


# Public Spaces in our Data-driven Society: The Myths of Digital Universalism

Abstract proposal for the theme “Data, democracy and sovereignty: towards new urban and political imaginaries”

## Other Conference Item

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**Abstract proposal for the theme “Data, democracy and sovereignty: towards new urban and political imaginaries”****Public Spaces in our Data-driven Society: The Myths of Digital Universalism**

This paper examines the impact of the virtual public sphere on how public spaces are experienced and conceived in our data-driven society. It takes as its point of departure six principles: all data are local; data have complex attachments to place; data are collected from heterogeneous sources; data and algorithms are inextricably entangled; interfaces recontextualize data; and data are indexes to local knowledge. Paying particular attention to Yanni Loukissas's analysis in *All Data Are Local: Thinking Critically in a Data-Driven Society* and Anita Say Chan's approach in *Networking Peripheries Technological Futures and the Myth of Digital Universalism*, it aims to reveal the myths upon which the idea of so-called “digital universalism” is based.

A first case that is closely examined in the paper is that of Zillow, an online real estate marketplace that seeks to make available information about “all the homes” in the United States. The paper begins with Loukissas's remark that “Zillow [...] cultivates a perception of their map as a virtual public space”, and sheds lights on the processes of merging of the physical and digital layer of public space in the case of Zillow. The main argument of the paper is that all data have complex attachments to place. Two characteristics of Zillow that are explored are the facts that “everyone has access [to the data], but no one is equal”, and that while the space of data on Zillow is public, the journey through that space is private. The navigation in this online real estate marketplace is guided by individualized interests as opposed to the public good.

A second case that is explored is that of “digital twins”, which refers to digital representations enabling comprehensive data exchange and can contain models, simulations and algorithms describing their counterpart and its features and behaviour in the real world. The term “digital twin” was first coined in the early 2000s by Michael Grieves and refers to digital simulation models that run alongside real-time processes. “Digital twins” are conceptualised as digital replicas of physical entities. Despite their aspirations to enhance the participation of citizens in the decision-making processes and to incorporate their input to urban planning strategies, the fact that digital twins are based on a limited set of variables and processes makes them problematic. Because of the way they abstract sets of variables and processes, they cannot take into consideration the social aspects of urban contexts. Manuel Castells' approach is useful for deciphering the tension between the real and the ideal at stake during this process of abstracting sets of variables and processes in the case of “digital twins”. Castells argues that the societal system corresponding to the digital era is based on two key features: informationalism and globalism. He also claims that societal processes cannot be understood or represented without the underlying technology. My objective is to present to what extent the above-mentioned cases fail to provide an understanding and experience of public space from a democratic perspective.