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Introducing the glossary of decentralised technosocial systems

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Abstract: Interdisciplinary glossary on peer-to-peer, user-centric and privacy-enhancing decentralised technologies

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EDITORIAL

Introducing the glossary of decentralised technosocial systems

Why this glossary

Much academic research in law, social sciences and technology is focused on scrutinising the adverse effects of the current structure of the information economy on individual, social, cultural and political life, and on the global distribution of power. Critical efforts point at the enclosure of users within platform ecosystems and at the logics of data accumulation: how they compress individual autonomy and create hard to reverse power asymmetries. But thinking critically against such a heavily centralised, data-intensive digital economy also implies imagining possible alternatives.

Based on the view that technological, legal and societal aspects of the information sphere are interlinked and co-dependent from each other, decentralised, privacy-enhancing, non-profit solutions emerge as tools for individual and collective emancipation and resistance.

Notions such as *data sovereignty*, *user-centric*, *commons-based*, *peer produced* as well as *privacy-enhancing technologies* are part of a narrative which sees technological design choices as means by which to achieve individual/collective autonomy. Unlike 'big tech'-generated terminology, however, terms that originate in peripheral, subversive, resistant parts of the internet remain obscure, unheard-of or misunderstood by most people. If discourses are performative, the obscurity of these terms means that the alternative visions of the future they propose are always already in the past.

With a highly ideological charge, discourses on decentralised technologies have generated a wide vocabulary of context-specific terms that associate political, societal and technological issues in rather original ways. Just as any other subject, however, these technologies (as tools, as conceptual design, as symbols) are rooted in specific geographies, ideologies, gender relations, and reflect the biases encoded in these contexts. The related terminology is used and interpreted according to

different purposes and pre- and/or mis- conceptions. This prevents fruitful confrontations on these types of technological developments, paving the way to uninformed hypes and prejudices among scholars and public institutions.

Goal

In order to tackle the existing gap in shared semantics, this glossary converges the efforts of experts from various disciplines to build a shared vocabulary on the social, technical, economic, political aspects of decentralised, distributed or sovereign technologies: artefacts which seek to challenge the techno-social *status quo* by, for example, circumventing law enforcement, resisting surveillance, or being participative. Situating the terms emerging through technology development in the wider context of multidisciplinary scientific, policy and political discourses, this glossary provides a conceptual toolkit for the study of the various political, economic, legal and technical struggles that decentralised, encryption-based, peer-to-peer technologies bring about and go through.

Choosing relevant technology-related terms and understanding them is to investigate their affordances within a given ecosystem of actors, discourses and systems of incentives. This requires an interdisciplinary, multi-layered approach that is attentive to the interlinkages between technological design nuances and socio-political, economic implications. For this reason, we encourage multidisciplinary contributions and require a thorough deconstruction, contextualisation and historical account of each term, rather than the simple selection of one of its possible interpretations.

Process

The glossary is envisioned as a long-term collaborative project, and as a work-in-progress, as new entries will be periodically added over time. Initiated by the Blockchain and Society Policy Research Lab (University of Amsterdam), in collaboration with P2P Models (Universidad Complutense de Madrid), Trust in Distributed Environments (Weizenbaum Institute for the Networked Society, Berlin) and Blockchain Gov teams (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris), the project is backed by a solid academic network. However, it is open to contributions from non-academic experts. Moreover, each glossary term is published using *Internet Policy Review* 'Open Abstracts' functionality, enabling peer review to take place in the open. After the publication of a tentative draft, the glossary terms are transparently reviewed by scholars, practitioners and the readers of our journal. The revised glossary terms are then approved at the editorial level and published if ap-

propriate.

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