



SYMPOSIUM REPORT

THE DIGITALISING STATE

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‘DIGITALISING STATE’ SYMPOSIUM

On September 4-5, 2023, the Regional Futures project hosted the ‘Digitalising State’ Symposium, a two-day programme devoted to an interdisciplinary and critical approach to state politics, practices and performances in the digital era. The event took place at UCL’s Institute of Advanced Studies (IAS), where more than 30 attendees gathered to present their current research and engage with the emerging debates at the confluence of data politics, state sovereignty, and the territorialisation of informational infrastructures.

DAY 1

Early on the first day, [Professor Ayona Datta](#) welcomed all attendees and inaugurated the event by briefly introducing the Regional Futures project. [Dr. Mariana Reyes](#) then joined Prof. Datta in welcoming all participants and outlined the aims and goals for the Symposium. She briefly mentioned the significance of approaching the convergence of digitalisation and the state in all its manifestations while considering the fundamental reorganisation of state institutions, information infrastructures and metropolitan peripheries through and for digitalisation.



The Symposium continued with the keynote ‘Planning Regional Futures: What Role Should Digitalisation and Digital Planning Play?’ by [Dr. John Harrison](#) from Loughborough University. During his presentation, Dr. Harrison offered a thought-provoking discussion on the role of digitalisation in urban planning, prompting us to consider the tensions between ‘new’ urban agendas (e.g. digitalisation, urbanisation, networked, smart cities) and ‘old’-style regional planning (territorial, top-down, long-term, hierarchical). Importantly, Dr. Harrison delved into the role of para-state actors in planning regional futures, drawing on illuminating examples, including the case of Alphabet Inc.’s Google in Toronto. Overall, Dr. Harrison’s contribution

stayed with us as we continued to contemplate the multifaceted agency landscape of planning alongside the role of the planner as orchestrator and enabler of planning regional futures.

The Symposium activities continued with the panel session ‘Spatio-Temporalities of the Digitalising State’, in which four panelists presented their perspectives on the temporal dimensions of digitalisation strategies by the state. Specifically, Prof. Ayona Datta (with contributions from [Dr Fenna Hoefsloot](#)) addressed how Global South states use timing as a form of statecraft. She argued that the ‘digitalising state’ is built upon the ‘time-image’ (Deleuze, 1989) of power, wherein particular processes, transactions, and infrastructures of the state are subordinated to the temporal rhythms of information flows. Next, [Dr Claudio Coletta](#) from the University of Bologna guided us through the interweaving of real time and deep time (geological time), and the manifold ways in which financialisation, state power, and environmental challenges intersect. Along similar lines, [Professor Oren Yiftachel](#) from the University of Ben Gurion shared his ethnographic work (in collaboration with Hagit Keysar and Mohamad Mohamad) on Bersheeba city, Israel’s technological hub, elaborating on the social changes and power differentials emerging from digitisation and digitalisation processes. Overall, all interventions in this panel prompted to reflect on time – as a discourse, a unit of measure, and a mediator of power - when approaching the digital dimension of state bureaucracies.



The Symposium's second keynote was delivered by artist and researcher [Manu Luksch](#) from Royal College of Arts. With great proficiency, Manu explained her artistic practice concerning data production and extraction, state surveillance, and grassroots resistance. Her work with young rappers from Dakar in the frame of the project ALGO-RHYTHM was particularly refreshing as it invited us to reimagine the city in relation to the corporate-governmental power and the social effects of predictive analytics.

Following the second keynote, we moved to the panel session 'Encountering the Digitalising State', in which four panellists scrutinised the various ways in which the digitalising state becomes tangible. As part of this panel, [Dr. Saskia Greyling](#) from the University of Neuchâtel presented her work (in collaboration with Jennifer Barella) on the use of digital artefacts to expedite and extend equitable governance decision-making in public administration. Based on their empirical work in Cape Town and Geneva, Dr. Greyling questioned the notions of transparency and justice when considering cultural, political, and organisational contexts. For their part, [Dr. Ipshita Basu](#) and [Dr. Joe Devine](#) from Westminster University and Bath University, respectively, presented their collaborative inquiry into the digitalisation of social protection and emergency relief in Bangladesh during and since the COVID-19 pandemic. In a dynamic and engaging presentation, they demonstrated how centrally mandated digital processes were delivered and how they ultimately delivered through an intermediating society, where access to services was determined not by digitally literate or membership in a marginalised group but rather by politically connections. Lastly, [Dr. Fenna Hoefsloot](#) presented her ongoing research (in collaboration with [Dr. Dennis Muthama](#) on the role of non-state actors in Kenya, where local authorities heavily invested in digitalising land tenure documents across the Nairobi Metropolitan Region. In summary, the panel was a compelling conversation on the ways in which the digitalising state becomes fragmented and decentralised across scales and institutions. Some thought-provoking questions emerging from this panel are: How can we critically evaluate the efficiency of the 'digitalising state'? And what is the role of citizens in shaping, moderating, and responding to the 'digitalising state'?



The last session of the day, 'Genealogies of the Digitalising State', was devoted to understanding the various ways in which the 'digitalising state' emerges through bureaucratic strategies and programmes across different geographies. With a particular focus on the Global South, the three presenters critically discussed state policies, legislative enactments, and official plans in which digitalisation plays a key role. First, [Dr. Catherine Gatheri](#) from the British Institute of East Africa (BIEA) presented her current research (in collaboration with [Dr. Melissa Wangui](#)) on land laws in land management in Kenya. Dr. Gatheri and Dr. Wangui's paper was followed by a presentation by [Dr. Neha](#)



[Gupta](#) from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), who provided a comprehensive analysis of technological and communication changes in post-colonial India. Finally, [Dr Jesus Flores](#) from the University of Guadalajara discussed his inquiry (in collaboration with [Dr Juan Demerutis](#)) on the role of municipal authorities in advancing digitalisation in land management and planning in Western Mexico. Overall, the ‘Genealogies’ panel prompted us to reflect on the multiple factors shaping the emergence of the digitalising state and the challenges of approaching genealogies beyond linear, progressive, and globally-synchronised time.

DAY 2



The Symposium’s second day of activities began with the keynote ‘Against Data Invisibilities: Thinking from the Margin’ delivered by [Dr. Stefania Milan](#) from the University of Amsterdam. In a fascinating presenting style, Dr. Milan delved into the geopolitical dimensions of datafication, data use, and state surveillance. Concurrently, she addressed the multiple fractures that everyday acts of defiance, subversion, and creativity produce in state power. In doing so, Dr. Milan provided some pragmatic tools that can be implemented when investigating data at the margins, including decoloniality and race, intersectionality, feminism, and pluriversal ontologies.



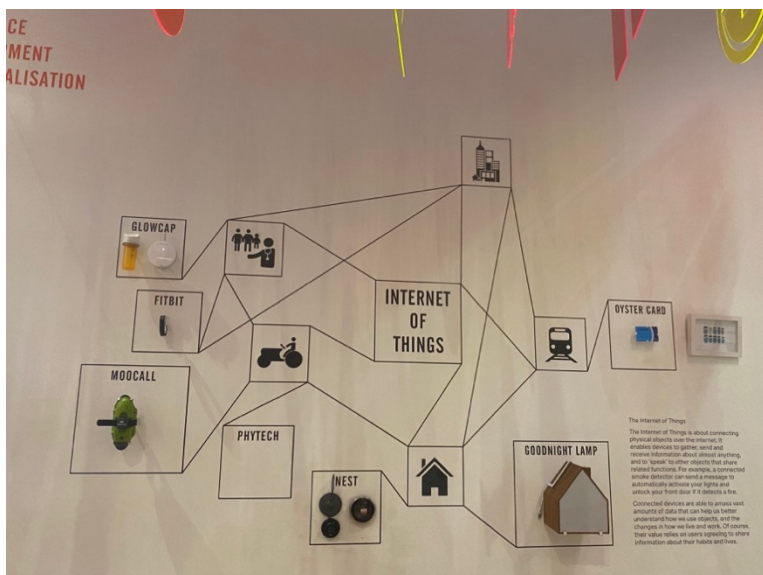
After Dr. Milan’s keynote, the symposium continued with the paper session ‘Data Politics in the Digitalising State’. In this panel, and in close connection with Dr. Milan’s ideas, the panellists examined the production, sharing, and operationalising of data in different cities of the Global South. First, Jinghan Li, an MSc student at UCL Geography, presented her analysis of the IPv6 and Yeti DNS projects in what she termed ‘the digital earthquake of the domain name revolution’. Next, [Eesha Kunduri](#) from the University of Minnesota presented her research (in collaboration with Shahana Sheikh and Shamindra Nath Roy) on India’s food relief efforts via digital platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic. [Arushi Sharan](#) from the University of Oxford then

critically discussed India’s Smart Cities Mission by examining the case of Pune in Western India. Finally, [Dr Josie Wittmer](#) from the University of Lausanne unpacked her work (in collaboration with Carolyn Prouse and Mohammed Rafi Arefin) on the political implications of health data collection via wastewater systems in South Asian cities.

Following the ‘Data Politics’ session, we moved to the roundtable ‘Methodological Approaches to the Digitalising State’, a dialogue among [four postdoctoral researchers](#) working in the Regional Futures project. They presented some of the opportunities and challenges of researching the ‘digitalising state’ in the Global South. Sharing part of their fieldwork experiences and anecdotes, the postdocs delved into the meaning of approaching the state in the digital era and engaged with the audience on some often-overlooked dimensions



of ethnographic research: gaining access to state and para-state institutions, earning trust from participants, and navigating different positionalities along the lines of ethnicity, gender, race, class, religion, and generation. The Symposium closed with a final group reflection on the topics covered by the keynotes and panels, as well as the sharing of participants' feedback on the entire event.



To relax our minds after two days of in-depth reflection, we embarked a group visit to London's Design Museum, where we were able to learn more about the role of technology and informational infrastructures in shaping our lives and cities. In the permanent exhibition, we explored concepts like 'smart cities' and the 'Internet of Things', which resonated fully with the conversations we had at UCL.

On behalf of the Regional Futures project, we are extremely grateful to all the participants who made this event an unforgettable experience. Undoubtedly, the Symposium provided us with much food for thought, and we are confident that the networks forged over the two days of activities will yield extremely positive outcomes, including the possibility of future collaborations and the opportunity to continue exploring important research areas together. Finally, we are thrilled to announce that some of the contributions to the Symposium be transformed into book chapters in an edited volume for submission to a university press. Watch this space!



UCL



Last but not least, we would like to acknowledge the support of the [European Research Council](#) as well as the [Institute of Advanced Studies \(IAS\)](#) at UCL, who kindly hosted us at their headquarters.