LECTURE SERIES PUBLIC THEOLOGY

An International and Intercontextual Assessment

Berlin Institute for Public Theology

Beyers Naudé SENTRUM·CENTRE

THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION

A Communion of Churches

Digital Politics of Space

Or: how digitalization codes public spaces

Dr. Frederike van Oorschot (FEST Heidelberg)

1. Digital spaces

Introduction

1. Digital spaces

- digital media create new spaces
  - structured by digital technologies
  - constituted by interaction and communication
  - e.g. social networks, search engines, databases or other digitally coded and online-based tools

- Analog and digital spaces partly separate and partly interfering with each other („analog-digital hybrid spaces")
  - By technical means
  - In a cultural sense: "hybridization and consolidation of the digital" (Felix Stalder)

Outline

1. Digital spaces

2. Digital public spaces
   a. Technical governance: algorithms
   b. Economic governance: attention and power
   c. Social governance: participation, identity and content

3. Public theology in digital spaces

4. Theological Politics of space?

2. Digital public spaces

Agents, structures and borders governing digital spaces

2. Digital public spaces

a. <u>Technical governance: algorithms</u>

- gatekeepers of digital publics create "corridors of attention"

- continuing pluralization and segmentation of publics
  - personalization break up social relationships and enables new encounters
  - "enclosures", limiting what one can see und and as the digital world

- personal and fluid „publics"
  - always new and changing communication networks

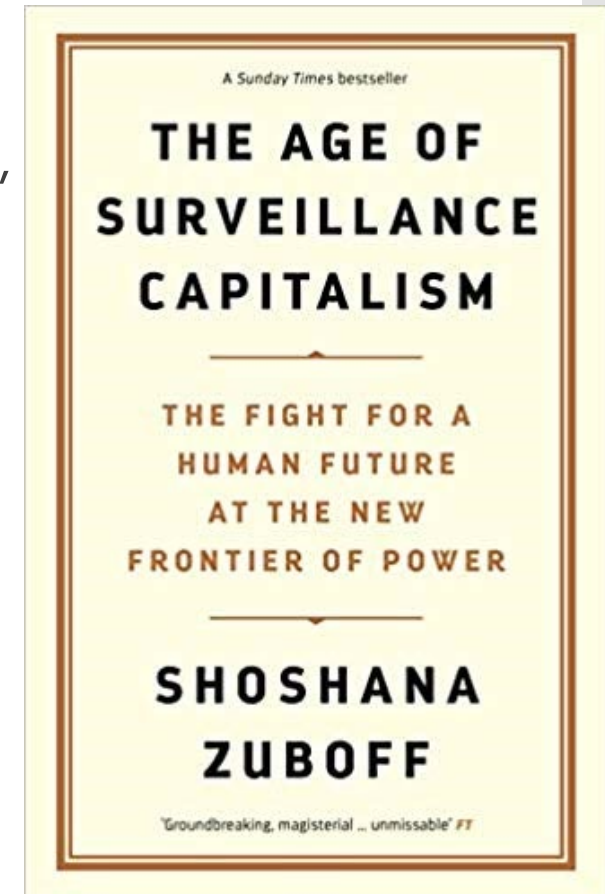# 2. Digital public spaces

a. <u>Technical governance: algorithms</u>

"[…] the 'world' the algorithm presents […] is not a representation of real settings, but rather a (individualized, usage data-responsive) construction based on specific parameters (whose nature and interaction are generally withdrawn from users)." (K. Merle)

2. Digital public spaces

b. **economic governance: attention and power**

- hierarchical order between back-end and front-end (Ramón Reichert)

- power structures differ depending on the "spaces"
  - e.g. social networks or search engines (Shoshana Zuboff)
    - capitalization of user attention
    - data to discern user profiles and micro-milieus

A Sunday Times bestseller

THE AGE OF SURVEILLANCE CAPITALISM

THE FIGHT FOR A HUMAN FUTURE AT THE NEW FRONTIER OF POWER

SHOSHANA ZUBOFF

'Groundbreaking, magisterial ... unmissable' *FT*

2. Digital public spaces

b. <u>economic governance: attention and power</u>

- non-profit or payed platforms, e.g. science platforms
  - scientific communities became more permeable
    - "Platforms and networks fulfill more and more functions, which previously belonged to institutions, certificates and authorship." (B. Friedrich/ H. Reichel/T. Renkert)

- importance of epistemic communities

2. Digital public spaces

c. <u>Social governance: participation, identity and content</u>

- participation and interaction

- "produser" (A. Bruns)

- public communication is changing "from a socially selective, linear and one-sided to a participatory, network-like and interactive communication" (C. Neuberger)

2. Digital public spaces

c. <u>Social governance: participation, identity and content</u>

- connection between content and identity
  - "I am what I like"
  - interactions influenced by private content and part of a public debate

Public "is not a pre-existing entity but rather a product of social circulation through various forms of media". (K. Merle)

3. Public theology in digital spaces

3. Public theology in digital spaces

I. Digital spaces create plural and fluid publics. They thus expand the concept of "publicness" – and at the same time lead it ad absurdum.

- Are these fluid personal spaces of interactions "publics"?
- What dos "public" theology mean –
  - if the "publics" are formed as a communication network
  - which is constantly being created and changed in the course of the digital interaction?

3. Public theology in digital spaces

II. Theology and the publics are not opposed to one another; on the contrary, public theologies are constituted in and by publics.

Public theology is therefore to be reformulated as a mode of discourse.

- demarcation of theology and its publics is unsustainable
- public theology exists not independent from or outside its publics
- „publicly" – adverb of a cooperative and participatory discourse

3. Public theology in digital spaces

III. Theological discourse in the digital space is witnessing in nature, closely relating content and identity for theological reasons.

- content cannot be separated from the identity of the proclaimed

- witness is always a contested witness

- Public theology is "for theological reasons, kenotic, self-restraining, and self-critical". (R. von Sinner)

3. Public theology in digital spaces

IV. Insofar as the Christian witness is constituted collectively, public theology can be understood as a collaborative practice.

- participatory and interactive structure of digital spaces
- witness is always part of the communion of Christian witnesses
- subject are all Christians in decentralized networks

3. Public theology in digital spaces
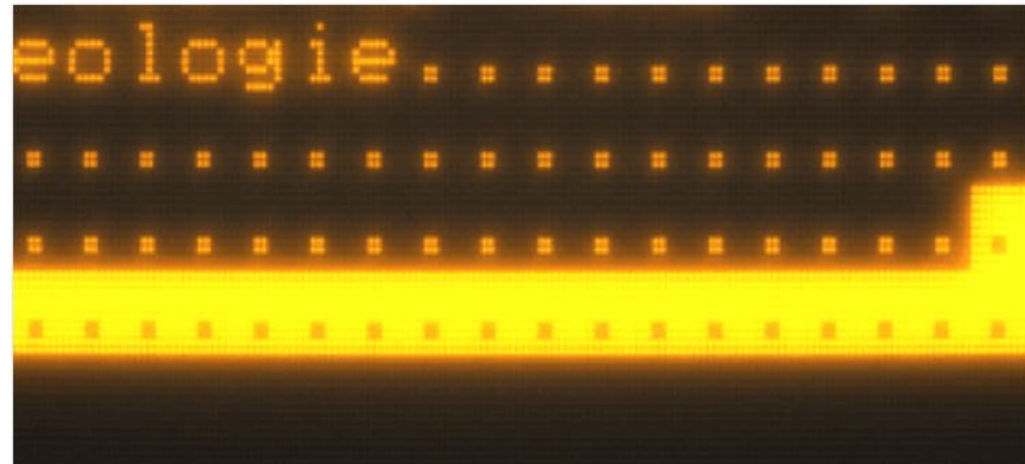
- https://cursor.pubpub.org/

- "citizen theology"
  - "The media transformations of the digital age offer paths to develop a more collaborative, participatory and exploratory practice of science."

4. Theological Politics of space?

Tasks of public theology in and for digital spaces

4. Theological Politics of space?

- Digital spaces as context and object of public theology

- Tasks for public theology
  - Awareness for the power structures of digital spaces
  - eschatological horizon of digital spaces
    - implicit imaginations, metaphors and narratives of debates on digitization
    - Theological sensorium for narratives and imaginations

Thank you for your attention.

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