

Working paper:

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.

## Introduction

The emergence of the digital realm and the increasing role it plays in our daily life has and continues to raise questions about the way in which this sphere should be governed and by whom. Since the beginning of the internet a variety of interpretations of this sphere and desired types of governance have been expressed. In the early days notions of cyber liberalism had a large impact on the way in which governance in relation to the digital was understood. Cyber liberalism understands 'the digital' as a separate sphere in which traditional forms of governance based on sovereignty 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.<sup>1</sup>

Another approach which gained popularity was a multistakeholder approach to the governance of the digital sphere which focuses on the inclusion of all stakeholders and consensus-based decision making. 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'.<sup>2</sup> Today, although ideas of cyber liberalism 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 in the previous decades, we are now witnessing the usage of the

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

<sup>2</sup> "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.>

notion of sovereignty in relation to the digital realm among a variety of state and non-state actors that previously shunned the term. This, as the sentiment of understanding cyberspace as an entirely new realm which would challenge the notion of sovereignty and the central role for the nation state seemed to have waned, as explained by Shahin in 2007, in *The Reassertion of the State: Governance and the Information Revolution*:

Whilst much was made of the creation of public agorae in cyberspace, the need for concrete realities to these spaces is now seen as apparent. Although the internet does provide a new channel of communication, the ramifications for not-yet-existing political institutions are unclear, and new institutions are not likely to emerge for a while. This is apparent as governments learn to adopt their own practices to bring cyberspace down to earth. It is, at present, more realistic to talk about current political structures and the relationship between their governance and the internet.<sup>3</sup>

In the last two decades there has been a growing trend among democratic nation 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 been taken active steps to achieve and strengthen French digital sovereignty.<sup>4</sup> In these policy initiatives a wide range of definitions of the term 'digital sovereignty' as well as a lack thereof can be identified.

Besides national 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).<sup>5</sup> 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 as according to the Commission: 'Europe must now strengthen its digital sovereignty and set standards, rather

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<sup>3</sup> Jamal Shahin, "The Reassertion of the State: Governance and the Information Revolution," In *The Resurgence of the State: Trends and Processes in Cyberspace Governance*, ed. Myriam Dunn Cavelty et al. (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007):12.

<sup>4</sup> 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>

<sup>5</sup> 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.

than following those of others- with a clear focus on data, technology and infrastructure'.<sup>6</sup>

The notion of sovereignty can also be found 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.'<sup>7</sup>

Thus, today we are witnessing a variety of actors having or desiring a role in the digital realm in which a trend can be identified in terms of the prevalence of the usage of the concept 'digital sovereignty' or similar variants of such, like data- and technological sovereignty.<sup>8</sup> Not surprisingly, in recent years a growing number of academics have focused on the different interpretations and usages of the concept of digital sovereignty<sup>9</sup>, the relationship between 'sovereignty' and 'the digital'<sup>10</sup> and the analysis of strategies that are used by actors to attain digital sovereignty.<sup>11</sup> 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 wants to contribute to our understanding of the way in which nation 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 considered to be a loose body of literature, that finds its origin in the disciplines of psychology and sociology and centres around a Symbolic Interactionist

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<sup>6</sup> 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](https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age_en)

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

<sup>8</sup> 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 Phole, and Thorsten Thiel, "Digital Sovereignty." *Internet Policy Review* 9, no. 4 (December 17, 2020): 1–19.

<sup>9</sup> Julia Phole, 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.

<sup>10</sup> 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).

<sup>11</sup> 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.

approach to Role Theory, which in recent years has been (re)-introduced to the study of International Relations.<sup>12</sup> This theoretical paper demonstrates and argues for the usefulness of Symbolic Interactionist Role Theory in order to further our understanding of the emergence of role conceptions in the digital space as well as the emergence and usage of the concept of digital sovereignty, which as this paper argues based on Symbolic Interactionist Role Theory, could be understood, and approached as being intertwined processes. Central insights and concepts found in Symbolic Interactionist Role Theory such as the understandings of a *problematic situation*, *role-taking*, *role-making*, and *alter-casting processes* can shed light on the social processes affecting and producing the roles of actors in the digital space. By doing so, this paper contributes to a growing body of literature focused on advancing and arguing for the usage of Symbolic Interactionist Role Theory to the study of International Relations as well as the academic efforts to understand governance in the digital realm and specifically the role of sovereignty therein.

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 studies. 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.

## **Symbolic interactionist role theory and the study of international relations**

Before we can touch upon the application of Symbolic Interactionist Role Theory into the study of International Relations it is crucial to discuss the origin of this approach. 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

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<sup>12</sup> 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.

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.'<sup>13</sup> 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 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.'<sup>14</sup> 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 creates discomfort. In response to a *problematic situation* the individual will engage in a *role-taking process* in which it will reflect upon the new reality and or diverging expectations of others and its own role conception (that is its perception of such). 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 'an object to itself'<sup>15</sup>, by taking the imagined 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'.<sup>16</sup>

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

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<sup>13</sup> George Herbert Mead, Ed Charles W. Morris, *Mind, self and society*. (Chicago: University of Chicago press,1934): 135.

<sup>14</sup> C. De Waal, *On Mead*. (Belmont: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning Inc., 2002):21-22.

<sup>15</sup> George Herbert Mead, Ed Charles W. Morris, *Mind, self and society*. (Chicago: University of Chicago press, 1934):136.

<sup>16</sup> George H. Mead, "The Social Self." *Psychiatry*, 41:2 (1978):181.

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'."<sup>17</sup>

Following 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 nation state by focusing on national role conceptions and foreign policy.<sup>18</sup> 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 being too positivistic by interpreting roles as static and neglecting agency. It is therefore that Baert et al., argue for moving away from the insights of Mead and insists instead on the use of positioning theory in an attempt to make agency more prominent.<sup>19</sup> While others agree with the notion that the application of Role Theory in International Relations is not used to its full potential, but that this mostly has to do with the insufficient application of the insights of Mead and Symbolic Interactionism.<sup>20</sup>

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.<sup>21</sup> 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

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<sup>17</sup> David M. McCourt, "The roles states play: A Meadian interactionist approach." *Journal of International Relations and Development* 15.3 (2012): 380.

<sup>18</sup> Kalevi J. Holsti, "National role conceptions in the study of foreign policy." *International studies quarterly* 14.3 (1970): 233-309.

<sup>19</sup> 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.

<sup>20</sup> 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.

<sup>21</sup> 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.

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* as they according to McCourt 'represent a conceptual schema designed to capture the core elements of interaction as seen from a symbolic interactionist perspective'.<sup>22</sup> 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, it is crucial to refer to the ground-breaking work of Stephan Klose, of which a few insights are in regard to this paper important to mention, especially its focus 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'.<sup>23</sup> 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.'<sup>24</sup>

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'.<sup>25</sup> 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)-

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<sup>22</sup> David M. McCourt, "The roles states play: A Meadian interactionist approach." *Journal of International Relations and Development* 15.3 (2012): 381.

<sup>23</sup> 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.

<sup>24</sup> Stephan Klose, "Interactionist role theory meets ontological security studies: an exploration of synergies between socio-psychological approaches to the study of international relations.", 852.

<sup>25</sup> 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.



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.'<sup>26</sup>

Finally, Beasley et al.<sup>27</sup> as well as Thies<sup>28</sup> 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 insights of Beasley et al. and Thies will be examined in the next part.

### **Sovereignty and Symbolic Interactionist Role Theory**

From a Symbolic Interactionist Role Theory 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'<sup>29</sup> as he wrote about the influence of social processes in the creation of the context in which international relations finds itself. 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.'<sup>30</sup> From a Symbolic Interactionist Role Theory perspective these collective meanings are understood as existing as a result of interactions that continuously give (shared) meaning to the concept, and in

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<sup>26</sup> Stephan Klose, "Theorizing the EU's Actorness: Towards an Interactionist Role Theory Framework." *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 56.5 (2018): 1145.

<sup>27</sup> 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.

<sup>28</sup> Cameron G. Thies, "International socialization processes vs. Israeli national role conceptions: can role theory integrate IR theory and foreign policy analysis?." (2012): 35-36.

<sup>29</sup> 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.

<sup>30</sup> Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy is what states make of it: the social construction of power politics." *International organization* 46.2 (1992): 397.

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 they are both presupposed by and an ongoing arti-fact of practice.'<sup>31</sup> 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. The notion of sovereignty 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.<sup>32</sup> In this regard it is important to mention the work of Werner and De Wilde who explain in *The Endurance of Sovereignty* how sovereignty should be understood as a legitimising discourse that is used by different kinds of powers 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.'<sup>33</sup> The 'ruling norms of sovereignty', meaning the way in which the notion of sovereignty is understood on the world stage from a Symbolic Interactionist Role Theory perspective is seen as the result of a certain level of convergence of sovereignty discourses containing a specific interpretation of sovereignty, which is used, recognised and accepted by different actors. Regarding predictions about the 'the end of sovereignty', which have been expressed in relation to the emergence of the digital realm<sup>34</sup>, they could be understood based on the insights of Werner and de Wilde, 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.

From a Symbolic Interactionist Role Theory perspective, sovereignty as understood as norms of sovereignty, is a collective meaning which influences potential role conceptions of actors.

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<sup>31</sup> Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy is what states make of it: the social construction of power politics.", 397.

<sup>32</sup> 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.

<sup>33</sup> Wouter G. Werner, and Jaap H. De Wilde, "The endurance of sovereignty." *European Journal of International Relations* 7.3 (2001): 287.

<sup>34</sup> For example in: Walter B. Wriston, "Bits, Bytes, and Diplomacy," *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 5 (October 1997): 174.

Thies has demonstrated that these norms also constitute a specific role in the current international system: 'the sovereign role'.<sup>35</sup> According to Thies, 'the role of the sovereign state' can be achieved by an emerging state or can be the result of alter-casting processes of other actors.<sup>36</sup> If for example an aspiring state wants to become a part of the international system, in which sovereignty is an important collective meaning that shapes the context of the international system, it will need to 'attain' the sovereign role for itself in order to make space for its own desired role conception (a sovereign state).<sup>37</sup>

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'<sup>38</sup> and are 'ideas that establish and set parameters for the nature of agency and scope of acceptable behaviours for the *sovereign role* within the international system'.<sup>39</sup> 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'.<sup>40</sup> 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.

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<sup>35</sup> 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.

<sup>36</sup> Cameron G. Thies, "International socialization processes vs. Israeli national role conceptions: can role theory integrate IR theory and foreign policy analysis?." (2012): 28-38.

<sup>37</sup> Cameron G. Thies, "International socialization processes vs. Israeli national role conceptions: can role theory integrate IR theory and foreign policy analysis?." (2012): 35-36.

<sup>38</sup> 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.

<sup>39</sup> Ryan K. Beasley, Juliet Kaarbo, and Kai Oppermann. "Role theory, foreign policy, and the social construction of sovereignty: Brexit stage right.", (2021): 2.

<sup>40</sup>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.

## The digital realm, a *problematic situation*, and role-taking processes

Our current understanding or ruling norms of sovereignty can be traced back to the work of Bodin, Hobbes and the Peace of Westphalia.<sup>41</sup> The current Westphalian understanding of sovereignty is heavily based on absolute authority over a specific geographical space found at the level of the nation state, as 'sovereignty is understood as exclusive authority of the State over persons and things within a specified territory.'<sup>42</sup> The emergence of new technological means has, throughout history, impacted sovereignty and has given rise to new role conceptions and role behaviour for state actors. However, the emergence of the internet and the accompanied emergence of the digital realm constituted a revolution which posed a larger disruption of states' understanding of reality and their role therein than previous inventions. It is therefore that this paper argues for conceptualising and approaching the emergence of the digital realm as a *problematic situation* for state and non-state actors, which can form a starting point for analysing the way in which actors are forging a role vis-à-vis the digital realm on the basis of a Symbolic Interactionist Role Theory framework.

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.'<sup>43</sup> The internet thus poses a threat to states' understandings of their own role and ability to exercise its role which is heavily rooted in norms of sovereignty based on absolute authority and territoriality. As stated by Perrit: 'These changes affect the

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<sup>41</sup> 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.

<sup>42</sup> 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.

<sup>43</sup> Henry H. Perritt Jr., "Cyberspace and State Sovereignty," *Journal of International Legal Studies* 3, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 163-171.

role of the state itself. (...) In a larger sense, the Internet threatens traditional political intermediation because it threatens governmental control.’<sup>44</sup>

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’.<sup>45</sup> 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 internet is based on physical technological components like servers, often referred to as the physical layer of cyberspace, is found on a specific territory and can thus be subject to a sovereign state. While on the other hand it can be argued, as stated by Roguski, that regarding cyberspace: ‘the impression of a distinct space is formed by the logical and social layers that construct a global platform for the exchange of information, services and activities, without regard for existing borders between States.’<sup>46</sup> The user of the internet is often not aware of the location of servers and with its activities on the internet moves and spreads data across different national contexts and jurisdictions, which makes it difficult or problematic to exercise sovereignty based on territory. 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.’<sup>47</sup> Cyberspace thus challenges the role of territory as well as absolute

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<sup>44</sup> Henry H. Perritt Jr., "Cyberspace and State Sovereignty,"(Summer 1997): 164.

<sup>45</sup>Tomáš Gábriš, and Ondrej Hamulák, "Pandemics in Cyberspace—Empire in Search of a Sovereign?." Abstract. *Baltic Journal of Law & Politics* 14.1 (2021): 104.

<sup>46</sup> 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.

<sup>47</sup> 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.

authority and thus undermines the ruling norms of sovereignty. 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 nation state.

At the same time, the erosion of the ability of the nation state to claim a 'sovereign role' in relation to the digital realm also signalled a *problematic situation* for actors other than the nation state. It is important to note that a *problematic situation* means a disruption of routines and understanding of reality and thus can also mean the ability of new positive avenues for an actor. Many non-nation state actors began to understand that new role conceptions for its 'Self' could be possible in this digital realm as traditional norms of sovereignty, which are heavily centred around the nation state, were being eroded. Thus, with the rise of the internet and the accompanied emergence of the 'digital realm' actors were confronted with a changed reality, which impacted or challenged their perception of their own role conception, of possible roles, the context of international relations and the notion of sovereignty underpinning all of these. 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.<sup>48</sup>

Following Symbolic Interactionist Role Theory, it is understood that after state and non-state actors experience a *problematic situation*, it will spark *role-taking processes* in which actors start to reflect and imagine a new role for its 'Self' and others which is (more) in correspondence, in this case, to the new realities brought forth by the emergence of the digital realm. Due to the role of nation states and their understanding of what this role entails in the pre-digital sphere (the historical self), which is drenched in the ruling norms of sovereignty, it is un-surprising that with the ever-growing influence of the digital realm on its citizens, the nation 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

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<sup>48</sup> Michael Lesk, "The new front line: Estonia under cyberassault." *IEEE Security & Privacy* 5.4 (2007): 76-79.

nation 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-nation state actors having recognised the difficulties of nation 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 session of the paper will address how we can, on the basis of a Symbolic Interactionist Role Theory 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.

### **Role making, digital sovereignty and alter-cast processes**

Following Symbolic Interactionist Role Theory, 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',<sup>49</sup> which is the case

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<sup>49</sup>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.

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'.<sup>50</sup> 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.'<sup>51</sup>

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 Symbolic Interactionist Role Theory, 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'<sup>52</sup>, 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

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<sup>50</sup> George H. Mead, *The Social Self*, *Psychiatry*, 41:2, (1978):181.

<sup>51</sup> Werner, Wouter G., and Jaap H. De Wilde, "The endurance of sovereignty." *European Journal of International Relations* 7.3 (2001): 286.

<sup>52</sup> Werner, Wouter G., and Jaap H. De Wilde, "The endurance of sovereignty." (2001): 287.



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 nation state in roles that are needed for their desired role conception, in this case: a role for the nation 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 Symbolic Interactionist Role Theory, 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.

### **A symbolic interactionist role theory approach to roles in the digital realm**

Symbolic Interactionist Role Theory 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' 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.'<sup>53</sup> By doing an analysis, on the basis of a Symbolic Interactionist Role Theory 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.

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<sup>53</sup> Wehner, Leslie E., and Cameron G. Thies, "Role theory, narratives, and interpretation: The domestic contestation of roles." *International Studies Review* 16.3 (2014): 421.

## Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated and argued for the usefulness of Symbolic Interactionist Role Theory 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 Symbolic Interactionist Role Theory 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 Symbolic Interactionist Role Theory 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 Symbolic Interactionist Role Theory 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.

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