BIG TECH SOVEREIGNTY: PLATFORMS AND DISCOURSE OF SOVEREIGNTY-AS-A-SERVICE

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Introduction

The notion of digital sovereignty has been mobilized by various stakeholders as a response to platform power (Dijck, Nieborg & Poell 2019, Herlo et al. 2021). In the last decades, the concept of sovereignty has been applied mainly to State responses to exert power over other sectors and organizations (Adler-Nisen & Gammeltoft-Hansen 2008). Nonetheless, the meanings of digital sovereignty have also been used and disputed by social movements, workers and indigenous communities (Couture & Toupin 2019).

But the platform companies also entered into disputes about the meanings of this multifaceted notion. As an update of Californian Ideology (Barbroock & Cameron 1995, Marwick 2017), platform companies modulate their discourse to say that they are also concerned with issues of sovereignty. Thus, they are reappropriating the meanings of sovereignty through the launch of programs focused on sovereignty. We named this "Big Tech sovereignty", a provocation to mean how platforms have changed the meanings of sovereignty based on their own interests, such as the renewal of discourses in the context of "Silicon Valley dystopianism" (Karppi & Nieborg 2021).

Built on analyzes of sovereignty programs of Amazon, Microsoft and Alphabet/Google, this article argues that "Big Tech sovereignty" is a way of trying to deflate the concept politically, giving it only a commercial and/or personal framework, being more of an expression of the platform power. Through the analysis of these "digital sovereignty" programs, the article demonstrates how companies framed "sovereignty-as-a-service", especially in terms of digital infrastructures (Poell, Nieborg & Van Dijck 2021, Plantin et al 2022, Lafuente et al 2022).

Context

The literature shows that claims around digital sovereignty may fit within at least three main categories (Pohle & Thiel 2020). One is related to the State's control over critical digital infrastructures. The second is related to the digital economy more broadly, encompassing the role of national companies and the State in delivering industrial policies. Finally, there is the personal dimension, mostly related to digital self-determination or agency over personal data. This approach became apparent when Germany's former prime minister Angela Merkel stated that digital sovereignty in the European Union (EU) would also mean "an individual, a single person" (Meinel, Galbas & Hagebölling 2023). Merkel's statement is also important because the discourse on "digital sovereignty" became more prominent in the context of the EU digital policy-making. These elements are key to understanding the discourse around "sovereignty-as-a-service".

Methods

Through critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough 1992, 2003), the article analyzes the programs of Google, Microsoft and Amazon in relation to digital sovereignty - all launched between 2022 and 2023. The focus on these companies is because they represent over two-thirds of the cloud computing market share (Statista 2024). Critical discourse analysis allows us to understand how text aspects relate to broader discourses and contexts, considering political and economic scenarios - in this case, how a specific expression "sovereignty" has been discursively mobilized and how this relates to the broader strategies of platform companies. Data collection involved all official information about these programs, consulted on the companies' own websites. The critical analysis involved the meanings of sovereignty in each program (what does sovereignty mean?), in which context they launched the program, and what were the strategies used by companies in these programs.

Analysis

All three companies launched their "digital sovereignty" programs between 2022 and 2023, especially focused on a European context, in a response to the recent digital policies and discourses around sovereignty in the region.

In late 2022, Amazon - through Amazon Web Services (Amazon 2022), its cloud infrastructure service provider - launched the "Digital Sovereignty Pledge" program. According to Amazon, digital sovereignty is about "having control over digital assets", and the company is able to help "customers to meet digital sovereignty requirements". Thus, the discourse of sovereignty is reduced to an asset for Amazon customers. The company uses the argument of "sovereign-by-design" - a notion that is not explained by the company - involving issues such as control over data location and access. The solutions aim to promote "greater control" of infrastructures by customers, in accordance with current laws, being discursively sold as something disruptive.

Microsoft launched its Microsoft Cloud for Sovereignty program (Microsoft 2022) in July 2022, and was the pioneer among other Big Tech companies. This program is aimed

especially at governments and public sector customers who want to invest in "digital sovereignty". Here, this notion is also related to cloud and control over data. More specifically, the company addresses the concept of "data sovereignty", which means that "data is under the control of the customer and governed by local law". Thus, this is related to the compliance with a country's policies. This approach is one of the responses, from the company's side, to the EU context of tech regulations.

The main product of the Microsoft program is a so-called "public cloud", such as Microsoft Azure. The company addresses sovereignty assuming that "every government has a unique view and requirements when addressing their sovereign needs". Therefore, Microsoft offers, through these services, "an additional layer of policy and auditing capabilities" for customer needs. Thus, Microsoft's discourse on digital sovereignty means that, instead of the State building its own sovereignty strategies, the company offers services so that the State is, in the company's view, "more sovereign", highlighting the power of platforms over the States (Lehdonvirta 2022).

Alphabet/Google was the last of these three companies in launching its program. The Digital Sovereignty Explorer (Google 2023) was launched in March 2023, designed for the European context. Instead of new products, Alphabet/Google created a tool to help customers identify digital sovereignty "solutions", involving data, operational issues and software - highlighting that it does not only focus on "data residency". Upon identifying consumer demands, the company sends a report to the customer suggesting Google Cloud products.

The notion of sovereignty is also framed as a service, recognized by the company as "complex" and related to "digital transformation", as something to be "achieved" by customers through Google services. According to the program, "digital sovereignty is about organizations maintaining control and autonomy as they develop their digital transformation and cloud strategies". Basic features emphasize control, visibility and transparency. The software sovereignty dimension emphasizes protections on the part of the company "against disruptive geopolitical events". Thus, the company places itself as "protector" of customers' interests in relation to possible external threats, thus guaranteeing its "sovereignty".

Conclusions

The digital sovereignty programs of Amazon, Microsoft and Alphabet/Google demonstrate how platform companies are emptying political meanings of sovereignty - with historical roots in relation to the State, communities and social movements - to emphasize sovereignty-as-a-service, erasing the power relations of the concept.

The meanings of digital sovereignty are services aimed either at individuals and companies, or at governments and the public sector, especially in the case of Microsoft. These services emphasize the role of infrastructures for platforms as well as market solutions. Thus, Big Tech companies reaffirm their power to prevent competition in the provision of these services. However, instead of "infrastructure-as-a-service", there is the emergence of "sovereign-as-a-service". Furthermore, sovereignty is addressed as something that can be resolved only by technologies. The analysis also reveals that the programs were designed for the European context, as a reaction by companies to the policies and regulations in force in the region.

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