Search engine governance at the intersection of global, European, and local contexts
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Search engines like Google are developed in the US-American context, but are used around the globe. Their business models are based on user-targeted advertising. They collect user data, turn it into user profiles, and sell them to advertising clients. Since the NSA affair practices of user profiling are critically discussed; especially in European contexts with diverse data protection laws, historically shaped notions of privacy, and very different tax systems that global IT companies exploit to maximize their profits. The reform of the EU data protection law is a particularly interesting site where tensions between global search engines and European policy and value-systems can be observed. Moreover, it provides an arena to analyze European disparities and the challenging task of translating culturally framed notions like privacy, but also imaginations of economic growth and future society at large, into EU legislation.

This poses important questions: What visions and values guide ongoing processes of search engine governance on the European level, and how do European visions relate to national identities, discourses, and value-systems? To answer these questions I conduct a discourse analysis of European policy documents, Austrian media discourses, and qualitative interviews with European and national stakeholders involved in the governance of search engines, the EU data protection reform in particular. Austria is an interesting case to study since it is one of the countries that aim to hold on to its strict data protection law, compared to liberal countries like Great Britain fearing that strict data protection legislation would weaken their economic power.¹ In this analysis I will identify “sociotechnical imaginaries” (Jasanoff and Kim 2009) guiding search engine governance on a European and national level, trace the absence and presence of “the state” in these narratives, and analyze how Austrian imaginaries and European visions challenge, contradict, and reinforce each other. This study will offer insights in complex relations between globally operating search engines like Google and European value-systems, but also European disparities and the role nation states (can) play in European net politics.

References

¹ http://derstandard.at/1392687864826/Widerstand-gegen-Aufweichung-im-EU-Datenschutz