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Roles in the Digital Space: Symbolic Interactionist Role Theory and Norms of Sovereignty

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Abstract

Today, we are witnessing state and non-state actors attempting to create a role for themselves in relation to the digital realm, often with the use of varying interpretations and usages of the concept of digital sovereignty. This seems to signal a new understanding of the way in which the 'digital' should be governed and the role of sovereignty therein.

This theoretical paper wants to demonstrate the usefulness of Symbolic Interactionist Role Theory in furthering our understanding of the way in which roles in the digital realm come about and the function of (digital) sovereignty in this process. This paper argues for using central concepts of Symbolic Interactionist Role Theory: problematic situation, role-taking process, role-making process, and alter-casting as a conceptual scheme which can be used in empirical research to analyse the roles that specific actors are attempting to forge in relation to the digital realm as well as the usage of the notion of (digital)-sovereignty therein, which as this paper argues on the basis of Symbolic Interactionist Role Theory, can be understood and approached as being intertwined processes.

Keywords

Digital sovereignty, digital governance, Symbolic Interactionist Role Theory

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1. Introduction

The increasing role of digital space in our daily life has and continues to raise questions about the way it should be governed, and not insignificantly, by whom. In the early days of the Internet, notions of cyber libertarianism had a large impact on the way in which digital governance was understood. Cyber libertarianism understands ‘the digital realm’ as separate. In this new space, traditional forms of governance do not or should not play a role, a sentiment which has been famously voiced by Barlow in 1996, in the *Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace*:

Governments of the Industrial World, you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from Cyberspace, the new home of Mind. On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone. You are not welcome among us. You have no sovereignty where we gather.¹

The multistakeholder approach to the governance of the digital sphere focuses on the inclusion of all stakeholders and consensus-based decision-making. This provided an alternative vision to that of the cyber libertarians, focusing on making existing democratic principles fit into the reality of a world shaped by various actors or stakeholders. The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) of 2005 formulated the working definition of internet governance as being: ‘the development and application of governments, the private sector and civil society, in their respective roles, of shared principles, norms, rules, decision-making procedures, and programmes that shape the evolution and use of the internet.’² Today, although ideas of cyber libertarianism and the multistakeholder approach are still present in the way in which governance in relation to the digital sphere is understood, we can identify a growing tendency of actors who are imagining and forging a role for themselves in which they are attempting to exercise governing power based on the notion of sovereignty.

While the notion of sovereignty has played a central role in authoritarian and non-democratic countries’ discourses around digital governance since the 2000s and has led to the emergence of concrete policy initiatives focussing on cyber/internet sovereignty around 2010 in China and Russia³, we are now witnessing the usage of the notion of digital sovereignty among a variety of state and non-state actors that have previously been very suspicious of the term. Specifically, in the last two decades, there has been a growing trend among democratic states of digital policy initiatives that focus on attaining or maintaining ‘digital sovereignty’ on the national level. France, for example, under the leadership of President Macron, has taken active steps to achieve and strengthen French digital sovereignty.⁴ In these policy initiatives, a wide range of definitions of the term ‘digital sovereignty’ as well as a lack thereof can be identified.

Whereas once, any mention of sovereignty in internet-related discussions in the Western world may have been seen as taboo, both the European Regional Dialogue for Internet Governance (EuroDIG) and the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) have seen this topic raised as key focal issues in recent meetings. Indeed, besides states, the digital realm is also characterised by the importance of a variety of other actors that play or attempt to play a role in this sphere. These include transnational multistate actors (e.g. UN, EU), civil society groups, transnational private actors (e.g. ICANN), and business actors (e.g. Meta, Microsoft).⁵ Interestingly, also among some of these actors, a discourse of or initiatives centred around digital sovereignty can be found. For example, the European Commission, in pursuit of attaining its priority of creating ‘a Europe fit for the digital age’, puts great emphasis on (European) digital sovereignty: ‘Europe must now strengthen its digital sovereignty and set standards, rather than following those of others- with a clear focus on data, technology and infrastructure.’⁶ The notion of sovereignty can also be found

1 John Perry Barlow, "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace." *Duke Law & Technology Review* 18, no. 1 (2019): 5.

2 "Internet Governance.", United Nations. Accessed August 9, 2022. <https://publicadministration.un.org/en/internetgovernance#:~:text=What%20is%20Internet%20Governance%3F,and%20use%20of%20the%20Internet>. This is to be countered with the Tunis Agenda, emergent from that first WSIS, which mentioned: "policy authority for Internet-related public policy issues is the sovereign right of States." (WSIS, 2002)

3 Budnitsky, Stanislav, and Lianrui Jia. "Branding Internet sovereignty: Digital media and the Chinese–Russian cyberalliance." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 21.5 (2018): 594-613.

4 Alice Pannier, "Review of Macron's term and debates in the 2022 presidential campaign", Briefings de l'Ifri, Ifri, March 15, 2022. <https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/briefings-de-lifri/digital-sovereignty-review-macrons-term-and-debates-2022>

5 Mark Leiser and Andrew Murray, "The role of non-state actors and institutions in the governance of new and emerging digital technologies." In *The Oxford Handbook of Law, Regulation, and Technology*. Brownsword, Roger, Eloise Scotford, and Karen Yeung, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017): 674.

6 European Commission, "A Europe Fit for the Digital Age." European Commission. July 11, 2022. https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age_en

among civil society groups which focus on protecting the rights of the individual on the basis of the notion of sovereignty. The Fair Data Society, for example, is an initiative that focuses on the ability of individuals to control their own data, by ‘promoting human rights through digital sovereignty.’⁷ Whereas transnational private actors continue to shun use of the term ‘sovereignty’, to describe their operations, they do have to enter into debates about the term and its use. Finally, Microsoft, for example, has sponsored research in the area of digital sovereignty⁸, and established a United Nations Affairs office in New York City.⁹

Thus, today we are witnessing a variety of actors having or desiring a role, or having to reject a role desired by other actors in the digital realm in which the prevalence of the usage of the concept ‘digital sovereignty’ or similar variants of such, including ‘data sovereignty’, ‘tech-sovereignty’, ‘technological sovereignty’ or ‘strategic autonomy’ is found.¹⁰ Not surprisingly, in recent years, a growing body of literature has focused on the different interpretations and usages of the concept of digital sovereignty¹¹, the relationship between ‘sovereignty’ and ‘the digital’¹² and the analysis of strategies that are used by actors to attain digital sovereignty.¹³ However, not many attempts have been made to formulate a theoretical approach which can capture the social dynamics underlying the emergence of new roles in the digital sphere and specifically the role of sovereignty therein.

This paper contributes to our understanding of the way in which states and other actors attempt to exercise a role in the digital sphere and their use of the concept of (digital)-sovereignty by arguing for the use of Symbolic Interactionist Role Theory. Symbolic Interactionist Role Theory is a loose body of literature, with origins in the disciplines of psychology and sociology. It centres around a Symbolic Interactionist approach to Role Theory, which in recent years has been (re)-introduced to the study of International Relations.¹⁴ This paper argues for the usefulness of Symbolic Interactionist Role Theory to help understand the emergence of role conceptions in the digital space. This, in turn, allows us to unpack their usage of the term digital sovereignty. This paper argues that role conceptions and sovereignty discourses are intertwined processes. We can draw upon insights and concepts found in Symbolic Interactionist Role Theory, such as the notions of a *problematic situation*, *role-taking*, *role-making*, and *alter-casting processes* to shed light on the social processes affecting and producing the roles of actors in the digital space. This paper thus contributes to a growing body of literature focused on advancing the use of Symbolic Interactionist Role Theory to the study of International Relations, and specifically gives attention to digital sovereignty.

The first section of this paper discusses central insights from Symbolic Interactionist Role Theory and recent applications of the framework in the field of International Relations. The second section examines the way in which the concept of sovereignty through the lens of Symbolic Interactionist Role Theory is understood. This is followed by a conceptualisation of the emergence of the digital realm as a *problematic situation* for actors and the consequent *role-taking processes* are examined. After this section, the ways in which actors attempt to make their role with the use of a discourse of digital sovereignty are discussed. Lastly, the way in which a Symbolic Interactionist Role Theory approach can be used for empirical analyses of specific actors will be touched upon.

7 “Fair Data Society”, Fair Data Society. Accessed August 2, 2022. <https://fairdatasociety.org/>.

8 The Chair in Digital Sovereignty, to which this author contributes, is partly funded by Microsoft.

9 “Microsoft at the United Nations.” Microsoft. Accessed June 29, 2023. <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/united-nations>.

10 Stephane Couture and Sophie Toupin, “What does the notion of “sovereignty” mean when referring to the digital?.” *New media & society* 21.10 (2019): 2306.; Julia Pohle, and Thorsten Thiel, “Digital Sovereignty.” *Internet Policy Review* 9, no. 4 (December 17, 2020): 1-19.

11 Julia Pohle, and Thorsten Thiel, “Digital Sovereignty.”, 1-19; Daniel Lambach and Kai Oppermann, “Narratives of digital sovereignty in German political discourse.” *Governance* (2022):1-17; Anna Litvinenko, “Re-Defining Borders Online: Russia’s Strategic Narrative on Internet Sovereignty.” *Media and Communication* 9.4 (2021): 5-15.

12 Stephane Couture and Sophie Toupin, “What does the notion of “sovereignty” mean when referring to the digital?.” *New media & society* 21.10 (2019): 2305-2322.; Przemysław Roguski, “Layered sovereignty: adjusting traditional notions of sovereignty to a digital environment.” (Paper presented at the 2019 11th International Conference on Cyber Conflict (CyCon), May 2019).

13 Luciano Floridi, “The fight for digital sovereignty: What it is, and why it matters, especially for the EU.” *Philosophy & Technology* 33.3 (2020): 369-378; Stanislav Budnitsky and Jia Lianrui, “Branding Internet sovereignty: Digital media and the Chinese–Russian cyberalliance.” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 21.5 (2018): 594-613; Arnaud Braud et al, “The road to European digital sovereignty with Gaia-X and IDSA.” *IEEE Network* 35.2 (2021): 4-5.

14 Rebecca Adler-Nissen, “The social self in international relations: Identity, power and the symbolic interactionist roots of constructivism.” *European Review of International Studies* 3.3 (2016): 27-39.

2. Symbolic Interactionist Role Theory and the Study of International Relations

Symbolic Interactionist Role Theory can be traced back to the work of psychologist, philosopher, and sociologist George Herbert Mead who wrote at the turn of the twentieth century. Mead conceptualised the notion of the 'Self' of an individual as being a product of social interaction. According to Mead, the 'Self' "arises in the process of social experience and activity, that is, develops in the given individual as a result of his relations to that process as a whole and to other individuals within that process."¹⁵ The 'Self' according to Mead is a continuous reflective process and consist of two aspects: the 'I' and the 'me'. According to Mead this process happens continuously and is largely unconscious until the individual is confronted with a *problematic situation* which can arise when: 'one's habits are inhibited or when there are conflicting tendencies to act.'¹⁶ The *problematic situation* confronts the individual with a perception of reality that does not correspond with their perception of 'Self', its role conception, and its perceived role expectations, which subsequently creates discomfort. In response to a *problematic situation* the individual will engage in a *role-taking process* in which it will reflect upon its perception of the new reality and or diverging expectations of others and its own role conception. This is done in a reflective process between the 'me' and the 'I', in which the 'me' refers to the ability of the 'Self' to look at itself as an 'object to itself'¹⁷, by taking the perceived position of Others to reflect upon their expectations for the 'Self'. While in this reflective process of *role-taking* the 'I', which refers to the creative part of the 'Self', will in search for stability, respond to the new situation and its role expectations by imagining a new more suitable role for its 'Self'. After this process the individual will actively attempt to 'make' this new role because according to Mead: 'solution is reached by the construction of a new world harmonizing the conflicting interests into which enters the new self.'¹⁸

It is important to note that Mead speaks of 'the construction of a new world' in which the new 'Self' can enter, which is a crucial component of the *role-making process* that follows the *role-taking process*. The 'Self' after having reflected upon and imagined a new role conception for itself, still needs to 'make' the role and make sure that this role is accepted by others. The *role-making process* refers to the attempts of the 'Self' to realise the imagined role for itself which is done by language and in interaction. By doing so the actor consciously or unconsciously engages in the process of *alter-casting* in which, as explained by McCourt, they: "seek to 'cast' a certain 'alter' onto the Other, an alter that accords with their particular vision of themselves. The Other, in such a situation, is also trying to do the very same thing; the actual roles taken, therefore, are the result of this process, the point at which the roles each are seeking to play correspond to the best 'fit'."¹⁹

Since the 1970's, insights from Role Theory, of which Symbolic Interactionist Role Theory is a variation, were transferred to the field of International Relations studies with the seminal work of Holsti, who moved central concepts of role theory to the level of the state by focusing on national role conceptions and foreign policy.²⁰ Since Holsti, there has been a growing body of work that applies role theory to the study of International Relations. However, the application of role theory in International Relations since then has been criticised for interpreting roles as static and neglecting agency. It is therefore that Baert et al. argue for moving away from the insights of Mead and insist instead on the use of positioning theory in an attempt to make agency more prominent.²¹ Others agree with the notion that the application of Role Theory in International Relations is not used to its full potential, but claim that this mostly has to do with the insufficient application of the insights of Mead and Symbolic Interactionism.²²

15 George Herbert Mead, Ed Charles W. Morris, *Mind, self and society*. (Chicago: University of Chicago press, 1934): 135.

16 C. De Waal, *On Mead*. (Belmont: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning Inc., 2002): 21-22.

17 George Herbert Mead, Ed Charles W. Morris, *Mind, self and society*. (Chicago: University of Chicago press, 1934): 136.

18 George H. Mead, "The Social Self." *Psychiatry*, 41:2 (1978): 181.

19 David M. McCourt, "The roles states play: A Meadian interactionist approach." *Journal of International Relations and Development* 15.3 (2012): 380.

20 Kalevi J. Holsti, "National role conceptions in the study of foreign policy." *International studies quarterly* 14.3 (1970): 233-309.

21 Francis Baert, Luk Van Langenhove, and Melanie James, "Rethinking role theory in foreign policy analysis: Introducing positioning theory to international relations." *Papers on Social Representations* 28.1 (2019): 4-1.

22 Rebecca Adler-Nissen, "The social self in international relations: Identity, power, and the symbolic interactionist roots of constructivism." *European Review of International Studies* 3.3 (2016): 27-39.

In recent years, a growing number of scholars are (re)-introducing insights from Symbolic Interactionism to the body of literature that applies Role Theory to the study of International Relations.²³ A few that are, in relation to this paper and its argument, important to mention will now be briefly touched upon. First of all, McCourt has developed a Meadian interactionist approach for the interpretation of the behaviour of states in world politics on the basis of the concepts of *role-taking*, *role-making*, and *alter-casting*. According to McCourt, they 'represent a conceptual schema designed to capture the core elements of interaction as seen from a symbolic interactionist perspective'.²⁴ He argues for furthering our understanding of the actions taken by a specific actor by analysing the way in which a state actor engages in *role-taking*, *role-making* and *alter-casting* processes.

Secondly, Klose focuses on the *problematic situation*. Klose used insights of Symbolic Interactionist Role theory to further our understanding of international actors and fused insights of ontological security studies with concepts such as *problematic situation* and the consequent *role-taking* and *role-making* processes. According to Klose, an international actor, like an individual or state, can also experience a *problematic situation* which challenges its ontological security: 'as external or internal stimuli bring about the experience of (looming) disconnects between its self-image and societal roles'.²⁵ It is in response to this that international actors can and will respond in creative ways by imagining a new or adapted 'Self' which 'enables an international actor to preserve and revitalize, in critical situations, its (ability to generate) ontological security'.²⁶

Moreover, Klose has focused on the way in which external actors decide to initiate and are able to 'make' a role in a specific region or specific context of international affairs. Regarding a region in which the actor is not present yet, according to Klose, it will be 'in response to a problematic situation that an external actor develops its aspiration to penetrate a particular region'.²⁷ Additionally, Klose has proposed a three-step analytical framework based on Symbolic Interactionist Role Theory to analyse the EU's emerging *actorness* in a specific context of international affairs. In this framework the first step is to study 'the EU's (re)-imagination of an international role in response to problematic situations' followed by the study of 'the EU's attempts to realize its (re)-imagined role in social interaction' and as a third step to analyse 'the implications of this role-making process for the EU's 'self' and others'.²⁸

Finally, Beasley *et al*²⁹ as well as Thies³⁰ have focused specifically on the notion of sovereignty and its relation to roles. The way in which sovereignty can be understood from a Symbolic Interactionist Role theory perspective and the contributions of these insights will be examined in the next part.

23 Vít Beneš and Sebastian Harnisch, "Role theory in symbolic interactionism: Czech Republic, Germany and the EU." *Cooperation and Conflict* 50.1 (2015): 146-165; Sebastian Harnisch, "Role theory and the study of Chinese foreign policy: Background and rationale of the political economy of business journalism." *China's international roles*. Routledge, 2015. 3-21; Thies, Cameron G., and Leslie E. Wehner, "The role of role theory in international political economy." *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 32.6 (2019): 712-733. ; Walker, Stephen G, "Role theory as an empirical theory of international relations: from metaphor to formal model." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*. 2017.; Wehner, Leslie E, "The narration of roles in foreign policy analysis." *Journal of International Relations and Development* 23.2 (2020): 359-384.a

24 David M. McCourt, "The roles states play: A Meadian interactionist approach." *Journal of International Relations and Development* 15.3 (2012): 381.

25 Stephan Klose, "Interactionist role theory meets ontological security studies: an exploration of synergies between socio-psychological approaches to the study of international relations." *European Journal of International Relations* 26.3 (2020): 852.

26 Stephan Klose, "Interactionist role theory meets ontological security studies: an exploration of synergies between socio-psychological approaches to the study of international relations.", 852.

27 Stephan Klose, "The emergence and evolution of an external actor's regional role: An interactionist role theory perspective." *Cooperation and Conflict* 54.3 (2019): 432.

28 Stephan Klose, "Theorizing the EU's Actorness: Towards an Interactionist Role Theory Framework." *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 56.5 (2018): 1145.

29 Ryan K. Beasley, Juliet Kaarbo, and Kai Oppermann, "Role theory, foreign policy, and the social construction of sovereignty: Brexit stage right." *Global Studies Quarterly* 1.1 (2021); Ryan K. Beasley, and Juliet Kaarbo, "Casting for a sovereign role: Socialising an aspirant state in the Scottish independence referendum." *European Journal of International Relations* 24.1 (2018): 12.

30 Cameron G. Thies, "International socialization processes vs. Israeli national role conceptions: can role theory integrate IR theory and foreign policy analysis?." *Foreign Policy Analysis* 8.1 (2012): 35-36.

3. Sovereignty and Symbolic Interactionist Role Theory

From a Symbolic Interactionist Role Theory (SIRT) perspective, a concept like sovereignty is understood to be a social construct which has arisen due to people who through language continuously convey meaning to the concept. This understanding can be found in the work of Alexander Wendt, who ‘introduced the best known – and most criticised application of symbolic interactionism in International Relations’³¹. Wendt has pointed to the importance of collective meanings such as ‘anarchy’ which shape understandings of the field of international relations and the potential roles that actors can play as: ‘actors acquire identities—relatively stable, role-specific understandings and expectations about self—by participating in such collective meanings.’³² From a SIRT perspective these collective meanings are understood as existing as a result of interactions that continuously give (shared) meaning to the concept, and in turn these collective meanings impact an actor’s understandings of international relations, its ‘Self’ and possible role conceptions.

Wendt also discussed the collective meaning of sovereignty as something that is: ‘now so taken for granted, so natural, that it is easy to overlook the extent to which [it is] presupposed by and an ongoing artifact of practice.’³³ Sovereignty is the result of ‘practice’ in which people through interaction and with language give meaning to the concept and is thus subject to change. Sovereignty therefore consists of temporary rules or norms through which sovereignty is defined, which are the result of a social process as they are formed through interaction and with the use of language.³⁴ Similarly, Werner and De Wilde explain that sovereignty should be understood as a legitimising discourse that has been used by different kinds of actors throughout history, as they state that: ‘sovereignty is a speech act to (re)-establish the claimant’s position as an absolute authority, and to legitimize its exercise of power.’³⁵ The ‘ruling norms of sovereignty’, or how sovereignty is understood on the world stage from a SIRT perspective is seen as the result of a convergence of sovereignty discourses containing a specific interpretation of sovereignty, which is used, recognised and accepted by different actors. Predictions about ‘the end of sovereignty’, which have been expressed in relation to the emergence of the digital realm³⁶, could be understood as predicting the end of the ‘current ruling norms’ of sovereignty. The use of the concept of ‘digital sovereignty’ and the different interpretations thereof can both be understood as the rise of a new collective understanding that shapes the context in which actors find themselves vis-à-vis the digital realm or it could even signal the emergence of new or adapted ruling norms of sovereignty in its entirety.

Thies has demonstrated that these norms also constitute a specific role for the actor claiming sovereignty in the current international system: ‘the sovereign role’.³⁷ According to Thies, ‘the role of the sovereign state’ is accorded to emerging states, or it can be the result of alter-casting processes of other actors.³⁸ If, for example, an aspiring nation wants to become a part of the international state system, it will need to ‘attain’ the sovereign role for itself in order to realise its desired role conception (being a sovereign state).³⁹ Beasley et al. have focused on the way in which this ‘sovereign role’ is constructed based on ‘norms of sovereignty’ which according to them: ‘define what kinds of actors can hold a sovereign role’⁴⁰ and are ‘ideas that establish

31 Rebecca Adler-Nissen, "The social self in international relations: Identity, power and the symbolic interactionist roots of constructivism." *European Review of International Studies* 3.3 (2016): 27.

32 Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy is what states make of it: the social construction of power politics." *International organization* 46.2 (1992): 397.

33 Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy is what states make of it: the social construction of power politics.", 397.

34 J. Samuel Barkin, and Bruce Cronin, "The state and the nation: changing norms and the rules of sovereignty in international relations." *International organization* 48.1 (1994):108.

35 Wouter G. Werner, and Jaap H. De Wilde, "The endurance of sovereignty." *European Journal of International Relations* 7.3 (2001): 287.

36 For example in: Walter B. Wriston, "Bits, Bytes, and Diplomacy," *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 5 (October 1997): 174.

37 Cameron G. Thies, "International socialization processes vs. Israeli national role conceptions: can role theory integrate IR theory and foreign policy analysis?." *Foreign Policy Analysis* 8.1 (2012): 35-36.

38 Cameron G. Thies, "International socialization processes vs. Israeli national role conceptions: can role theory integrate IR theory and foreign policy analysis?." (2012): 28-38.

39 Cameron G. Thies, "International socialization processes vs. Israeli national role conceptions: can role theory integrate IR theory and foreign policy analysis?." (2012): 35-36.

40 Ryan K. Beasley, Juliet Kaarbo, and Kai Oppermann, "Role theory, foreign policy, and the social construction of sovereignty: Brexit stage right." *Global Studies Quarterly* 1.1 (2021): 1.

and set parameters for the nature of agency and scope of acceptable behaviours for the *sovereign role* within the international system.⁴¹ In this way sovereignty is, as stated by Beasley et al.: ‘not an ability or capacity that is necessary to enable agency and enact roles, but is a consequence of defining agency itself’.⁴² The ruling norms of sovereignty thus have a major impact on potential roles that actors can take upon the international stage as they impact understandings about potential roles, generate expectations for specific behaviour and produces ‘the sovereign role’. In other words: norms of sovereignty impact the way in which an actor sees ‘reality’, its ‘Self’ and potential role conceptions and therefore, (perceived) challenges to the ruling norms of sovereignty can therefore constitute a major *problematic situation* for actors.

4. The Digital Realm, a *Problematic Situation*, and Role-Taking Processes

Our current understanding of the ruling norms of sovereignty can be traced back to the work of Bodin, Hobbes and the Peace of Westphalia.⁴³ This is heavily based on absolute authority over a specific geographical space found at the level of the state, as ‘sovereignty is understood as exclusive authority of the State over persons and things within a specified territory’.⁴⁴ Technological change has, throughout history, shaped our understanding and use of sovereignty and has given rise to new role conceptions and role behaviour for state actors. The internet – as a decentralised network and communications technology – is the most recent manifestation of this evolution and has disrupted states’ understanding of reality and their role. I posit that the digital realm is a *problematic situation* for state and non-state actors, which forms a starting point for analysing how actors forge a role vis-à-vis the digital realm.

Perrit, in his work *Cyberspace and State Sovereignty* published in 1997, asked the question: what makes the internet different from other inventions in terms of its impacts on sovereignty? According to Perrit, the internet is different from other technological inventions in the following ways: (1) The internet has inherent global reach (compared to television, telegraph and telephone which are heavily tied to a national context), (2) It is far more difficult to impose physical border controls, (3) It is both a conversational and a mass medium, (4) It has extremely low barriers to entry, and lastly (5) ‘because of the way the Internet was developed, it has its own culture, which mistrusts traditional geographic, legal and political institutions.’⁴⁵ The internet thus poses a threat to states’ understandings of their own role and ability to exercise its role as stated by Perrit: ‘These changes affect the role of the state itself. (...) In a larger sense, the Internet threatens traditional political intermediation because it threatens governmental control.’⁴⁶

States struggle to exercise absolute authority over digital matters as they rely heavily on private entities which often operate across borders, facilitate the infrastructure of the internet on which the state heavily relies as well as store and control data of their citizens. This weakens the ability of states to be sovereign over their territory and its people as stated by Tomáš and Hamulák: ‘the state as an “analogue sovereign” shrinks in the digital cyberspace rather to a co-sovereign, co-coordinator, or in feudal terms a “senior” vis-à-vis their vassals’.⁴⁷ Moreover the notion of territoriality, which is central to our current understanding of sovereignty is challenged by the internet. However, the extent to which cyberspace should be understood as a-territorial is contested.

On the one hand, one can argue that since the physical layer of cyberspace is based on tangible and materially-located technological components like servers, it can be subject to traditional sovereign control. While on the other hand, as stated by Roguski, ‘the impression of a distinct space is formed by the logical and social layers that construct a global platform for the

41 Ryan K. Beasley, Juliet Kaarbo, and Kai Oppermann. "Role theory, foreign policy, and the social construction of sovereignty: Brexit stage right.", (2021): 2.

42 Ryan K. Beasley, and Juliet Kaarbo. "Casting for a sovereign role: Socialising an aspirant state in the Scottish independence referendum." *European Journal of International Relations* 24.1 (2018): 12.

43 Edward Andrew, "Jean Bodin on Sovereignty." *Republics of Letters: A Journal for the Study of Knowledge, Politics, and the Arts* 2.2 (2011): 75-84.

44 Przemysław Roguski, "Layered sovereignty: adjusting traditional notions of sovereignty to a digital environment." (Paper presented at the 2019 11th International Conference on Cyber Conflict (CyCon), May 2019), 1.

45 Henry H. Perritt Jr., "Cyberspace and State Sovereignty," *Journal of International Legal Studies* 3, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 163-171.

46 Henry H. Perritt Jr., "Cyberspace and State Sovereignty," (Summer 1997): 164.

47 Tomáš Gábriš, and Ondrej Hamulák, "Pandemics in Cyberspace–Empire in Search of a Sovereign?." *Abstract. Baltic Journal of Law & Politics* 14.1 (2021): 104.

exchange of information, services and activities, without regard for existing borders between States.⁴⁸ The user of the internet is often not aware of the location of servers, nor the paths which data takes to get from a server to their screen. The Internet moves and spreads data across different national contexts and jurisdictions by design, which makes it difficult or problematic to exercise sovereignty based on territory. It is possible, but highly inefficient, and more worryingly, will transform the nature of the Internet. This has led Roguski to argue for an understanding of sovereignty or state authority regarding the logical and social layer of cyberspace based on a criterion of proximity. This criterion of proximity is not based on distance but instead on whether 'the state can establish a genuine link between the digital objects or online personae over which authority is to be asserted.'⁴⁹ Following Roguski's argument Cyberspace thus challenges the defining feature – one of the key norms – of sovereignty: control over a given territory. Given the importance of norms of sovereignty in relation to possible role conceptions and the 'sovereign role', the emergence of the digital realm thus poses a *problematic situation* for the state.

At the same time, the erosion of the ability of the state to claim a 'sovereign role' in relation to the digital realm also signalled a *problematic situation* for actors other than the state. A *problematic situation* is a disruption of routines and understanding of reality and thus can also mean the ability of new positive avenues for an actor. Many non-state actors began to understand that new role conceptions for their 'Self' could be possible in this digital realm as traditional norms of sovereignty, which are heavily centred around the state, were being eroded. Although on a conceptual level it can be argued that the 'emergence of the digital realm' constitutes a *problematic situation* for actors found on the world stage, in reality specific actors will have a particular experience with the 'digital realm' that confronts their Self with the realisation that their perception of reality, their Self and their role conception are being challenged, this for example could be the hacking of national institutions as was the case for Estonia in 2007.⁵⁰

SIRT contends that after state and non-state actors experience a *problematic situation*, they will spark *role-taking processes* in which actors start to reflect and imagine a new role for their 'Selves' and others which – in this case – is seen in the emergence of cyberspace. Due to the role of states and their understanding of what this role entails in the pre-digital sphere (the historical self), which is drenched in the dominant norms of traditional sovereignty, it is unsurprising that with the ever-growing influence of the digital realm on its citizens, the state experiences expectations to imagine a role for itself vis-à-vis the digital space. Although in principle the traditional understanding of the 'sovereign role', is difficult to apply or perhaps not suited in the digital realm, since the role conceptions of states as established members of the international system are heavily rooted in sovereignty norms their 'old Self' and Others expect them to maintain, or at least attempt to have, a sovereign role in the digital realm as well. However, as the traditional sovereign role in the international system struggles in the digital realm due to fact that it cannot exercise power in the way assumed by the norms of sovereignty, it rendered the 'sovereign role' as disputed. Non-state actors having recognised the difficulties of states to claim a sovereign role based on a traditional understanding of sovereignty, after engaging in a reflective role-taking process, understood that there were new possibilities for role conceptions for themselves.

These processes have led and continue to lead to new role conceptions vis-à-vis the digital realm which are for example expressed in digital policy initiatives by state as well as other actors. In these expressions of and attempts to 'make' these new role conceptions we are now witnessing a discourse of, and or aims to attain, digital sovereignty. The next section of the paper will address how we can, on the basis of a SIRT framework, understand and approach this phenomenon in research as part of the *role-making process* that these actors must engage in after the *role-taking process* has resulted in a new role conception for its 'Self' in relation to the digital realm.

48 Przemysław Roguski, "Layered sovereignty: adjusting traditional notions of sovereignty to a digital environment." (Paper presented at the 2019 11th International Conference on Cyber Conflict (CyCon), May 2019), 5.

49 Przemysław Roguski, "Layered sovereignty: adjusting traditional notions of sovereignty to a digital environment." Abstract. (Paper presented at the 2019 11th International Conference on Cyber Conflict (CyCon), (May 2019), 5.

50 Michael Lesk, "The new front line: Estonia under cyberassault." IEEE Security & Privacy 5.4 (2007): 76-79.

5. Role Making, Digital Sovereignty and Alter-Cast Processes

Following SIRT, the emergence of the digital realm can be understood as a *problematic situation* which sparked *role-taking processes* in which roles for the Self in and in accordance with this new realm were imagined. Consequently, the next step that actors must engage in is to ‘construct’ their new role conception by engaging in *role-making activities*, which is especially needed in relation to the digital realm. This because as explained by Fullilove, there is a high potential for *role-making processes* when ‘a new role is created to tackle specific policy problems in a geographical or functional domain and if there are few predecessors and even fewer administrative rules’⁵¹, which is the case for the digital realm. An important part of *role-making processes*, as mentioned before, is to actively engage in ‘the construction of a new world harmonising the conflicting interests into which enters the new self’.⁵² Given the importance of norms of sovereignty for (possible) role conceptions on the world stage, and the way in which the digital realm challenges norms of sovereignty, it is thus crucial for actors to engage with the notion of sovereignty and to position themselves in relation to that concept as a means to enable their own desired role conception. This, as according to Werner and De Wilde: ‘sovereignty does not become less and less important in times when the power of the state (or any other claimant of sovereignty) is questioned or diminishing. On the contrary, especially in times of competing claims to authority, such as times of civil unrest, a strong claim to sovereignty is more likely to occur.’⁵³

This raises questions about how actors try to shape suitable norms of sovereignty as part of their attempt to make space for its role conception. From the perspective of SIRT, it is through language that in interaction meaning is transferred to reality, and thus by talking in a specific way about an object or concept subjective meaning is given. Based on the insights of Werner and De Wilde, as mentioned earlier, who understand sovereignty as a ‘speech act to (re-)establish the claimant’s position as absolute authority and to legitimize its exercise of power’⁵⁴, it can be argued that the use of the discourse of digital sovereignty that we are witnessing today could be understood as an attempt of state and other actors to construct new norms of sovereignty vis-à-vis the digital realm which allows for their imagined role conception, as a crucial part of the *role-making process*.

Moreover, by ‘making’ a role for themselves by creating policy initiatives or strategies in which attempts are made to construct new norms of (digital)-sovereignty fitting for their own role, these actors are also engaging in an *alter-casting process*. In this process the Self of a specific actor will ‘alter-cast’ others in roles that allow for their desired role conception. The alters may accept or reject this role, which in the latter case can lead to role conflict. However, the alters in turn will also engage in this process and could thus also impact the way in which an actor is able to ‘make’ the desired role for themselves. When for example, the European Commission expresses a role conception of its Self in which it aims at playing a large regulatory role in the field of digital policy, it casts actors like Meta and Twitter in a subordinate role.

Moreover, by using a discourse of digital sovereignty, which is interpreted as something that needs to be created on the European level and efforts are made to attain ‘European digital sovereignty’, it casts other actors such as the state in roles that are needed for their desired role conception, in this case: a role for the state with a reduced ability to exercise national sovereignty over digital matters. But when a discourse of digital sovereignty is used by a civil society organisation, in which digital sovereignty is interpreted as something that belongs to the individual or a community, it *alter-casts* other actors such as states and international organisations in roles that are fitting with their desired role conception, in this case: a role in which the state and or international organisations are unable or struggle to exercise legitimate power over digital matters.

Based on SIRT, it can be argued that today we are witnessing actors that are engaging in a *role-taking* and *role-making processes* in regard to the role they (desire to) play in relation to the digital realm. As norms of sovereignty are important elements of (possible) role conceptions on the world stage, which are challenged by the digital realm, we can now observe attempts of actors to construct new norms of (digital)-sovereignty as part of their *role-making and alter-cast process* and by doing so are engaged in a social process which could result in new ruling norms of (digital)-sovereignty.

51 Michael Fullilove, “All the President’s Men: The Role of Special Envoys in U.S. Foreign Policy.” *Foreign Affairs* 84 (2005): 13–18. In Harnisch, Sebastian. “Conceptualizing in the minefield: role theory and foreign policy learning.” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 8.1 (2012): 47–69.

52 George H. Mead, *The Social Self*, *Psychiatry*, 41:2, (1978):181.

53 Werner, Wouter G., and Jaap H. De Wilde, “The endurance of sovereignty.” *European Journal of International Relations* 7.3 (2001): 286.

54 Werner, Wouter G., and Jaap H. De Wilde, “The endurance of sovereignty.”, 287.

6. A SIRT Approach to Roles in the Digital Realm

SIRT and the four central concepts of *problematic situation*, *role-taking*, *role-making*, and *alter-casting*, as this paper has argued and demonstrated, can be used to further understand the way in which state and non-state actors are forging a role for themselves in the digital realm. This paper proposes to conduct future empirical research on the basis of this Symbolic Interactionist Role Theoretical Framework in which specific actors and their attempts to create a role vis-à-vis the digital realm are analysed. This analysis could be structured around the four central concepts discussed in this paper, in which first the specific *problematic situation* in relation to the digital realm for an actor can be located and examined. This could be followed by an analysis of the *role-taking process*, that is the reflective phase in which an actor tries to imagine a new role conception, which can be found in advisory commissions, parliaments and in case of the EU in the interactions between the European institutions. Following, the ways in which the actor attempts to make this role by examining its activities such as public speeches, strategies, declarations, or policy initiatives could be conducted. In this analysis special attention should be placed on the way in which the actor attempts to construct new norms of sovereignty as a crucial way to make space for its role conception vis-à-vis the digital realm. Lastly, the ways in which an actor engages in *alter casting* could be examined as this not only sheds light on the way an actor imagines its role conception but also lays bare the social process which is set in motion in which other actors are casted in roles that are in accordance with the desired role conception of another actor. In terms of methodology ‘narrative’ could be a suitable approach in which based on the four concepts discussed above a narrative of a specific actor and its (desired) role conception can be constructed. This approach has been promoted by Wehner and Thies in regard to Role theory and international relations and argue that ‘narrative is an appropriate method for the interpretive approach and symbolic interaction to reach thick interpretations’⁵⁵ and implies ‘using secondary, official documents and spontaneous press declarations to find yardsticks for specific narrations containing the roles enacted by states in different settings as well as the divergence/ convergence in the making of the role.’⁵⁶ By doing an analysis, on the basis of a SIRT conceptual scheme with the methodological approach of narrative, of multiple different actors it could be possible to uncover different parts of the continuous social processes of interaction between actors that play or want to play a role in the digital realm. Moreover, by doing so it could also be a way to reveal the social process in which norms of digital sovereignty are created, and potentially, traditional norms of sovereignty are being adapted or entirely new ruling norms of sovereignty are constructed.

7. Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated and argued for the usefulness of SIRT to further our understanding of the roles that actors play vis-à-vis the digital realm as well as the usage of the concept of digital sovereignty, which this paper argues can be understood and approached as being intertwined processes. Drawing on insights of SIRT the emergence of the digital realm can be conceptualised as a *problematic situation* which questions actors’ understandings of reality and the role for its Self’s as the emergence of the digital realm challenges traditional understandings of norms of sovereignty, the *Sovereign role* and potential role conceptions of actors. Following a SIRT perspective, it is understood that this *problematic situation* will spark a process of *role-taking* in which actors imagine new roles for themselves in relation to a new (perception of) reality brought forth by the emergence of the digital realm. After having imagined a new role for themselves actors need to engage in *role-making* as well as *alter casting* processes to forge space for their new role conception. Given the importance of the notion of sovereignty in relation to legitimacy and authority on the world stage a need exists to construct new or adapt ruling norms of (digital)-sovereignty that allow for their desired role conception in relation to the digital space, in which the usage of a discourse on digital sovereignty plays a vital role. This paper argues that a SIRT perspective can and should be used to conduct further research by analysing specific actors’ role conceptions vis-à-vis the digital realm, the way in which they engage in *role-making* and *alter-casting* practices and their specific use of the notion of digital sovereignty. This not only to further our understanding of the roles that a variety of actors (attempt to) play in relation to the digital realm, but also to shed light on the social process in which new or adapted norms of (digital)-sovereignty are being constructed.

55 Wehner, Leslie E., and Cameron G. Thies, "Role theory, narratives, and interpretation: The domestic contestation of roles." *International Studies Review* 16.3 (2014): 421.

56 Wehner, Leslie E., and Cameron G. Thies, "Role theory, narratives, and interpretation: The domestic contestation of roles.", 421.

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