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ARTIGOS DOSSIÊ

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The making of Global Digital Governance: from social imaginaries to institutional order

A construção da Governança Digital Global: dos imaginários sociais à ordem institucional

ABSTRACT:

Global Digital Governance (GDG) constitutes a domain of intense constitutive contestation over the normative order of cyberspace. This article argues that the prevailing theoretical approaches in International Relations, focused on regime structures, actor agency, or technicalities, are insufficient to capture the processual, discursive, and historical nature of institutionalization in this field. I propose an integrated theoretical framework that articulates speech act constructivism, symbolic universes, and social imaginary significations. The aim is to demonstrate that the dispute over GDG is not merely regulatory, but an ontological struggle for the principles of 21st-century order, waged through the performance of speech acts that seek to establish rules, extracting legitimacy from conflicting symbolic universes, and proposing rival imaginary meanings. Through critical discourse analysis of key documents, the article deciphers this dispute as a crisis of the symbolic form of sovereignty, where competing projects seek to subvert it (libertarian-technoutopian model), reaffirm it (cybernetic sovereignist model), or hybridize it (value-based regulationist model). It concludes that the institutionalization of the GDG is an ongoing civilizing process: the next phase of the long historical struggle for the monopoly of legitimate authority. The theoretical contribution lies in offering a multilayered lens for analyzing global politics as an ongoing debate over the making of the common world through language. Hence, this theoretical move advances constructivism beyond "norms" and "identity" and demonstrates that every technical choice is ultimately a political choice about the future of global authority.

Keywords: Global digital governance; Institutionalization processes; Speech act constructivism; Imaginary meanings; International relations theory

RESUMO:

A Governança Digital Global (GDG) constitui um domínio de intensa contestação constitutiva pela ordem normativa do ciberespaço. Este artigo argumenta que as abordagens teóricas predominantes nas Relações Internacionais, focadas em estruturas de regime, agência de atores ou tecnicalidades, são insuficientes para capturar a natureza processual, discursiva e histórica da institucionalização neste campo. Proponho um arcabouço teórico integrado que articula construtivismo de atos de fala, universos simbólicos e significações imaginárias sociais. O objetivo é demonstrar que a disputa pela GDG não é meramente regulatória, mas uma luta ontológica pelos princípios de ordem do século XXI, travada através da performance de atos de fala que buscam instituir regras, extraindo legitimidade de universos simbólicos em conflito e propondo significações imaginárias rivais. Através de análise crítica de discurso de documentos-chave, o artigo decifra esta disputa como uma crise da forma simbólica da soberania, onde projetos concorrentes buscam subvertê-la (modelo libertário-tecnoutópico), reafirmá-la (modelo soberanista cibernético) ou hibridizá-la (modelo regulacionista baseado em valores). Conclui-se que a institucionalização na GDG é um processo civilizador em curso: a próxima fase da longa luta histórica pelo monopólio da autoridade legítima. A contribuição teórica reside em oferecer uma lente multicamadas para analisar a política global como um embate contínuo pela criação do mundo comum através da linguagem. Assim, este movimento teórico avança o construtivismo para além de "normas" e "identidade", e evidencia que toda escolha técnica é, em última instância, uma escolha política sobre o futuro da autoridade global.

Palavras-chave: Governança digital global; Processos de institucionalização; Construtivismo de atos de fala; Significações imaginárias; Teoria de relações internacionais

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INTRODUCTION

Global digital governance (GDG) has arisen as one of the most dynamic and contested domains of contemporary international politics (Mignot-Mahdavi, 2024; Kaya; Shahid, 2025). It encompasses norms (tacit or explicit), institutions, and processes that govern and regulate cyberspace, transnational data flows, and digital platforms. Rapid global digitalization has intensified cross-border governance conflicts across areas such as digital taxation, data protection, platform regulation of artificial intelligence, digital currencies, and cross-border data transfers. Those issues, despite varying in scope, derive from the widespread adoption of digital technologies (Jia; Chen, 2022). The phenomenon, that has changed the global agenda towards the construction of a comprehensive regime to address digital growth (Ignatov, 2023), reflects a confluence of rapid innovation trends, falling access costs, the expansion of digital infrastructure, globalization of markets, and sustained both public and private investment. Such conditions, together, have enabled ubiquitous connectivity and the global-wide diffusion of digital platforms and services.

As GDG increasingly bears on national securities and insecurities, technological sovereignty, privacy, innovation, and equitable access to digital markets, understanding it requires theoretical frameworks that capture adaptive, multi-level dynamics in which diverse state and non-state actors interact across overlapping arenas which drive continuous institutional change bearing in mind preoccupations concernign the exercise of internal and external digital sovereignty (Baines, 2024). However, unlike long-established international regimes, the normative architecture of cyberspace remains foundational and incipient: states, corporations, and civil society actors are engaged in an active dispute and contestation regarding the constitutive rules that will shape digital, social, economic, and political interactions, reframing debates about authority, sovereignty, liberty, and control (Golia, 2024; Fratini *et al.*, 2024).

Yet, prevailing theoretical approaches in International Relations (IR) struggle to adequately capture the dynamics inherent to processes of institutionalization. In his influential 1988 article, Robert O. Keohane argued that international institutions should be taken seriously as a central object of inquiry for IR theory. While realists tended to dismiss them as mere reflections of power, Keohane advanced a liberal-institutionalist perspective, highlighting their role in influencing state behavior and facilitating cooperation under anarchy (Keohane, 1988). However, this formulation itself reveals important limitations: institutions are theorized primarily in functional terms, as neutral mechanisms that enable cooperation. Hence, the

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political struggles over their creation, contestation, and meaning are largely bracketed out. Such a framework risks naturalizing institutions as solutions to collective problems, rather than interrogating how they arise from, and perpetuate, asymmetries of power.

Keohane's neoliberal institutionalism inherits much from earlier functionalist traditions, most prominently articulated by David Mitrany (1943; 1948), who envisioned international cooperation as arising from functional agencies devised to deal with technical problems beyond the competence of individual national governments. Neofunctionalists such as Ernst Haas (1964) extended this logic to regional integration, arguing about spillover effects whereby cooperation in one sector would generate further institutionalization in others. While these approaches were innovative in demonstrating how institutions might foster cooperation under anarchy, they framed governance outcomes as natural and technocratic responses to pre-existing problems, thereby underplaying their political contingency.

In this way, liberal-institutionalism obscure the power-laden struggles over what counts as a "problem" (and for whom: here, paraphrasing Robert W. Cox (1981), I would say that *every problem in international theory is always for someone and for some purpose*) and whose technical remedy becomes authoritative through the institutionalization of particular rules. Critical perspectives on functionalism, on their turn, including those of Susan Strange (1982), Martha Finnemore (1996), and Barnett & Finnemore (2004), have emphasized precisely this point: institutions are not neutral mechanisms of problem-solving, but political constructs that privilege certain forms of knowledge and rationality, delimit the horizons of legitimate action, and embed asymmetries of power into ostensibly technical practices. Rather than transparent facilitators of cooperation, institutions should thus be understood as sites where struggles over meaning, authority, and order are sedimented.

More recently, scholars have questioned functionalism's core tenets, particularly its insistence on separating technical from political domains and its faith in deterministic, technical solutions for inherently political conflicts. This skepticism is echoed in Jan Klabbers's critique of the functionalist logic underpinning much of international organizations law. Drawing on principal-agent theory, he argues that functionalism presents a sanitized, depoliticized narrative of institutional evolution that obscures power dynamics and political trade-offs (Boisson de Chazournes, 2015; Klabbers, 2025). Furthermore, mainstream constructivist accounts, especially those emphasizing normative diffusion and 'life-cycle' models (Finnemore; Sikkink, 1998), are often criticized for privileging the ideational content of norms while

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downplaying the symbolic power and relentless relational struggle embedded in institutionalization processes. This critique is reinforced by scholars like Lucrecia García Iommi (2020), who argues that the life-cycle model treats internalization as automatic and overlooks persistent contestation long after formal adoption.

Consequently, a critical gap remains for an analytic frame capable of capturing institutionalization as a deepely constitutive and contested process. Such a framework must move beyond functional adjustment or normative diffusion to instead analyze GDG as a battlefield of signification, where the core institutions of digital order are perpetually imagined, asserted, and challenged, ultimately drawing legitimacy from antagonistic symbolic universes.

Thus, the prevailing literature tends to analyze processes of institutionalization through lenses that, although individually valuable, are collectively insufficient to apprehend its both political and integrative nature. Regime-centered approaches map institutions but underplay the continuous processes of construction and contestation that give institutions meaning and durability (Huizenga, 1995). Actor-centered perspectives identify interests and strategies, yet often fails to explain how those strategies become stabilized as norms and, crucially, how agents themselves are constituted through institutionalizing practices (Emmenegger, 2021). Technicist or engineering-oriented views treat GDG as a problem of protocols and optimization, detaching those proposed solutions from the intrinsically political universes of meaning that legitimate them (Andersen, 2020). The result is a fragmented understanding that cannot fully account for the profoundly (co) constitutive and processual character of digital order formation, a gap that calls for theoretical tools capable of linking power, meaning, practice, and institutional durability.

What is missing, therefore, is an integrated theoretical framework capable of deciphering institutionalization as a multi-layered constitutive process. Such a framework must operate simultaneously at three analytical levels: (a) at the micro-level, by examining the precise discursive mechanism (speech acts) through which normative proposals are performatively articulates; (b) at the meso-level, by investigating the competing symbolic universes that provide the cultural repertoire for their intelligibility and legitimacy; and (c) at the macro-level, by situating this contest within the long-term historical transformations of global power configurations and the struggle for authority. The main purpose of this article is to propose and apply such a framework to the field of GDG.

To guide this investigation, this paper is structured around a central research question: How can processes of institutionalization in GDG

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be understood as a dynamic interaction between competing speech acts, the symbolic universes that legitimize them, and long-term transformations in global power figurations?

In response, this article argues that the struggle for digital order is a process of conflictual institutionalization, best deciphered through an integrated theoretical lens. This lens reveals a multi-layered contest where performative speech acts, uttered by actors seeking to institute rules, function as primary weapons. These acts, in turn, draw their legitimacy from profoundly antagonistic symbolic universes, which provide the cultural soil for their intelligibility and potency. Crucially, this entire struggle does not occur in a historical vacuum but must be situated within the long-term dynamics of the civilizing process, specifically, the incessant struggle to form and preserve monopolies of legitimate authority. Consequently, GDG is far more than a technical or regulatory controversy; it is a constitutive political struggle over the imposition of the social imaginaries that will define the common future of digital social life.

The article unfolds as follows. The next section develops an integrated theoretical framework that brings together the concepts of speech acts, symbolic universes, civilizing processes, and social imaginary significations. The third section outlines the methodological approach, a theoretical–interpretive strategy designed to construct, articulate, and demonstrate the heuristic value of this framework for understanding ongoing institutionalization processes in GDG. Combining critical discourse analysis with an intentionally constructed corpus, the study captures struggles for normative hegemony in the digital realm. This approach operationalizes the framework by enabling empirical analysis of how speech acts, when articulated through rival symbolic universes and imaginary significations, perform competing projects of sovereignty's symbolic form within the longue durée of civilizing processes. The fourth section applies this framework to show that GDG is not a regulatory vacuum but a constitutive battleground, where a profound crisis of sovereignty's symbolic form is unfolding. At least three antagonistic projects, libertarian-technoutopian universalism, cyber-sovereignism, and value-based regulationism, are vying to re-institute the organizing principles of digital political space, contesting not merely rules but the very ontology of the digital. Finally, the conclusion synthesizes the findings, reaffirms the paper's theoretical contribution, and outlines implications for future research on creativity and constituent power in global politics.

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AN INTEGRATED THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR PROCESSES OF INSTITUTIONALIZATION

The (Co)-constitutive Starting Point: Nicholas Onuf and Speech Acts as Rules

The starting point for our analysis is the constructivist theory of Nicholas Onuf (1989), which offers a precise analytical tool for understanding the *modus operandi* of institutionalization. Moving beyond the traditional confines of International Relations (IR) theory, Onuf developed a framework for understanding "a very large world of experience that I referred to as social relations," hoping to leave behind an "impoverished, auto-limiting apparatus" for thinking about world politics (Onuf, 2013 [2012], p. 196). His central proposition is that social reality is fundamentally constituted by rules, which are, in turn, instituted through the linguistic performance of speech acts. This approach provides the crucial micro-mechanism for how institutionalization operates discursively.

Drawing on Onuf's constitutive approach (Onuf, 1989) and speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1979; 1976; 1969), for the purposes of this work constitutive speech acts can be categorized into three types, each performing a distinct function in building social reality:

- Assertives: Acts that affirm how the world is and seek to establish truths (e.g., "Cyberspace is a fifth operational domain of warfare" (Küçüksolak, 2018)). These claims attempt to fix a shared understanding of reality, creating a foundational premise for further rules.
- Directives: Acts that seek to command or cause action (e.g., "Data must be localized within national borders" (Fratini; Musiani, 2024)). These are the quintessential acts of governance, aiming to institute specific, enforceable rules of conduct.
- Commissives: Acts that commit the speaker to a future course of action (e.g., "Our platform will implement end-to-end encryption by default for all users" (Siapera; Farries, 2025)). These acts create obligations and expectations, building trust and stability (or new forms of dependency) into digital social relations.

GDG emerges, therefore, as a field saturated with such speech acts, uttered by a multiplicity of states, corporations, and civil society actors in fierce competition. Onuf provides the basic grammar of social construction, revealing the elemental

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mechanism by which normative proposals are launched into the world. However, his framework prompts a crucial question: why do some of these speech acts resonate and become institutionalized, while others fail?

To answer this question and fully appreciate Onuf's contribution, one must understand his critical stance towards a key concept in mainstream constructivism: identity. Onuf regarded identity as "one of the most fashionable concepts (...) and one of the murkiest," (Onuf, 2013 [2003], p. 75) expressing reluctance to use it. He critiqued both post-modern scholars, for whom identity is an "unstable symptom of alienation," and mainstream constructivists, for whom it is an "objective condition" and an "unproblematic primitive term." For Onuf, this focus obscures a more fundamental social unit: the person as an agent.

He argues that identity is substantiated not through abstract affiliation but through agency, that is, the process of "acting for ourselves" or "as agents for others" (Onuf, 2013 [2003], p. 95). It is through speech acts and other deeds that we enact our roles and solidify our positions within a social order. "In the process of acting for ourselves," Onuf writes, "we substantiate our personal identities (...) When we act, as agents, for a group of others (which may include ourselves), we act for the others as if they, or we, are a single body, known to us all as such" (Onuf, 2013 [2003], p. 95). This perspective is invaluable for GDG, as it allows us to analyze how actors like "the tech community," "the international community," or "netizens" are not pre-existing entities but are performatively constituted through the very speech acts that claim to speak on their behalf. This moves the analysis away from static categories and towards the dynamic processes of claiming authority and representation.

Onuf's framework thus provides more than a typology: it offers a foundational theory of sociality based on rule-making and agency. Crucially, these rules, particularly instruction rules, function as symbolic devices that bring a normative "should/ought" to bear on models (understood as simplified representations of reality) (Onuf, personal communication, 2025). For instance, the assertive speech act "data is the new oil" carries ontological force, proposing a model of the digital economy. The directive speech act "data must flow freely across borders" functions as a normative instruction, seeking to enforce that model by guiding actors' behavior.

This refinement is essential for analyzing GDG. The field is a cacophony of competing models (e.g., the internet as a 'global commons,' a 'national domain,' or a 'marketplace') being advanced through billions of speech acts. The struggle for institutionalization is, therefore, a struggle to have one's preferred model naturalized through

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the successful enactment of instruction rules. This process is inherently bound up with status-ordering, as the power to successfully issue directive and commissive speech acts is a primary marker of authority within the global figuration. Thus, Onuf's grammar of speech acts provides the micro-logic that connects macro-sociological concepts of symbolism and figuration to the concrete processes of institutionalization. This enables us to see GDG not as a pre-formed arena with fixed actors, but as a contested process of world-making.

The Dimension of Legitimation: Berger and Luckmann's Symbolic Universes

The sociology of knowledge developed by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) becomes indispensable at this juncture, providing the crucial meso-level analysis of meaning and legitimation. While Onuf provides the grammatical structure of how rules are proposed, Berger and Luckmann explain why some rules are accepted as legitimate and others are not. They detail the process by which social constructs become objective reality through a threefold process: externalization (human activity produces institutions), objectivation (institutions attain a reality of their own, independent of their creators), and internalization (this objective social world is reabsorbed into subjective consciousness, becoming taken for granted). Legitimation is the overarching process that explains and justifies the institutional order, making it subjectively plausible to its participants.

The key concept for this analysis is that of the symbolic universe as a level of legitimation. Berger and Luckmann define these as comprehensive systems of meaning that provide an overarching framework for legitimizing the institutionalized social order. They are "bodies of theoretical tradition that integrate different provinces of meaning and encompass the institutional order in a symbolic totality" (Berger; Luckmann, 1966, p. 113). These universes function as the guardians of reality, cultural repertoires that answer ultimate questions and confer sense and purpose upon society's institutions, from the most mundane to the most sacred. They provide the bedrock of shared meaning that sustains the coherence of social order.

Hence, symbolic universes constitute the source of legitimacy that enables the uptake and institutionalization of the speech acts identified by Onuf. A speech act is never uttered in a vacuum; its power to persuade and institute rules is drawn from its alignment with a pre-existing symbolic universe. For instance:

A speech act invoking the symbolic universe of liberal individualism (Borgohain, 2019) (e.g., "Privacy is an individual human right") derives its persuasive power from a deep-seated cultural repertoire that prioritizes autonomy, the indi-

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vidual over the collective, and limited government intervention.

In stark contrast, a speech act invoking Westphalian sovereigntism (Meijen, 2024) (e.g., "The state is the guardian of its citizens' data") draws its legitimacy from a universe centered on the state as the primary, legitimate unit of political organization, ultimate authority, and provider of security.

Therefore, the contest over GDG is not merely a negotiation of material interests, but a confrontation between fundamentally distinct symbolic universes, enacted and reproduced through speech acts. Appeals to the "free flow of data" mobilize a liberal-cosmopolitan imaginary that frames information as a borderless public good and individuals as bearers of universal rights, resonating with traditions of liberal individualism and cosmopolitan global justice (Held, 1995; Beardsworth, 2011; Markus; Kitayama, 1991). By contrast, invocations of "cyber sovereignty" draw their legitimacy from a Westphalian-statist repertoire that posits the state as the primary locus of political authority, security provision, and legal jurisdiction (Weber, 1946 [1919]; Krasner, 1999; Fratini; Musiani, 2024). This opposition reflects the broader theoretical tension between cosmopolitanism, which emphasizes universal moral obligations beyond borders, and statist realism, which asserts the primacy of state sovereignty and *raison d'état* in international politics (Buzan *et al.*, 1998; Beck, 2004; Sleat, 2011). In this sense, the struggle over data governance norms can be read as a struggle over the very ontologies of world order that speech acts seek to perform and stabilize.

However, a crucial question remains: Berger and Luckmann's framework is adequate to deal with the maintenance and legitimation of an existing social order. How, then, do we explain the emergence of new rules and meanings that rupture and challenge established symbolic universes? Their theory, while powerful, leans towards explaining social stability. To account for radical change and the creation of novel significations in the digital realm, we must turn to a theorist who complements this focus on legitimation with a focus on radical creation: Cornelius Castoriadis.

Creative Sources and Historical Depth: Castoriadis and the Imaginary Institution

The theory of Cornelius Castoriadis (1975) provides a critical perspective on institutional change, adding a layer of creative and historical depth essential for understanding disruptive innovation in GDG. While Berger and Luckmann excel at explaining the legitimization of existing orders, Castoriadis offers tools to account for radical transformation and the emergence of the genuinely new.

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For Castoriadis (1975), society is not merely constructed or functionally organized. It is instituted. More precisely, it is an *imaginary* institution. Hence, society does not arise as the rational or necessary outcome of pre-given structures, interests, or functional imperatives; rather, it is created *ex nihilo* through the radical imaginary of the social collective. This instituting capacity produces new forms, meanings, and norms without determinate causal antecedent and manifests in what he calls social imaginary significations (*significations imaginaires sociales*), which are shaped and reproduced by institutions and their participants (Castoriadis, 1996). These foundational, non-rational, and non-functional significations provide coherence to society and orient its institutions, practices, and symbolic universes. Examples include "God," "Nation," "Progress," or "The Market," which function as ultimate reference points and sources of legitimacy. They are not mere reflections of material or functional necessities but the invisible bedrock that renders institutions meaningful and societies intelligible as cohesive wholes.

Castoriadis's assertion, following Merlau-Ponty (1964) in that every organization of language relies on the organization of the world, for it necessarily relies on the invisible of the visible (Castoriadis, 1978), further bridges language and reality. In the context of GDG, the visible refers to the material substratum of digital infrastructures: server farms, fiber-optic cables, lines of code, and data packets. These elements only acquire social meaning through the invisible network of social imaginary significations (Castoriadis, 1975; Adams, 2005). Whether data is understood as a "commodity" to be traded, a "national resource" to be controlled, or an "expression of human identity" to be protected depends not on its physical properties, but on the symbolic universes instituted by different collectivities. These universes are reproduced through discourse: every speech act draws on and re-enacts these deeper strata of meaning, naturalizing particular digital ontologies. Castoriadis thus illuminates how struggles over digital governance are not merely technical disputes, but conflicts between competing imaginary significations seeking to institute different worlds.

This perspective also reconfigures our understanding of Berger and Luckmann. Their symbolic universes can be understood as crystallized social imaginary significations: the 'lava' of the radical imaginary cooled into the 'rock' of apparently natural reality. While Berger and Luckmann show how these universes stabilize and legitimize existing orders, Castoriadis accounts for the eruption of new significations that disrupt them, providing the creative foundation for institutional innovation.

Within this dynamic, Onuf's speech acts serve as the vehicles through which new significa-

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tions are proposed, contested, and potentially instituted. A commissive act like "We will build the metaverse" is not simply a promise; it performs the work of bringing a new social imaginary signification into existence. Castoriadis explains the creative source of institutional change that Onuf's grammar describes and Berger and Luckmann's universes legitimize. He shifts the analysis from rule-making and justification to the more fundamental question of where the ideas for new worlds and rules originate.

Seen through this lens, the tension between liberal cosmopolitanism and statist realism in GDG is not merely a debate over norms or strategic interests, but a struggle between rival social imaginary significations. Liberal cosmopolitanism relies on imaginaries that valorize autonomous individuals, universal rights, and a borderless global public sphere, whereas statist realism invokes the sovereign state as the ultimate locus of authority, territorial control, and security provision. These rival imaginaries, thus, provide the deep ontological background from which symbolic universes are drawn and within which speech acts seek to institute new rules. Therefore, speech acts such as "free flow of data" or "cyber sovereignty" thus operate not only as regulatory claims but as performative enactments of these competing significations, each seeking to institute incompatible worlds under a "sociotechnical imaginary" that can be defined as "collectively imagined forms of social life and social order reflected in the design and fulfillment of nation-specific scientific and/or technological projects" (Jasanoff; Kim, 2009).

The Symbolic Form of Sovereignty: Jens Bartelson and the Denaturalization of Power

Jens Bartelson's work provides a crucial theoretical foundation for this framework by offering a sophisticated theorization of sovereignty's contingent and historically constructed nature. In Bartelson's Sovereignty as Symbolic Form (2014), Bartelson argues that sovereignty is not a primordial political fact or a fixed legal doctrine, but a deeply ingrained structure of meaning (a symbolic form) that makes certain institutions and actions conceivable while excluding other political possibilities. This perspective allows us to denaturalize key concepts in GDG, such as 'free flow of data' or 'digital sovereignty.' These are not neutral technical descriptors but competing political projects that seek to impose specific visions of order upon digital space.

Bartelson identifies a stalemate in contemporary debates: between essentialist views that treat sovereignty as a given attribute of states and post-linguistic turn approaches that see it as entirely contingent on discursive practices. To escape this sterile duality, he proposes a third way, in-

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spired by Ernst Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms (Cassirer, 1955). This approach shifts the central question from whether sovereignty has an immutable essence to how its symbolic representation is expressed and used to organize the political sphere. Bartelson's central argument is that sovereignty, as a symbolic form, has become an instrument of governability whose primary objective is to maintain international order, thereby legitimizing and reifying the international system itself (Bartelson, 2014).

This perspective is fundamental for analyzing GDG. The dispute between competing models, such as the cosmopolitan ("free flow of data") and the sovereigntist ("cyber-sovereignty"), is not merely a regulatory battle but a struggle to impose rival symbolic forms that seek to organize digital space. Bartelson shows that sovereignty is not a static principle but a form whose meaning and function are in constant transformation, adapting to new historical and technological contexts. In the digital age, this manifests as a tension between traditional territorial sovereignty and new forms of authority exercised by non-state actors (like global tech corporations), which challenge and reconfigure the very idea of sovereign power.

Hence, Bartelson provides the elegant theoretical link that connects the contributions of Castoriadis and Elias. Castoriadis provides the concept of social imaginary significations, the *ex nihilo* creation of deep meanings (like "Nation" or "Market") that found a society. Elias offers the analysis of the civilizing process, the long-term transformations in power figures and social psychology that lead to the formation of authority monopolies. Bartelson names and details the specific symbolic form, sovereignty, through which these imaginary significations are historically expressed and contested. In doing so, his work helps us understand how the conceptualization of the international, as we know it today, was made possible. Besides, as he argues in Becoming International (Bartelson, 2023), the international is a *sui generis* category, a distinct realm not reducible to its component parts, which emerged from changes in cosmological thinking that made the spatial differentiation of political communities appear natural.

This historical process is crucial for GDG. The idea of "collective memory," which Bartelson explored in Visions of World Community as a tool first used in service of emergent nations (Bartelson, 2009), now finds a new manifestation. In the digital realm, control over data flows and digital infrastructure becomes a new battleground for shaping a collective, planetary memory and identity. Thus, the crisis and transformation of sovereignty in digital space represent the contemporary manifestation of a broader historical process where new imaginary significations (like "the cloud" or "the metaverse") dispute hegemony with

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established forms. The current struggle over GDG is, therefore, a profound crisis of the symbolic form of sovereignty, occurring within the long-term dynamics of the civilizing process, characterized by the emergence of new powerful actors challenging the state's monopoly on authority.

However, Bartelson's later work also presents a critical provocation. He reframes the universal scope of the international order not as a future aspiration but as a present condition and a considerable political predicament, an "empire of states" that recognizes no spatial limits. This boundless quality, which he links to earlier imperial visions, is central to the predicament of GDG. The very aspiration to govern the global digital space replicates the imperial impulse of a system that appropriates the whole earth, now extending its claim to the virtual planet. This frames the cosmopolitan vs. sovereigntist debate in a new light: both models operate within and reinforce this boundless international frame. The challenge, then, is not merely to choose between them but to find ways of practicing world ordering that can transcend this imperial international system, perhaps by embracing the concept of the "planetary" that Bartelson introduces to reckon with ecological crises like climate change.

Therefore, Bartelson's contribution is triple: (1) it helps to denaturalize key GDG concepts, exposing their political and contested character; (2) it provides the conceptual link that integrates micro (speech acts), meso (symbolic universes), and macro (historical processes) analyses into a cohesive framework; and (3) it challenges us to see the GDG debate not just as a fight over rules, but as a symptom of a deeper crisis within an international order whose claim to boundless global scope is itself the fundamental problem we must confront. Taken together, these contributions position sovereignty as the pivotal symbolic hinge that connects the micro, meso, and macro dynamics of GDG.

The Structural Scenario of Dispute: Norbert Elias and the Civilizing Process

While the preceding sections have equipped us with the micro-mechanisms of rule-making (Onuf), the meso-structures of legitimation (Berger & Luckmann), and the creative source of new significations (Castoriadis), these dynamics unfold within a macro-historical context that must be explicitly theorized to avoid a presentist myopia. To fulfill this macro-analytical dimension and ground the contest over digital order in the *longue durée* of social transformation, we turn to the process sociology of Norbert Elias. His concept of the 'civilizing process' (Elias, 1994 [1939]) provides the indispensable historical scope to interpret the present dispute not as a novel rupture, but as the lat-

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est phase in a centuries-long reconfiguration of power, authority, and psychology.

For Elias, societies transform over extended timeframes through the formation of increasingly complex and extensive figurations, that is, interdependent webs of human relationships where power is always relational and dynamic (Elias, 1978; Dunning; Hughes, 2013). The central trajectory of the modern era in the West, as detailed in his foundational work, The Civilizing Process, was the gradual monopolization of the means of physical violence by central state authorities. This process was inextricably linked to the parallel monopolization of taxation and, crucially, the monopoly of the authority to rule: the legitimate right to make and enforce binding decisions (Elias, 1994 [1939]; Fletcher, 1997). This was not merely a political or economic shift but a profound sociogenetic and psychogenetic transformation. As external social constraints became more stable and pervasive, they were increasingly internalized into individual personality structures, forming a specific habitus: a second nature characterized by greater self-discipline, foresight, and the automatic control of impulses (Elias, 1939; 2001). This process, whereby social structures become ingrained in individual psychology, is vividly illustrated in Elias's empirical study of The Court Society (1983), which shows how the figuration of the French court functioned as a mechanism for cultivating a specific habitus of self-restraint and calculated conduct.

Hence, GDG represents a new, decisive front in this ongoing and unfinished civilizing process. The digital realm has become a primary arena for forming 21st-century global figurations, characterized by intense interdependence between states, multinational corporations, international organizations, and civil society. The current struggle, waged through speech acts that draw upon and seek to institute competing symbolic universes and imaginary significations, is fundamentally a battle for what might be termed the monopoly of legitimate authority to define the rules of this new digital social space (Sassen, 1998). This represents not a replacement of the state's traditional monopoly on physical violence but rather a dramatic expansion and transformation of the monopoly on rule-making authority into a nascent, contested, and multi-polar digital sphere where state power is both challenged and reconfigured.

Elias thus allows us to reinterpret seemingly mundane phenomena as core to this new civilizing phase. For example, the widespread, often uncritical, acceptance of a platform Terms of Service is not merely legal consent but indicative of the formation of a new digital habitus. It represents the internalization of controls exerted by new centers of authority (tech corporations), where users self-discipline their behavior accord-

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ing to algorithmic governance and corporate policies (Zuboff, 2019). Similarly, the fierce debate over data sovereignty is a direct manifestation of the monopoly mechanism transposed to the digital age: who has the legitimate right to control data flows: a sovereign state, a corporate entity, or the individual? This is the contemporary equivalent of the historical struggle over who had the right to levy taxes or raise armies.

Consequently, Elias provides more than mere historical or sociological context; he offers the conceptual framework to understand GDG as the latest stage in the inherently conflictual reorganization of global power figurations. Following Elias, the civilizing process should not be conceived as a linear march toward moral or political progress, but as an ongoing restructuring of constraints and interdependencies that simultaneously produces order and generates new tensions and conflicts. Linklater (2011) extends this insight to global politics by emphasizing the persistent potential for harm: in the digital domain, online hate speech, cyberattacks, and the uneven distribution of technical and normative authority exemplify the "decivilizing" possibilities embedded within each phase of integration and systemic complexity. Each advance in digital connectivity or institutional coordination, therefore, carries both stabilizing and destabilizing effects, revealing that the struggle to manage and contain violence: whether physical, structural, or symbolic. This point should be regarded as central to the shaping of contemporary global governance.

This macro-perspective synthesizes and comprehends this theoretical framework, revealing the distinct yet complementary role of each part. If speech acts are the strategic moves made within a game, and symbolic universes are the competing rulebooks that legitimize those moves, then social imaginary significations constitute the deep, often unconscious and unintended, agreement on what the game ultimately is and means, whether it is a market, a community, or a state. Elias, in turn, provides the game board itself and its historical rules of development: the evolving global figuration and the long-term civilizing process through which monopolies of authority are formed, challenged, and transformed. It is upon this board that the crisis of sovereignty, so incisively detailed by Bartelson, is played out, situating the symbolic form of sovereignty within a concrete historical sociology of power.

In this light, sovereignty emerges not as a static principle but as both a central weapon and the ultimate stake in the perpetual struggle to organize and control new figurations of human interdependence, a dynamic that is quintessentially expressed in the contest over GDG, where state and non-state actors wield claims to digital sovereignty as a tool to legitimize their authority

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and vie for the power to control the future of the digital realm itself.

In conclusion, this integrated theoretical framework reveals the institutionalization of the digital order as a multi-layered process, where each theoretical piece illuminates a distinct, yet interconnected, dimension. Nicholas Onuf provides the indispensable grammatical structure of world-making, detailing the micro-mechanisms, speech acts, through which rules are proposed and enacted. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann furnish the meso-level of legitimation, explaining how these rules derive persuasive power from pre-existing symbolic universes that make institutional orders feel objective and real. However, it is Cornelius Castoriadis who delves into the ontological depths of this process, identifying the creative source from which new rules and meanings emerge. From this perspective, speech acts are not merely constructive but are attempts to momentarily capture and stabilize the flux of the radical imaginary. They are the vehicle of institution, but not the explanation for their creative genesis.

This framework does not force a harmonious compatibility but rather leverages the productive tension between these theorists, particularly between Castoriadis and Norbert Elias. Elias's theory of the civilizing process provides the indispensable, yet non-deterministic, macro-historical scenario for the dispute. It answers the question: "Within which long-term historical-structural process does this contest occur?" By detailing the centuries-long formation of figurations, the monopolization of authority, and the psychogenesis of the habitus, Elias provides the structural "game board" and its historical rules of development, preventing a voluntaristic reading where anything is possible at any time. Castoriadis, in contrast, answers the fundamentally different question: "Where do the new significations that can radically reorient this very process come from?" His focus on the *ex nihilo* creation of social imaginary significations explains the points of rupture and the source of the new. Thus, Elias explains the grammar of long-term change (its morphogenesis) while Castoriadis explains its poetry: its ontological creation. This tension between the structuring process and the instituting creation is precisely what is observed in the struggle over GDG.

Consequently, GDG is best understood as a new phase within the Eliasian civilizing process, but one where the Castoriadian openness manifests with particular intensity. The struggle, waged through speech acts that draw legitimacy from symbolic universes and seek to institute new imaginary significations, unfolds on the evolving global figuration described by Elias. The widespread internalization of platform controls exemplifies the structuring Eliasian habitus. Simultaneously, the

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contestation of these controls, the demand for digital rights, and the emergence of significations like "the cloud" or "data sovereignty" are acts of institutional creation that spring from the social imaginary and aim to redirect the civilizing process itself. Jens Bartelson's work denaturalizes the central symbolic form (that is, sovereignty) at stake in this struggle, revealing it as both a weapon and a prize. Therefore, this framework avoids both naïve voluntarism and historical fatalism, ultimately explaining the openness within structuring that defines the contemporary battle to govern our digital world.

METHODOLOGY: A THEORETICAL-INTERPRETIVE APPROACH TO ANALYSING INSTITUTIONALIZATION IN GDG

This article adopts a theoretical-interpretive research strategy aimed at constructing, articulating, and demonstrating the heuristic utility of an integrated theoretical framework for understanding ongoing institutionalization processes in GDG. Because the object of study, the construction of meanings, authority, and the very social reality of cyberspace, is intrinsically discursive and constitutive, the study employs critical discourse analysis applied to a purposefully constructed corpus designed to capture struggles for normative hegemony in the digital realm. This approach operationalizes the theoretical framework by enabling the empirical interpretation of how speech acts, articulated through rival symbolic universes and imaginary significations, perform competing projects of sovereignty's symbolic form within the *longue durée* of civilizing processes.

The analysis proceeds through critical interpretive readings, organized into three interconnected analytical layers corresponding to the theoretical framework's levels. This layered approach captures institutionalization complexity from micro-linguistic performances to macro-historical structures:

1. Pragmatic analysis of speech acts (micro level): This initial layer involves identifying and categorizing performative utterances that constitute the dispute's discursive raw material through:
   - Assertives establishing truths and ontological definitions of digital reality (e.g., "Data is a strategic national resource");
   - Directives commanding action and instituting conduct rules (e.g., "Data must be localized within national borders");
   - Commissives establishing future commitments and behavioral expectations

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(e.g., "We pledge to uphold an open Internet");

2. Analysis of structures of signification (meso/creative level): This layer critically interprets speech acts to unravel deeper meaning structures that grant legitimacy and creative intent through:
   - Identifying symbolic universes providing plausibility and legitimizing force (e.g., liberal-cosmopolitan, Westphalian-sovereigntist, or libertarian-technoutopian frameworks);
   - Interpreting social imaginary significations that acts attempt to institute or stabilize (e.g., "data as commodity," "network as sovereign territory extension");
   - Decoding projects transforming sovereignty's symbolic form, assessing whether discourses reaffirm, adapt, or subvert Westphalian models in cyberspace;
3. Contextualization within the civilizing process (macro level): This final layer situates findings within societal transformations' longue durée, interpreting discursive disputes as episodes within broader historical processes through:
   - Examining how disputes reflect global power figuration reconfigurations among states, corporations, and activists competing for legitimate authority monopoly;
   - Analyzing how discourses and norms contribute to new global digital habitus formation by internalizing controls and expectations;
   - Understanding GDG conflicts as new phases of historical struggles for social life governance authority, now transposed to digital domains.

Acknowledging the interpretive and qualitative nature of this analysis, the generated insights are elucidative and theoretical rather than statistically generalizable. Methodological rigor is ensured through theoretical concept application fidelity and theoretical triangulation efforts. The ambition is not to empirically exhaust GDG's vast field but to generate analytical clarity and theoretical depth about the meaning, power, and imaginary layers constituting digital order disputes. This method captures the productive tension between institutional creation and processual structuration, offering a powerful lens for understanding the openness and conflict inherent in GDG's institutionalization.

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THE IMAGINARY INSTITUTION OF GLOBAL DIGITAL ORDER

The Constitutive Battleground: The Crisis of Sovereignty's Symbolic Form

As previously discussed, GDG does not constitute a regulatory vacuum but rather a constitutive battleground where a profound crisis of sovereignty's symbolic form is unfolding. This crisis is characterized by the emergence of at least three antagonistic projects of social imaginary signification that seek to re-institute the organizing principles of digital political space: libertarian-technoutopian universalism, cyber-sovereignism, and value-based regulationism. These projects dispute not merely rules, but the very ontology of the digital, that is, what it ultimately is and ought to be, waging this battle through a strategic profusion of performative speech acts that draw legitimacy from radically distinct symbolic universes. This process, situated within the long-term dynamics of the civilizing process, represents a fundamental struggle for the monopoly of legitimate authority in the 21st-century.

The Subversion of Sovereignty: Libertarian-Technoutopian Universalism

The first project, articulated primarily by U.S. policy actors, the transnational technical community, and major technology corporations (Big Techs), advances an imaginary signification that seeks to fundamentally displace the Westphalian symbolic form of sovereignty. This vision constructs cyberspace as a pre-political realm where technical efficiency and market logic should prevail over traditional territorial authority, thereby legitimizing governance by technocratic and commercial actors rather than by democratically accountable states (DeNardis, 2014; Mueller, 2002). This project's intellectual foundation draws significantly from science and technology studies (STS), particularly the recognition that technical architectures and standards constitute fundamental arrangements of power that shape social and political outcomes (DeNardis, 2014). Besides, Mueller's (2002) seminal history of the Internet's domain name system (DNS) offers a foundational case study of how control over critical technical resources became a central battleground for institutional authority.

One of the main proponents of this vision in John Perry Barlow, whose "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace" (1996) serves as a foundational speech act for this project. In Barlow's words:

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> 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. We have no elected government, nor are we likely to have one, so I address you with no greater authority than that with which liberty itself always speaks. I declare the global social space we are building to be naturally independent of the tyrannies you seek to impose on us. You have no moral right to rule us nor do you possess any methods of enforcement we have true reason to fear. (Barlow, 1996)

The declaration's constitutive power is enacted through a set of speech acts whose illocutionary force is world-making rather than merely descriptive. It employs assertives that posit the ontological reality of cyberspace: "I come from Cyberspace, the new home of Mind," "You have no sovereignty where we gather"; directives that seek to shape the behavior of states: "I ask you of the past to leave us alone," "You are not welcome among us"; and commissives that bind the speaker community to future norms and institutions: "We will create a civilization of the Mind in Cyberspace," "We will create our own Social Contract." Through these performative utterances, Barlow does not simply refer to an already existing domain but constitutes cyberspace as a distinct political community, simultaneously disavowing the jurisdictional claims of states and affirming the community's autonomous normative order.

These speech acts do not merely describe cyberspace but performatively enact what they declare, seeking to constitute it as a sovereign realm through the very act of proclamation. Their illocutionary force draws symbolic legitimacy from what Berger and Luckmann (1966) would identify as a "symbolic universe", that is, a worldview that endows social arrangements with overarching meaning and normative authority. In this case, the declaration fuses elements of the American frontier mythology of self-reliant pioneers, the radical individualism and anti-statism of libertarian thought (Rothbard, 1973; Nozick, 1974), and the cyber-utopian belief in the emancipatory potential of networked technologies (Barbrook; Cameron, 1996; Barbrook, 2002; Turner, 2006). This ideological constellation frames state authority as a relic of the past and positions cyberspace as a post-territorial space of unfettered individual freedom, self-regulation, and voluntary association. These values are, therefore, presented as inherently more legitimate than the hierarchical authority of sovereign states.

By grounding its authority in a symbolic universe rather than in territorial jurisdiction, Barlow's declaration de-territorializes the very basis of political authority, displacing the Westphalian model of sovereignty that locates legitimacy within

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territorially bounded statehood (Ruggie, 1993). It reconfigures authority claims as emanating from individual autonomy, voluntary association, and technical connectivity, rather than from the institutional apparatus of states (Hall; Biersteker, 2002). This rhetorical gesture constitutes an imaginary of post-sovereign order that would later underpin and legitimize efforts to institutionalize non-state and technocratic regimes of Internet governance, exemplified by entities such as ICANN (Mueller, 2002; DeNardis, 2014).

Central to this libertarian project is what might be termed the "infrastructural sovereignty" thesis, the argument that control over the Internet's technical architecture constitutes a novel form of governance that transcends traditional territorial and political boundaries (DeNardis, 2014; Musiani, 2013). As scholarship demonstrates, processes such as protocol standardization through the IETF and the allocation of critical technical resources, including domain names and IP addresses via ICANN, create concentrated points of control where policies are effectively enforced beyond the reach of national jurisdictions (DeNardis, 2014; Mueller, 2002). This technical governance regime appears to operate through neutral, apolitical decision-making about technical standards, yet these choices carry profound political, economic, and social consequences that often escape conventional democratic oversight (DeNardis, 2014). In this sense, infrastructural control constitutes a form of technocratic authority, enabling actors to exert power over global communications infrastructures while circumventing traditional state sovereignty.

Hence, the libertarian–cyber-utopian universalist project leverages this technical governance paradigm to advance a vision of Internet freedom aligned with market-based values and libertarian principles (Goldsmith; Wu, 2006). By framing governance as primarily a technical problem requiring specialized expertise, it depoliticizes fundamental questions of power, accountability, and public interest (DeNardis, 2014). The technical community's emphasis on the Internet's purportedly "unique" architecture serves to naturalize a specific governance model, privileging certain actors, norms, and economic interests while marginalizing others (Musiani, 2013). In doing so, the libertarian–cyber-utopian project consolidates an ideological and infrastructural basis for post-sovereign governance, linking symbolic, technical, and institutional dimensions into a coherent framework of authority beyond the state.

Building on these ideological and infrastructural foundations, adepts of this project defend that cyberspace should be treated as a transnational global frontier, a pre-political space governed primarily by technical expertise and market logic (Goldsmith; Wu, 2006). This claim draws legitimacy from the same symbolic universe high-

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lighted earlier, fusing a distinctively libertarian rhetoric, radical economic libertarianism, and a cosmopolitan faith in transnational infrastructures. By combining ideological and technical authority, this libertarian–technocratic vision naturalizes a borderless digital realm and portrays state intervention as an illegitimate disruption of the Internet's supposed inherent order. Together, canonical manifestos (like Barlow's Declaration), the culture of free-software and standards communities, and commercial narratives sustain and reproduce this post-sovereign imaginary, linking the symbolic, infrastructural, and institutional dimensions of authority in a coherent framework of global Internet governance.

That worldview is routinely enacted through strategic speech acts with regulatory force. International organizations and policy fora, for example, have urged member countries to "avoid the creation of unjustified barriers to the international exchange of data and information" (OECD, 2002, p. 54), an injunction that functions both as a normative rule and as a performative act framing state regulation as presumptively wrongful. This perspective is further reinforced by the U.S. Department of State's Declaration for the Future of the Internet, which emphasizes principles such as an open, free, global, interoperable, reliable, and secure Internet, highlighting the centrality of technical standards and international collaboration in shaping the digital landscape (US Department of State, 2022). Together, these discourses depoliticize governance questions by presenting them as matters of technical compatibility rather than distributive politics, while simultaneously legitimizing the authority of transnational technical actors and constraining the policy autonomy of nation-states (DeNardis, 2014). In this way, the very language of international policy both constitutes and enforces a normative order that privileges a libertarian–technocratic vision of the Internet.

Regarding the U.S. Department of State's Declaration for the Future of the Internet (2022), its speech acts exemplify how rules and norms are simultaneously constructed, legitimized, and situated within broader historical processes. At the micro-level, the Declaration's assertives, directives, commissives, and declaratives perform acts of digital world-making: they describe the digital ecosystem, invite partners to adopt shared principles, commit signatories to concrete actions, and instantiate normative obligations that shape behavior in cyberspace. At the meso-level, these acts derive persuasive force from a libertarian-technoutopian symbolic universe, combining ideals of market freedom, global connectivity, and participatory engagement. Yet, as Hans-Hermann Hoppe (2001) emphasizes, this vision often subordinates democratic principles to the pursuit of a

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libertarian social order, envisioning a society governed by voluntary association and private authority rather than majority rule. In this sense, the Declaration's normative force emerges not only from its advocacy of open connectivity but also from its alignment with an ideological project that challenges conventional understandings of state-centered democracy.

Hence, this symbolic universe renders the post-sovereign, multistakeholder model of Internet governance both plausible and morally compelling, stabilizing social imaginaries in which the Internet itself functions as a quasi-sovereign space, and data, infrastructure, and connectivity acquire normative and economic value. Here, the imaginary institution perspective illuminates the creative, *ex nihilo* dimension: these speech acts instantiate new social imaginaries, producing significations such as "data sovereignty" and the Internet as a global commons, which momentarily reorient the civilizing process by proposing alternative forms of authority and collective responsibility.

At the macro-level, the civilizing process situates these developments within the longue durée of global power reconfigurations. The Declaration reflects and reshapes the evolving figuration of states, corporations, and technical communities competing for legitimate authority over cyberspace. Its promotion of multistakeholder governance, normative obligations, and technical standards exemplifies the structuring of digital habitus, internalizing rules and expectations that regulate social and economic behavior. Simultaneously, the Declaration's creative significations, that is, its calls for cooperation, human-rights-centered norms, and global connectivity, reveal the Castoriadian openness within Eliasian structuring, moments in which actors contest, reinterpret, and potentially redirect the trajectory of GDG. In this sense, the Declaration functions not merely as a policy statement but as a performative instrument of institution-building, producing both legitimacy and imaginative space for ongoing normative and infrastructural contestation in the digital era.

Seen through an Eliasian lens, this project constitutes an offensive reconfiguration of authority monopolies, aiming to establish a new monopoly of legitimacy in the hands of a private, transnational technocracy and thereby displacing the nation-state's historical role as the ultimate legitimating authority. In line with Jens Bartelson's genealogy of sovereignty, the attempt is not merely to contest specific powers but to transform the symbolic form of sovereignty itself, by emptying territorial sovereignty of its political content and internalizing a global habitus that treats governance as a technical, apolitical problem to be solved by experts and markets (Bartelson, 2014). From a Foucauldian perspective, these processes illustrate how power operates through diffuse, institutional-

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ized practices and discourses, which shape subjects, knowledge, and norms without requiring overt coercion, making the multistakeholder and technical governance regime both self-reinforcing and normatively compelling (Foucault, 2008).

The Adaptive Reassertion of Sovereignty: Cyber Sovereignism

In direct response to the libertarian-technoutopian universalism discussed in the previous section, China, Russia, and other emerging states are actively reaffirming and adapting the symbolic form of sovereignty to the digital domain (Litvinenko, 2021). This movement represents a reactive and conservative phase within the civilizing process, aiming to preserve the state's monopoly on legitimate authority in the face of perceived erosion by transnational actors. Rather than seeking to subvert the symbolic form of sovereignty, these states endeavor to radically adapt it to ensure its survival under new historical conditions.

Central to this project is the imaginary signification that expresses cyberspace as a sovereign national domain and an existential matter of state security (Karpiuk, 2022). This perspective draws upon a symbolic universe rooted in Westphalian sovereignty, political realism, and cultural particularism. It emphasizes the state's authority over digital infrastructures and the protection of national identity in the digital realm, framing cyberspace not as a borderless technical frontier but as a strategic space intrinsically tied to national power (Fischerkeller *et al.*, 2022).

From a macro-level perspective, the enactment of cyber sovereignty laws in China and Russia can be interpreted as an adaptation of the state's monopoly on legitimate authority to the digital age (Litvinenko, 2021). The civilizing process involves both the internalization of norms and the gradual centralization of power, producing increasingly interdependent and regulated societies. In this context, cyber legislation represents a deliberate effort by states to maintain control over flows of information and communication that are essential for social cohesion and political stability (Chen *et al*., 2021).

Furthermore, the conception of sovereignty as a symbolic form provides a critical lens for understanding how cyber sovereignty laws transform the symbolic representation of state authority to align with contemporary geopolitical realities (Bartelson, 2014). Sovereignty, here, is not merely a legal framework but a symbolic construction that legitimizes the state's authority. Through cyber legislation, China and Russia reconfigure this symbolic form, asserting the state's primacy in cyberspace and reshaping the rules of engagement in GDG.

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Through performative speech acts and legislative measures, these states actively redefine the boundaries of state authority in cyberspace, challenging libertarial-technocratic narratives that claim to dominate international digital governance. The strategic affirmation of cyber sovereignty, through both normative assertions and enforceable legal frameworks, reveals the dynamic interplay between institutional adaptation and the creative potential of the social imaginary in shaping the digital era. In doing so, China and Russia are not merely defending existing prerogatives; they are engaging in a transformative rearticulation of sovereignty itself, positioning the state as the ultimate guarantor of order, security, and legitimacy in the digital domain.

Enacted on June 1, 2017, China's Cybersecurity Law (CCL) establishes a comprehensive legal and institutional framework that underscores the state's authority over cyberspace (Stanford, 2018). Article 1 explicitly declares the law's purpose: to "safeguard cyberspace sovereignty and national security." Notice that this is not a mere declarative statement; it constitutes a performative assertion that seeks to instantiate cyber sovereignty as an incontestable reality, transforming a political construct into an ontological fact, consistent with the understanding of speech acts as constitutive of social reality.

A closer reading of the law reveals multiple layers of performativity. Assertive speech acts are evident in passages that frame cyberspace as an arena under the exclusive authority of the state. For example, the law asserts that the state "advances the construction of network infrastructure and interconnectivity, encourages the innovation and application of network technology, supports the cultivation of qualified cybersecurity personnel, establishes a complete system to safeguard cybersecurity, and raises capacity to protect cybersecurity." Here, the state not only describes existing conditions but enacts the institutional and technical order that constitutes its authority over the digital realm. Similarly, the law's mandate that the state "takes measures for monitoring, preventing, and handling cybersecurity risks and threats arising both within and without the mainland territory" functions as a performative act that spatially extends sovereign control into both domestic and cross-border digital networks.

Directive speech acts, which materialize the abstract assertion of sovereignty, are particularly visible in provisions that impose concrete obligations on actors within cyberspace. Article 21, which establishes the Multi-Level Protection System (MLPS), requires network operators to adopt technical measures, such as virus protection, intrusion prevention, data classification, encryption, and log retention, to prevent interfer-

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ence, damage, or unauthorized access. These directives do not merely regulate; they instantiate the state's ontological claim over cyberspace, transforming the imaginary of "cyber sovereignty" into material practice. Similarly, Articles 43 and 44 regulate the collection, use, and protection of personal data, delegating responsibilities to network operators and codifying the boundaries of lawful digital conduct.

The law also contains commissive speech acts that signal the state's ongoing intentions to shape cyberspace and its global governance. Article 7, perhaps the most globally consequential provision, commits the state to "actively carry out international exchanges and cooperation in the areas of cyberspace governance, research and development of network technologies, formulation of standards, attacking cybercrime and illegality (...) and establishing a multilateral, democratic, and transparent Internet governance system." This statement performs the dual function of asserting China's sovereign authority while projecting its vision of global cyber governance, thereby situating China as both enforcer and architect of normative and institutional frameworks.

Finally, the CCL embeds moral and normative imperatives, producing social imaginary significations. Provisions such as those in Article 46 and the clauses regulating content and conduct articulate a vision of cyberspace aligned with state-defined social order, national unity, and "core socialist values." Through these rules, the law attempts to socialize both individuals and institutions into a cyber habitus where governance, security, and digital morality are inseparable from state sovereignty. From an Eliasian perspective, this constitutes a structuring of the digital civilizing process: norms and institutional routines internalize the state's monopoly over legitimate authority, while the imaginative work of Castoriadis is evident in the law's creative extension of sovereignty into digital space.

Taken as a whole, the CCL exemplifies cyber sovereignism as a performative, multi-level project. Assertive speech acts establish the ontological primacy of state sovereignty; directive acts materialize this authority through concrete technical and legal requirements; and commissive acts project the state's intentions into the future, shaping both domestic and international digital governance. In doing so, China enacts a transformation of sovereignty's symbolic form, aligning legal, technical, and normative structures to consolidate its authority within a rapidly globalizing digital landscape.

Russia's Federal Law No. 242-FZ (President of Russia, 2014) mandates that operators ensure the collection, recording, systematization, accumulation, storage, clarification, and extraction of personal data of Russian citizens exclusively through

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databases located within the Russian Federation. At its core, the law represents a strategic effort to reclaim sovereign authority over digital resources, asserting that control over data infrastructures is inseparable from state power in cyberspace. This is a paradigmatic instance of cyber sovereignism, enacting a declarative claim that national sovereignty extends into digital domains.

From a speech act perspective, the law is densely performative. Assertive acts are evident in the framing of the state's prerogative over personal data and cyberspace. By declaring that "the presence on the territory of the Russian Federation of databases (...) is required for processing personal data of citizens of the Russian Federation," the law does not merely describe an administrative requirement: it performs the act of instituting territorialized cyber sovereignty as an ontological fact. This speech act declares a rule into existence and situates digital activity within the contours of Russian sovereign authority. Likewise, the law's repeated references to the federal executive body exercising control over media, communications, and information technology reinforce the state's performative authority, positioning these bodies as active agents of institutionalization rather than passive regulators.

Directive speech acts are pervasive throughout the law, particularly in the operationalization of data localization and access restriction mechanisms. The automated "Register of Violators," the procedures for identifying unlawful processing, the obligations of hosting providers, and the processes for restricting access to noncompliant information, function as materializing acts: they translate abstract principles of cyber sovereignty into enforceable routines. For example, the requirement that network operators implement data-protection measures under the Multi-Level Protection System (MLPS) operationalizes the state's ontological claim, embedding sovereignty into technical and administrative practices.

Commissive and regulative acts are also visible, projecting state intent into both domestic and international digital arenas. The law's detailed provisions for monitoring, risk assessment, and judicially validated restrictions exemplify a commitment to actively shape cyberspace in accordance with Russian legal norms. These acts collectively instantiate a social imaginary: cyberspace is a controlled extension of national territory, where law, technical infrastructure, and social practice converge to stabilize the significance of sovereignty in digital form. In particular, the law signals an international dimension by emphasizing oversight, cooperation, and compliance, thus positioning Russia not only as a domestic regulator but also as a strategic actor asserting its model of Internet governance globally.

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Hence, the law represents a conservative, adaptive reassertion of state authority within the long-term civilizing process. It does not seek to subvert sovereignty's symbolic form, as in the libertarian-technoutopian project, but to consolidate the monopolization of legitimate authority against perceived transnational and technical encroachments. The law structures a digital habitus in which actors internalize the boundaries, rules, and obligations established by the state. At the same time, its elaborate mechanisms for compliance and enforcement create a performative rhythm through which sovereignty is reproduced continuously, reinforcing the state's monopoly over legitimate power in cyberspace.

Finally, the law exemplifies the transformation of symbolic form: it territorializes digital flows and codifies state prerogatives as naturalized, technical, and juridical imperatives. Cyber sovereignty is thereby instantiated not only in declaratory statements but in actionable rules, technical architectures, and enforcement routines. In combination, the assertive, directive, and commissive speech acts embedded throughout the law enact a performative reality in which Russia's digital space is fully integrated into its sovereign domain, demonstrating the interplay of creative social imaginaries and structured institutional authority.

Therefore, the enactment of cyber sovereignty laws in both Russia and China represents a distinctive phase in the civilizing process, wherein states adapt their monopolization of legitimate authority to the challenges of the digital age. These legislative measures are not merely regulatory instruments; they constitute strategic interventions designed to counter the perceived erosion of state authority by transnational actors, technical communities, and market-driven platforms. In this context, the laws function as mechanisms for consolidating the state's monopoly over legitimate authority, embedding the control of digital infrastructures, data flows, and network governance into the broader structuring of social and political power. Jens Bartelson's conceptualization of sovereignty as a symbolic form illuminates how these laws perform a transformative operation: they reconfigure the symbolic representation of sovereignty itself, translating traditional territorial authority into digitally mediated forms that correspond to contemporary geopolitical and technological realities.

The adaptive reassertion of sovereignty through cyber sovereignism thus exemplifies a critical juncture in the civilizing process. By deploying performative speech acts alongside comprehensive legislative measures, China and Russia actively reshape the symbolic form of sovereignty, extending its reach into cyberspace and as-

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serting normative and material control over digital domains. These acts do not merely codify power; they instantiate it, embedding the state's authority into technical, legal, and social infrastructures. In doing so, cyber sovereignism directly challenges libertarian-technocratic narratives of GDG, which privilege transnational, market-based, and ostensibly apolitical models of internet management. This ongoing struggle reveals the interplay between institutional adaptation and the creative potential of the social imaginary: while states seek to stabilize and legitimize their authority, the enactment of cyber sovereignty simultaneously opens spaces for contestation, reinterpretation, and the negotiation of new meanings within the global digital order. It is precisely in this tension that the contemporary governance of cyberspace should be understood.

The Hybridization of Sovereignty: Value-Based Regulationism

The European Union's value-based regulatory project achieves its performative force through specific legislative instruments, such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (Regulation (EU), 2016). The provisions of Article 5 (1) can be interpreted as a series of powerful assertive speech acts that collectively construct the EU as a normative authority in cyberspace. By declaring that personal data shall be: (a) processed lawfully, fairly, and in a transparent manner; (b) collected for specified, explicit and legitimate purposes ('purpose limitation'); (c) adequate, relevant and limited to what is necessary ('data minimisation'); (f) processed with appropriate security ('integrity and confidentiality'). Hence, the regulation does not merely suggest good practices; it authoritatively establishes a new normative reality. It declares what proper data processing is, thereby producing a shared understanding of digital ethics that actors across the globe are expected to internalize. Furthermore, Article 5(2) (the 'accountability' principle) functions as a crucial directive speech act, placing a positive obligation on data controllers to demonstrably comply with these constructed norms. By doing so, the EU performs the act of stabilizing a comprehensive normative framework, making compliance an expected part of the global digital habitus.

Articles 12 through 22 of the GDPR, which enshrine the rights of data subjects, function primarily as directive speech acts that impose precise, actionable obligations on data controllers worldwide. This is achieved through the repeated use of the imperative "shall," which commands compliance with the EU's vision of data protection. For instance, Article 15 (Right of access) dictates that "The controller shall provide a copy of the personal data undergoing processing", while

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Article 17 (Right to erasure) obligates that "the controller shall have the obligation to erase personal data without undue delay" under specific conditions. Article 20 (Right to data portability) further commands that "the data subject shall have the right to receive the personal data (...) in a structured, commonly used and machine-readable format" and to transmit it to another controller. These are not suggestions but legally-binding directives.

However, the regulation as a whole can be interpreted as a macro-level commissive speech act by the EU: it is a foundational commitment to its citizens and to the world to uphold and enforce this specific set of rights, thereby establishing a new global standard. Collectively, these acts performatively articulate the EU's normative priorities: transparency, individual autonomy, and control over one's digital identity, and cement its identity as a global guarantor of privacy. They invite (and compel) compliance by creating a new structure of expectations and responsibilities for state and non-state actors alike, effectively shaping a global digital habitus where these principles become fully ingrained. The performative dimension is particularly evident in the GDPR's preamble, which frames the protection of personal data as a fundamental right. By codifying these powerful, granular rights, the EU does not merely regulate; it institutionalizes its authority in the moral and legal sphere of GDG.

The GDPR's extraterritorial reach, codified in Article 3(2) as a powerful directive speech act, explicitly commands that "This Regulation applies to the processing of personal data of data subjects who are in the Union by a controller or processor not established in the Union." This utterance performs a radical extension of authority by conditioning the regulation's application not on a company's location, but on the location of the data subject and the nature of the activity (offering goods/services or monitoring behaviour). To operationalize this global claim, Article 27(1) issues a further directive, mandating that such non-EU controllers "shall designate in writing a representative in the Union," creating a tangible point of enforcement within its jurisdiction.

This is the Brussels Effect in action: through these directives, the EU projects its authority transnationally, compelling foreign companies to internalize and adhere to EU standards. This process represents a hybridization of authority where normative legitimacy and market power are mutually reinforcing (Bradford, 2012). The EU, through this legal architecture, fundamentally transforms the symbolic form of sovereignty. It remains territorial in its enforcement anchor (via Article 27's designated representative and the power of EU supervisory authorities), yet is profoundly deterri-

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torialized in its scope of application, as compliance obligations extend worldwide, actively reshaping corporate behaviour and establishing new global standards.

Articles 25 and 32 of the GDPR exemplify the EU's performative construction of regulatory authority and its hybridization of sovereignty. Article 25 mandates "data protection by design and by default," requiring controllers to implement appropriate technical and organizational measures "both at the time of the determination of the means for processing and at the time of the processing itself" to minimize data collection and integrate necessary safeguards (Article 25(1–2)). These obligations constitute directive speech acts, compelling organizations to embed privacy protections into system architectures and operational routines. By specifying that personal data must "by default (...) not be made accessible without the individual's intervention to an indefinite number of natural persons" (Article 25(2)), the regulation translates normative principles into tangible operational behavior. Thus, the GDPR does not merely assert the EU's normative authority: it performs it, creating a set of obligations that organizational actors must enact, thereby internalizing the EU's conception of privacy and data protection as legitimate and obligatory.

Article 32 further operationalizes this performativity by requiring controllers and processors to implement technical and organizational measures "to ensure a level of security appropriate to the risk," which includes "pseudonymisation and encryption of personal data, the ability to ensure ongoing confidentiality, integrity, availability and resilience of processing systems, and processes for regularly testing and evaluating security measures" (Article 32(1)(a–d)). These provisions function as materializing directive acts, shaping the organizational environment and compelling actors to align with the EU's regulatory vision. The risk-based framing allows flexibility, but within a clearly defined normative boundary, embedding the EU's values into everyday digital practices. Compliance itself becomes a performative act, translating abstract legal and ethical principles into operational realities that reflect EU-defined standards of digital sovereignty.

Combined, Articles 25 and 32 further demonstrate the Brussels Effect: through these obligations, the EU projects its authority beyond its borders, compelling non-EU companies to internalize EU standards to maintain access to the European market (Bradford, 2012). The GDPR's operationalization of privacy and security norms transforms sovereignty into a hybrid form, simultaneously anchored territorially, via enforcement powers of EU supervisory authorities and mechanisms like the designated representative under Article 27, and deterritorially, as obligations extend trans-

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nationally to all actors processing data of EU residents. In this sense, the legislation constitutes a continuous performative speech act: it asserts, materializes, and reproduces the EU's authority while reshaping corporate behaviors, demonstrating how regulatory norms can instantiate global power in the digital realm.

Finally, the enforcement mechanisms established in Articles 83 and 84 exemplify a sophisticated combination of assertive and directive speech acts within the GDPR framework. Article 83 specifies that administrative fines shall be imposed "depending on the circumstances of each individual case (...) taking into account the nature, gravity and duration of the infringement" (Article 83(2)(a)) and that such fines must be "effective, proportionate and dissuasive" (Article 83(1)). By enumerating factors such as the intentional or negligent character of the infringement, prior compliance efforts, and the degree of responsibility of controllers or processors (Article 83(2)(b–d)), the legislation performs an assertive function, declaring the legal facts of accountability and establishing what counts as lawful and unlawful conduct under EU law. Simultaneously, by setting out explicit consequences for non-compliance, including fines of up to 4% of a company's global annual turnover (Article 83(5)), these provisions operate as directive speech acts, compelling both public and private actors to align their practices with GDPR requirements. Compliance thus becomes performative: to follow the law is to enact the EU's normative authority.

Article 84 extends this logic by requiring Member States to establish additional penalties for infringements not subject to administrative fines, specifying that these penalties must also be "effective, proportionate and dissuasive" (Article 84(1)). Together, Articles 83 and 84 produce a self-reinforcing regulatory environment in which normative legitimacy and material enforcement mutually reinforce each other. Like a civilizing process, these provisions contribute to the internalization of regulatory norms and the structuring of social habitus, embedding GDPR standards within organizational routines and shaping actors' behavior in ways that extend beyond formal legal compliance. By clearly defining both legal accountability and the behavioral obligations of controllers and processors, the GDPR's enforcement mechanisms transform compliance into a performative act that simultaneously asserts, materializes, and reproduces the EU's authority in the digital domain.

Through this constellation of speech acts, the GDPR operationalizes the EU's hybrid conception of sovereignty: it affirms the Union as a legitimate regulatory actor while projecting value-based norms beyond its territorial borders. By intertwining identity-asserting commissive acts, directive obligations, and extraterritorial application,

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the EU's regulatory framework simultaneously shapes organizational behavior, reinforces compliance practices, and establishes normative expectations that transcend national boundaries, thereby contributing to the constitution of a global moral community. As Reus-Smit (2001) emphasizes, different systems of sovereign states have historically developed distinct fundamental institutions to govern relations among their constituent units; in this sense, the GDPR exemplifies how the EU articulates the creation of a novel institutional mechanism that extends regulatory authority and moral order across borders.

Besides, Articles 25 and 32, which mandate "data protection by design and by default" and require technical and organizational security measures, exemplify how these speech acts are materially instantiated, embedding the EU's normative standards within everyday operational routines and making compliance a performative act in itself. Similarly, Articles 83 and 84 operationalize accountability by specifying the consequences of non-compliance, combining assertive declarations of legal fact with directive enforcement measures, thereby producing a self-reinforcing regulatory environment.

This performative and imaginative work illustrates the creative potential of the social imaginary in constructing a transnational governance order that is simultaneously normative, enforceable, and enduring. By embedding legal structures, moral principles, and market dynamics into its regulatory architecture, the EU demonstrates how authority can be simultaneously rooted in institutional practice and global normative influence, redefining the symbolic form of sovereignty for the digital age.

Conflictual Synthesis: Institutionalization as a Dispute over Meaning and Authority

GDG emerges as a deeply contested and constitutive arena in which competing social imaginaries struggle to define authority, legitimacy, and even the very ontology of the digital. Far from converging toward a consensual order, these imaginaries articulate rival visions of how sovereignty should be exercised, how norms should be constituted, and who holds legitimate power in the digital realm.

The libertarian-technoutopian universalist project, championed by U.S. actors, Big Tech, and the transnational technical community, constructs cyberspace as a pre-political, self-regulating domain, displacing territorial sovereignty through performative speech acts that assert normative and infrastructural authority. These acts instantiate a technocratic order in which technical expertise, market logic, and individual autonomy form the basis of legitimacy, producing a digital space

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governed by voluntary associations and global connectivity rather than by traditional nation-states.

In response, cyber sovereignist projects, exemplified mainly by China and Russia, adapt and reaffirm the symbolic form of sovereignty in the digital sphere. Through assertive, directive, and commissive acts embedded in national legislation, these states territorialize digital flows, operationalize authority over infrastructure and data, and shape organizational and social routines to consolidate their monopoly of legitimate power. These acts preserve the Westphalian vision of sovereignty while creatively extending it to meet the challenges of the digital age, illustrating how symbolic authority is both defended and transformed.

Finally, the EU's value-based regulatory approach, embodied in the GDPR, enacts a hybrid form of sovereignty that bridges these poles. Through assertive declarations, directive obligations, and commissive commitments, the GDPR establish global norms of privacy and security, operationalize compliance, and project EU authority extraterritorially. Here, compliance itself becomes performative, embedding the EU's moral and legal principles into organizational practices worldwide.

Across these three projects, the institutionalization of GDG is not harmonious but tensioned: each imaginary seeks legitimacy, imposes normative frameworks, and transforms sovereignty in distinctive ways. The arising global digital order is hybrid and dynamic, reflecting the ongoing negotiation of authority, the interplay of normative and material power, and the creative potential of social imaginaries in shaping the 21st-century digital world.

CONCLUSION: THE DIGITAL ORDER AS AN ONGOING CIVILIZING PROCESS

This analysis has demonstrated that GDG is not a neutral, technical-regulatory field, but the central stage on which a contemporary civilizing process unfolds: in other words, a deeply constitutive struggle over the organizing principles that will govern the twenty-first century. By developing an integrated analytical lens, the study was able to decipher this process as a dynamic interaction between several interrelated layers.

At the micro level, speech acts emerge as the primary instruments of this struggle. Assertive, directive, and commissive utterances by states, corporations, and technical actors do not merely describe reality; they seek to perform and bring into being competing digital orders, attempting to institute rules and norms through the power of language itself. At the meso level, these utterances derive their legitimating force from deeply entrenched and antagonistic symbolic universes, ranging from liberal individualism to Westphalian sovereignism and human-rights constitutionalism.

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This level, therefore, provides the background understandings from which claims to authority can be made and recognized.

At the creative level, the conflict reveals itself as a struggle over social imaginary significations. Rival projects seek to impose radical visions of what the digital fundamentally is and ought to be, whether as a borderless frontier, a national domain, or a rule-bound constitutional space, thereby generating new realities *ex nihilo*. At the structural level, this clash constitutes a crisis and transformation of the symbolic form of sovereignty itself. The competing projects do not simply bypass sovereignty; they aim to subvert, reaffirm, or hybridize it, turning GDG into a laboratory for the reconfiguration of the central organizing principle of modern politics. Finally, at the macro level, this entire interaction unfolds within the long-term dynamics of the civilizing process: the historical struggle over the formation and monopolization of legitimate authority. What was once the internalization of self-restraint through court etiquette or state bureaucracy now takes place through terms of service and technical standards, as the global figuration of power witnesses the rise of new contenders (global technology corporations), challenging the traditional monopoly of the state.

Ultimately, this analysis reveals that the contest over GDG is politics at its most elemental: a struggle over the very creation of a common world: imagined by some as the foundation of a global moral community, by others as the imposition of a singular worldview, and by yet others as the assertion of particular state interests. The emerging digital order will not unfold according to an inexorable technological logic; it will be shaped by the ever-contested and always provisional outcome of clashes among rival political projects, enacted through language and anchored in irreconcilable universes of meaning. The future of cyberspace, therefore, will not be scripted in code, but forged in the arena of signification and power that this article has sought to bring into view.

The contribution of this study is explicitly metatheoretical. It advances a reconceptualization of institutionalization not as a functional response to pre-given problems, but as the ongoing making and unmaking of worlds within digital governance. In doing so, it brings Nicholas Onuf's insights on institutional design into dialogue with Cornelius Castoriadis's notion of the radical creation of social meaning ex nihilo. Onuf (2002) reminds us that institutions are not natural givens but human constructions: they emerge from rules that assign roles, from commitment-rules akin to reciprocal promises, and from deliberate acts of design that seek to impose order on a contingent world. He contrasts this intentional dimension with more spontaneous institutional developments, arguing that any adequate theory of insti-

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tutions must account for their designed purposes and their role in constituting international society. Castoriadis, by contrast, emphasizes that social institutions arise from the creative imaginary, instituting new significations where none existed before. Bringing these perspectives together allows us to view institutionalization in GDG not as predetermined or purely functional, but as a profoundly creative and political process: one in which actors struggle to design, impose, and legitimize the very principles through which order is imagined, enacted, and recognized as valid.

This has important implications for both theory and practice. Theoretically, it challenges functionalist and rational-institutionalist approaches that continue to dominate debates on global governance, showing instead that institutionalization is best understood as a performative, symbolic, and imaginative struggle. Practically, it suggests that international actors and policymakers must recognize the deep normative and ontological conflicts embedded in GDG. Governance initiatives that ignore these symbolic struggles risk reinforcing instability, while approaches that engage explicitly with competing imaginaries may foster more sustainable institutional settlements.

Future research could build on this framework in several directions. First, by empirically tracing how specific speech acts travel across governance arenas, future studies could illuminate how certain imaginaries gain traction while others fade. Second, comparative research could examine whether similar dynamics of symbolic contestation and creative institutionalization are emerging in other domains of global governance, such as climate governance, AI regulation, or biotechnology. Finally, more work is needed on how non-state actors, especially transnational corporations and technical communities, contribute to reshaping the symbolic form of sovereignty, as their growing authority may signal a shift towards post-Westphalian power figurations.

By foregrounding the interplay of speech acts, symbolic universes, and civilizing processes, this article has sought to open a space for rethinking institutionalization as a deeply political and creative practice. In doing so, it aims to contribute to a broader reorientation of International Relations theory, away from deterministic accounts of institutional design and towards a richer understanding of how, through language and imagination, actors seek not merely to regulate the digital world, but to create it.

In the end, what is at stake in GDG is not simply the regulation of technological infrastructures but the very constitution of the political itself. The struggles unfolding in this domain are not peripheral disputes over technical norms; they are acts of world-making that seek to define what counts as legitimate authority, community, and

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order in the twenty-first century. By revealing institutionalization as a performative and creative struggle rather than a functional or evolutionary process, this article has aimed to shift how we see the digital: not as a neutral terrain awaiting governance, but as a contested space where multiple futures are being imagined, claimed, and fought over. If the future of the digital is not written in code but forged in meaning, then understanding (and engaging with) the symbolic battles that shape it becomes not just an academic task, but a profoundly political responsibility.

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