: Some are now placing greater emphasis on principles like decentralised coordination, coalition-building, transparent integration into policy-making processes (as an alternative to conventional lobbying), and active participation in decision-making

bodies. Germany's Beirat Digitalstrategie Deutschland4 is an apt example of this outlook, so is the 2023 Digitalgipfel5 in Jena.

Digitalgipfel 2023: In the preparation of the 2023 Digitalgipfel, the German Government's annual congress on digital transformation, the responsible ministries announced the goal to involve civil society in the congress and asked CSOs to submit session proposals. While this goal is needed and welcome, the Digitalgipfel has illustrated that mere encouragement for involvement is not sufficient. It is imperative to create transparency around decision-making processes and to address the unique challenges faced by civil society. There were significant concerns that civil society involvement would be window-dressing rather than real participation. This led to a mixed reception on behalf of CSOs: on one hand, there was an inclination towards constructive engagement to leverage the opportunity, while on the other there was criticism and a reluctance to participate due to perceived procedural shortcomings.

Narratives: shifting public discourse

CORE FINDINGS

→ **Focus on specific interest groups:** Many civil society organisations work on a case-by-case basis and focus on the immediate future and specific user groups, often taking a self-centred and competitive approach. This is due to the lack of a common narrative and is reflected in their organisational cultures.

→ **Future shift to public engagement and storytelling:** To overcome these challenges, the focus is shifting to collecting detailed data and improving transparency. This approach aims to understand complex public discussions and improve the resilience and redundancy of their work.

→ **The importance of compelling public narratives:** With better data and more transparency, CSOs can better adapt to challenges and actively participate in public debates. This marks the transition to engaging the wider public and co-creating collective narratives that are positive and constructive, rather than doomsday tales.

> "From 'don't kill penguins' to positive futures."

Decades of digital policy work have given rise to a diverse ecosystem of organisations in Germany. This persistence is particularly noteworthy for civil society organisations that operate with a strong sense of purpose, where building and maintaining a positive reputation is akin to acquiring social currency. Such organisations have shaped their approaches over extended periods, establishing themselves as key players in the digital policy landscape. Consequently, they have cultivated enduring relationships with policy makers, often at the individual level, established routines of internal management and, maybe most consequentially, are experienced in fundraising. These well-established actors wield comparatively high discursive and political power as well as the capacity for implementation.

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4 The Digital Strategy Germany Advisory Board is an advisory body for the development of digital strategies for Germany. It consists of experts from various fields who work together to develop recommendations and advice on topics such as digital transformation, technology and innovation. The Advisory Board aims to promote a comprehensive and forward-looking approach to Germany's digital development. https://digitalstrategie-deutschland.de/beirat/
5 See: https://www.digitalgipfel-jena.de/

There is a considerable opportunity to strengthen potential synergies of resources within the ecosystem through the strategic integration of complementary and new partners within a shared-interest network. Collaborating with other CSOs in the sector, and collectively accessing entry points into political institutions, provides a promising avenue for advancing mutual goals. This alignment corresponds not only to the importance highlighted above regarding the establishment of a shared narrative for future action but also aligns with the point below emphasising the strategic understanding of when and where to engage in smart collaboration, and how to capitalise on the network effects of coordinated actions. This strategic shift represents a transition from a „scaling deep" approach to a more expansive „scaling out" strategy.6

5.5 Relations

The interconnectivity of networked actors, communities, collectives, and organisations

Social capital: overcoming silos

CORE FINDINGS

→ **Barriers to collaboration:** German digital civil society contends with collaboration obstacles due to limited organisational collaboration, insular networks, and a divide between established and emerging groups, raising the costs of partnership.

→ **Overcoming silos:** CSOs must break out of their niches, embracing open dialogue and mutual support while navigating ideological differences to get to strategic, focused collaboration.

→ **Strategic alliances:** The competition with well-funded corporate entities highlights the necessity for targeted collaboration as well as issue-based alliances (rainbow coalitions) amidst funding competition and ecosystem dynamics.

"In the past we invited everyone very openly. It didn't work out so well."

The German digital civil society grapples with a significant collaboration challenge, stemming from a range of factors. These include limited interfaces between organisations, the existence of tightly-knit social bubbles characterised by strong internal cohesion and expertise but limited external allyship and interest. Additionally, the division between established and emerging actors in the field has contributed to a perceived high transaction cost for collaboration that extends beyond organisational boundaries. It just seems hard to break out of silos, have open and honest conversations, and explore new spaces for collaboration and complementary support.

6 For the differentiation of "scaling up", " scaling out", and "scaling deep" see for instance Omann et al. 2020: https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10584-019-02503-9

Initiatives like F5 serve as (albeit rare) beacons, guiding the way towards a novel momentum for strategically establishing collaborative and complementary networks of action. The F5 Alliance is a coalition of organisations that deal with various aspects of digital transformation on a daily basis. Their common goal is to promote democratic digital transformation based on principles such as openness, transparency, participation, human rights and consumer protection. The alliance aims to strengthen civil society voices and to coordinate efforts to influence debates and decision-making processes, particularly in areas such as data protection, platform transparency and state surveillance. The group draws its strength from long-standing, trusting relationships among its members, who do not compete with one another. Rather, they work on different areas towards a shared vision. It consists of Reporter ohne Grenzen, Algorithm Watch, Wikimedia Deutschland, Open Knowledge Foundation, and Gesellschaft für Freiheitsrechte.[7]

By transcending the limits of their individual areas of focus, these initiatives aspire to encourage cooperation, resource sharing, and the amplification of voices and reach. Notably, this also necessitates addressing and overcoming potential ideological challenges in the pursuit of shared and complementary action, coherent and on-going investment by all parties, and a more targeted approach to strategically aligned collaboration rather than a broad invite all approach.

This becomes even more crucial when confronted with highly organised and well-funded corporate counterparts and questions of strategic issue/based alliances (so-called rainbow coalitions). A limiting factor in this context lies in the availability of funding resources that can result in competitive dynamics within the ecosystem.

Diversity: new actors, new interests, new movements?

CORE FINDINGS

→ **A shift towards diversity and new actors:** There is a shift towards more internal and external diversity, with new actors from the political or social sphere and new sources of funding through alliances with established organisations.

→ **Influx of a pragmatic new generation:** These new entrants, who are often more pragmatic and less tied to the traditional net politics scene, are reshaping the ecosystem, even if they are not always readily accepted.

→ **Still no emergence of broader movements:** Despite these changes, there is still a gap in the emergence of dynamic youth-led public movements within digital civil society, as was the case with the Fridays for Future in the climate context.

→ **Representative data needed:** To thoroughly understand this development and assist organisations in evaluating their setup and unique qualities, more comprehensive and representative research is needed.

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7 See https://buendnis-f5.de

"There is a new generation, and they are often just much more pragmatic."

Historically, CSOs concentrated on engaging with closely related actors, such as core communities, impacted stakeholders, and long-term partners. Recently, however, there's been a shift towards embracing both internal and external diversity, bringing in new actors from various spheres and exploring new funding avenues through alliances with established entities. This influx of pragmatic, new-generation members — less anchored in the traditional net politics scene — is reshaping the ecosystem, despite occasional resistance to their integration. They tend to be perceived as more pragmatic, less bound to ideological concerns or principles, and come from a diverse range of underlying interests and motivations – financial, political, academic, or social.

Yet, many CSOs today still operate on a case-by-case basis, focusing on immediate objectives without aligning their efforts with a broader, collective mission. This fragmentation is partly due to the absence of a shared narrative and is exacerbated by organisational cultures that can be self-centred, exclusory, and competitive. Furthermore, the anticipated emergence of broader, dynamic youth-led public movements within the digital civil society, akin to the climate context's Fridays for Future (FFF), remains unfulfilled, although it bears great potential.

It should be noted that in order to more deeply explore this development, more quantitative and representative research would be useful. This could further help organisations in the ecosystem reflect their own set up and position more closely and understand their unique qualities.

5.6 Resources
Underpinning baseline factors such as funding, skills, knowledge, staff, etc. that are available to the system

Capabilities: translation for transformation

CORE FINDINGS

→ **Beyond specialisation:** Initially, digital civil society focused heavily on expertise, specialising in areas such as AI regulation, data protection and online harassment. While essential, this was limiting their ability to capture the broader public landscape and sometimes led to organisational and technical silos that hindered the exploration of synergies between different areas.

→ **Shift to public communication capabilities:** Alongside deep specialisation, there is a growing recognition that complementary skills are needed, particularly public communication skills, to facilitate and promote collective policy goals in the wider democratic discourse.

→ **New skills and campaigning:** Developing these communication skills requires training, organisational realignment and a rethinking of funding strategies, with an increased focus on public campaigning for effective advocacy and engagement.

"Many are stuck in their specialised topics, there is a lack of 'translation' into the wider society."

Many CSOs have their roots in tech-focused subcultures, and they have developed profound expertise in specific areas of work. An example is the demanding specialisation required for compliance with regulations such as the AI Act. While these specialised capabilities are indispensable, they are inherently limiting when faced with the vast complexity and ever-evolving nature of the digital landscape. As discussed earlier, this specialisation has also given rise to organisational and technical silos, preventing the exploration of potential synergies.

The current trajectory suggests that, alongside their deep specialisations, digital organisations will increasingly need to develop a new core competency: that of a communicator. This entails the ability to translate, simplify, repackage, and notably champion collective policy goals within and outside the organisation. Past organisations involved in civil movements have effectively demonstrated how scientific data and abstract models can be made accessible and actionable for the general public, with the climate movement being a prominent example.

The development of these communications skills requires not only training and a realignment of the roles within these organisations but also a re-evaluation of their funding strategies. It necessitates a fresh understanding of the dynamics of political momentum and discourse, coupled with prepared and coordinated actions to engage in public debates. At present, digital CSOs may not place enough emphasis on the concept of campaigns, which will become increasingly important for effective advocacy and public engagement in the future. For instance, as one study found, today only 14% of grants are directly tailored to public campaigning, narrative and communication work.[8]

Capacities: connecting intents

CORE FINDINGS

→ **Transition to collaborative resource allocation:** The evolving digital civic ecosystem currently demands a shift from individual organisational achievements to a collective approach, emphasising alliances of shared resources, including funding, expertise, and skills, across broad, cross-sectoral networks. This strategy aims to maximise the impact of collaborative efforts on societal issues.

→ **Adapting funding models for collective impact:** Moving away from traditional, project-based funding, there is a growing trend towards organisational and core funding that offers greater flexibility. However, a deeper shift towards issue-based collaboration is needed to fully leverage the synergies within the ecosystem, focusing on pooled resources for shared goals.

→ **Challenges and opportunities in resource sharing:** While collaborative networks offer a promising framework for systemic change, they also require careful navigation of strategic risks related to diluted focus and the potential for corporate capture. Ensuring resources are allocated efficiently and ethically within these collaborations is key to sustaining impactful work and avoiding the pitfalls of fluctuating funder priorities.

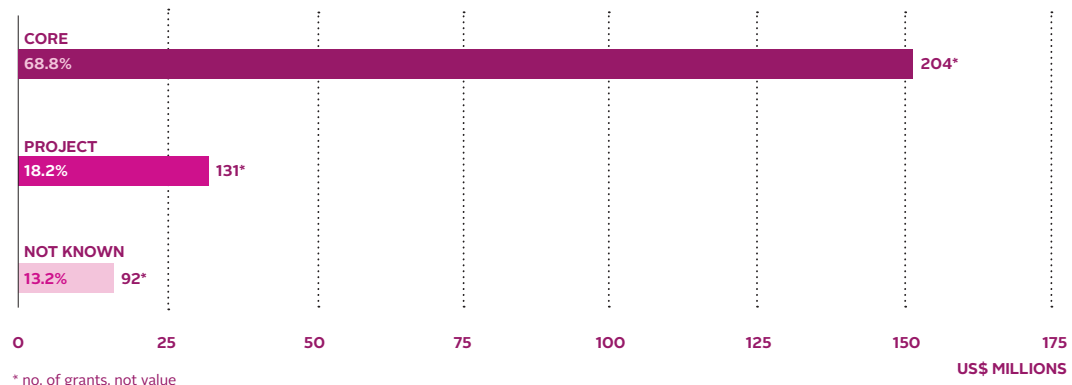8 Source: Internal research committed by seven of the key digital rights funders in Europe

To more deeply understand the systemic changes and transitions taking place within the digital civic ecosystem, an updated perspective is needed. This new understanding is to move away from issue- and even organisation-centric views toward a broad cross-sectoral coordination of transition and innovation activities. Again, this aligns with recent literature:

" "Most funders, faced with the task of choosing a few grantees from many applicants, try to ascertain which organisations make the greatest contribution toward solving a social problem. Grantees, in turn, compete to be chosen by emphasising how their individual activities produce the greatest effect. Each organisation is judged on its own potential to achieve impact, independent of the numerous other organisations that may also influence the issue. And when a grantee is asked to evaluate the impact of its work, every attempt is made to isolate that grantee's individual influence from all other variables." (Kania and Kramer: 2011)

This understanding requires the acquisition of new skills and competencies, alongside the adoption of innovative funding approaches. More thinking in the bigger picture and around collective intents, less focusing on small but clearly defined steps along the way. The ongoing trajectory already indicates a gradual departure from project-based funding that often entails excessively detailed reporting and, at times, the use of weak proxy indicators to gauge actual impact. Instead, there is a growing inclination towards organisational and core funding (see Fig. 7). While this shift offers increased flexibility and capacity building for grant recipients, it still retains a single-actor focus.

FIG. 7: Core vs project funding.

Source: Internal research committed by seven of the key digital rights funders in Europe. Note that this shows the distribution of grants made by those seven funders and is not representative of the whole field.

CORE
68.8%   204*

PROJECT
18.2%   131*

NOT KNOWN
13.2%   92*

0   25   50   75   100   125   150   175

US$ MILLIONS

* no. of grants, not value

To unleash the full potential of synergies within the ecosystem, a more profound shift towards issue-based networks or clusters of intent is essential. These networks can be "transition teams", that advance a given theme while acting inter-organisationally, inter-regionally, and even inter-temporally (picking things up that others have advanced elsewhere, earlier). In its mission to create 100 Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities by 2030, for instance, the European Commission currently aims to implement this approach with a Transition Team Playbook[9] to build a more resilient momentum for change. This thinking enables several organisations and actors to align their efforts around a shared purpose and allocate resources, which include not only funding but also staff and skills, in a self-organised manner. The significance of this transformative approach to understanding impact and intervention

9 See: https://netzerocities.app/assets/files/Transition_Playbookv0.1.pdf

comes from an inherent acknowledgement that complex systems cannot be managed in a classical sense (Glanville 2000). While seemingly commonplace, the implications of this acknowledgement remain challenging for many funding organisations that are bound in more traditional ways of evaluating and reporting.

This approach may involve both private and public actors, provided they share a common purpose. It also has the potential to mitigate strategic risks associated with global funders and their networks, which may periodically shift their focus and internal priorities, potentially jeopardising the consistent work of local organisations in Germany. It is important to be aware of the threat of corporate capture, however, and to hone the competency to understand how and when issue-based collaboration makes sense, and when it might get harmful.

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A Look Ahead
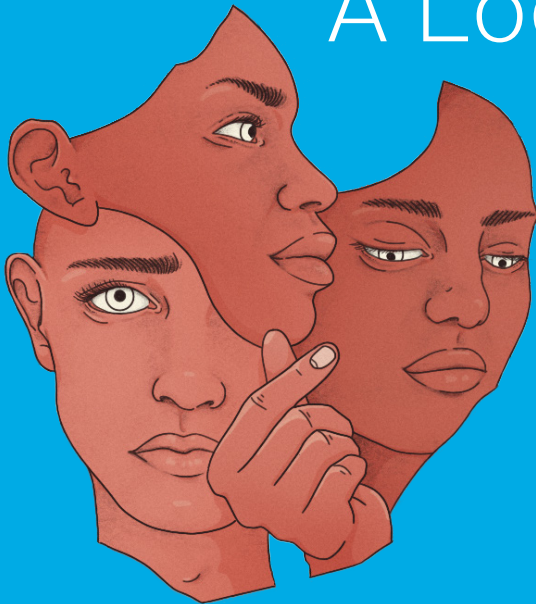
6. A Look Ahead

6.1 A new paradigm for funders

In this evolving landscape, the paradigm of advocacy is shifting. This means the entire ecosystem, including funders and donors, should rethink their approaches to support change. This shift involves understanding and dismantling current challenges by comprehensively understanding emerging forces, acknowledging stabilising influences, and redefining impact itself in a context where outcomes are unpredictable and extend beyond single initiatives. For funders and donors committed to enhancing strategic impact within the digital civic ecosystem, we propose three recommendations:

→ **Better systemic understanding for funding:** Prioritise funding that supports coalitions, portfolios, and self-organisation. This approach encourages a broader cross-sectoral coordination, allowing funders to identify and leverage synergies across the digital civic ecosystem, thus amplifying the collective impact of investments. We suggest additional quantitative research to ground this understanding in a representative data layer.

→ **Invest in new skills and tasks:** Allocate resources towards developing education, communication, and translation skills within grantee organisations. This funding logic recognises the importance of evolving advocacy to include the capacity to make complex issues accessible and engage a wider audience, ensuring messages resonate across different sectors and communities.

→ **Adopt new reporting standards:** Shift towards more flexible impact logic and results-orientation in funding evaluations. By moving away from traditional metrics towards approaches that better capture the nuanced impacts of work, funders can more accurately assess the value of their investments in alignment with dynamic objectives.

From a strategic funding perspective, advocacy and intervention require honing abilities to target systemic vulnerabilities with precision, while promoting vigilance in public discourse when translating among grantees. Encouraging the building of strategic redundancies prepares grantee organisations for funding fluctuations, political changes, and technological shifts. Embracing these recommendations, especially in fostering networked collaboration beyond organisational confines, is essential for resilience and effective ecosystem-wide impact for a just digital society.

6.2 Next steps

To build on and solidify the conclusions of this study, further investigation is essential. We are highlighting three areas for follow-up research:

1. **More quantitative data:** To fully understand not just the perspectives and narratives of key actors but also the overarching themes and structures, a detailed quantitative study seems promising. It should examine funding streams and types, organisational structures, and prominent themes, all within a historical context of the past decade. Such a dataset could enrich the qualitative focus of the present analysis, ensuring a balanced and nuanced perspective on the ecosystem of digital civil society and related advocacy strategies.

2. **In-depth comparisons across policy areas:** Expanding comparisons to include climate change and other policy fields is highly promising. This exploration should aim at uncovering structural similarities and potential synergies, as well as identifying specific differences or trade-offs. A deeper dive into how these fields interact, influence each other, and possibly share solutions or challenges could yield valuable insights for developing more integrated and effective policies.

3. **Expanding expert diversity for a deeper understanding:** To ensure a more robust account of these findings, broadening the pool of experts involved in the research is crucial. Including funders, foundations, policymakers, practitioners, and activists will offer diverse and complementary perspectives, enriching the analysis and conclusions.

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About the Authors
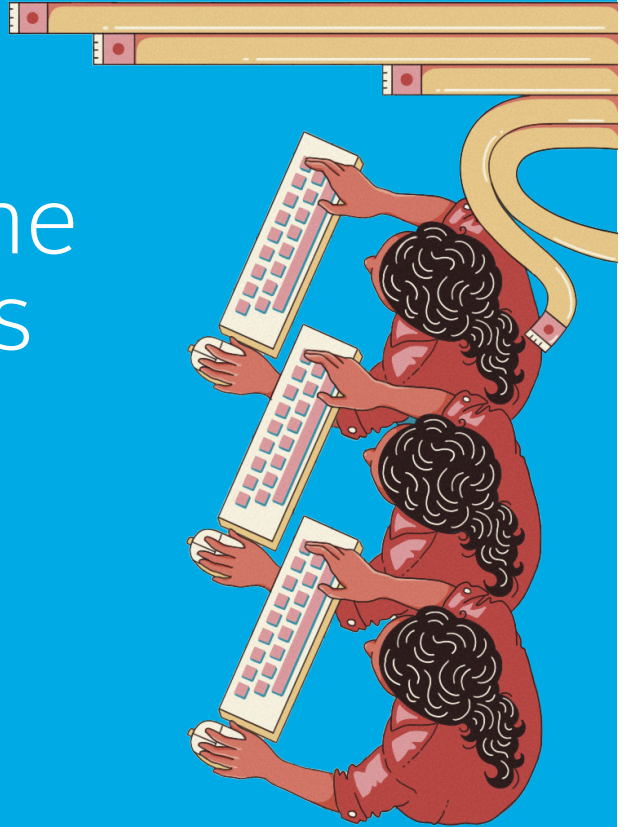
7. About the Authors

Simon Höher (author) is an Independent Strategic and Public Designer as well as Systems Change Lead at Dark Matter Laboratories. In his work he explores emerging patterns within just transition processes, public innovation, and digital transformation. Simon has a background in sociology, political science, economics and philosophy with a particular focus on Systems Theory. He has been working with public, private and civic organisations for over a decade and is (occasional) visiting lecturer at the Faculty for Social Design at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna.

Simon is an alumnus at the European Policy Center's FutureLab in Brussels, and at MIT's International Development Innovation Network (IDIN), as well as Seedcamp, Europe's largest accelerator program for early stage startups. His work and contributions have been featured in national and international media including WIRED, Fast.co, Make:Magazine, Deutschlandfunk, Springer Press, and others. Email: hi@simonhoeher.com

Peter Bihr (co-author) is a senior advisor at the intersections of tech, policy, public interest & philanthropy. Working with philanthropic foundations, non-profits and public sector, his focus is on how emerging technologies can benefit society. With an experience of 15+ years, his work focuses on areas including tech policy, platform accountability, strengthening civil society, the impact of social media on democracy, as well as technologies including the Internet of Things (IoT), smart cities, and artificial intelligence (AI). In addition to working as a consultant, Peter served as Interim Director for the European AI & Society Fund. He serves as special advisor to Stiftung Mercator's Centre for Digital Society.

Peter was a Senior Mozilla Fellow (2018-19) investigating trust and technology, and an Edgeryders Fellow (2019) studying smart cities from a civil rights perspective. Postscapes named him a Top 20 IoT Influencer (2019). Peter co-hosted the Getting Tech Right podcast, a series of interviews about how to think about the role of technology better. He blogs at thewavingcat.com.

Carla Hustedt (publisher) is the director of the "Centre for Digital Society" at the Mercator Foundation. Her work focuses on the impact of digitalization on democratic structures and questions of (in-)equality. Since the start of the program in 2021 she has developed and funded more than 44 projects with partners from civil society and science on issues such as AI-regulation, the design of a healthy digital public sphere, the digitization of the public sector and open innovation. Until April 2021 she was the head of the Bertelsmann Foundation's "Ethics of Algorithms" project. In this position she led the development of the Algo.Rules, 9 rules for the ethical design of algorithmic systems and coordinated an interdisciplinary scientific alliance, the "AI Ethics Impact Group" in their development of an AI Ethics label.

In 2019, she advised the AI Enquete Commission of the German Bundestag on the transparency of algorithmic systems. Carla Hustedt is the head of the Steering Committee of the European AI and Society Fund and member of the board of the initiative "SheTransformsIT for more women in tech. In 2021 Capital Magazin awarded her as one of Germany's „top 40 under 40" talents in the category „societal issues". In 2010 she founded the German-Ghanaian human rights organization "Boa Nnipa" – an organization that has provided education on sexual and reproductive health to more than 70.000 students in Ghana.

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Stiftung Mercator is a private, independent, and non-profit foundation that acts on the basis of scientific expertise and practical project experience. Since 1996, it has been advocating for a society based on solidarity and participation. To this end, it supports and develops projects that improve participation and cohesion in an increasingly diverse community. Stiftung Mercator stands up for a cosmopolitan, democratic Europe, a digital transformation of state and society based on fundamental rights, and socially just climate change mitigation. Stiftung Mercator pursues activities in Germany, Europe and worldwide. It feels particularly connected to the Ruhr area, home of its founder's family and the foundation's headquarters.

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