Report of first Digital Climate Agreement meet up 02-02-2019

On Saturday 2 February a group of about 30 people from art organizations, tech companies, and activist groups as well as individuals from the field of critical tech were invited to a workshop at Transmediale to develop a working covenant for a healthy and fair digital media environment signed by organizations, institutions and tech industry, the Digital Climate Agreement (DCA). It was the first in a series of meetings initiated by iMal and an attempt to create a unified course of action. The idea is to build alliances and collaborations across different interest groups and disciplines, bringing together what has until now been a wide range of critical practices, and to do this through highlighting and subscribing to commonly shared goals. It is an ambitious project to undertake, but the first meeting went very well and produced some interesting results we will use for the follow up sessions in Brussels, Paris and Amsterdam/The Hague. The DCA development project is experimental in its set up. Each event could be entirely different. In the first meeting we tried to have everybody participate rather than have a few voices dominate and leaving the rest of the room mostly passive.

First session: Defining basic issues

Since we only had 2,5 hours we collaborated with the seasoned workshop leader Dmytri Kleiner of Telekommunisten to develop a strict protocol for the meeting. We had already established a simple, basic structure to start the discussion beforehand. The event started with five different topics (thinking/acting in alliance, digital heritage, infrastructure, free speech and sustainability) being discussed in five groups. People knowledgeable in the respective areas and experienced with leading discussions moderated these groups: Cathleen Berger of Mozilla handled Free Speech, Sarah Grant of Radical Networks led Infrastructure, Open Knowledge International's Lieke Ploeger took care of Thinking & Acting in Alliance, while Gaby Wijers was the moderator of Digital Heritage and Dmytri Kleiner fell in for Jussi Parikka in the Sustainability table. The five discussion groups had about 45 minutes to discuss issues in their field. Afterwards each group reported the main topics that came up at their table to everybody in the room. These reports served as a broad, general information pool for all participants to consider when drafting potential agreement items. What follows are brief reports from the five discussion groups.

The Thinking/Acting in Alliance table discussed how to best develop the Digital Climate Agreement. Since we ambitiously aim to present a first draft of the DCA at Transmediale in 2020 this discussion group first of all took the limited amount of time into consideration. Collaborating and building agreement will take a considerable time investment. The group also stressed it is important to develop a common and accessible language to discuss the issues we face, in order to reach as many people as possible, while avoiding dumbing down debates. The practical development of the DCA also was discussed. It was suggested that we could use both more formal and looser types of meetings to create the DCA, though finally, to come to a working agreement, decisions would have to be made, at which point formalization would be inevitable. The group identified this as a "tension". Furthermore the group talked about the need for shared resources and shared infrastructures to form alliances. The DCA was seen as a possible resource (or platform maybe) and as a code of conduct. For this the DCA needs to be "flexible" and adaptable (useful?) for different situations. The group also discussed the challenge of making very diverse people collaborate. As an example they described how difficult it is to change how digital technology is presented and discussed at schools. Finally the question came up at the table whether the DCA would be something people would just sign as a symbolic gesture, or whether it would be used to make decisions and develop the course of actions. Last the group made a list of already existing agreements in various related fields. These are the Erklärung der Vielen collaboration of German art organizations against the far right; Art but Fair, an international organization for fair artist fees; and the international initiative to create a safer internet for young people called webwewant.

At the Freedom of Speech table the discussion not only centered on freedom of speech, but also focused on fake news, disinformation and surveillance. One of the things this table concluded is that we learn more about what freedom of speech means through online life. Offline you stay in relatively homogenous communities, but through the internet we get in touch with many more different communities, new societies and other languages. The limits of what is acceptable and what is not are felt more strongly. We haven't yet figured out what the discourse in heterogeneous groups should look like. A problem is that a lot of this is happening on private platforms, which set the rules. The limits of freedom of speech, of public discourse, are automated, whereas automation of humanity and civility does not scale. Next conversations about these issues also tend to be held in rather privileged groups, and it is difficult to have a wider range of voices be included. One reason for hate speech and trolling online could be the communication through smartphones and online platforms that replaces face to face interaction makes it easier to share unfiltered gut feelings. What needs to be developed are online safe spaces.

The Preservation of Digital Cultures table first talked about whose culture should we save for the future, and who decides what to save. Some at the table think we cannot escape a certain "aristocratic attitude" when we have to decide what is worth saving for the future. This means we will always need knowledgeable people or experts to make this decision for us. One problem at the table was that it was unclear what the term digital culture stands for. Since digital technologies have pervaded almost all aspects of our society we need to decide what it is about digital cultures we want to save for the future. As we are at Transmediale and the event is initiated by a media art organization the group suspects the focus should be on a particular kind of born digital content. There needs to be more clarity on what exactly we think we need to protect and preserve. Next a serious preservation of heritage cannot be done on a voluntary basis alone. Funding therefore is definitely an issue in this area. Last but not least the accessibility of content in archives was discussed: accessibility both in terms of availability and openness of the archive and in terms of a contextualization, mapping and analysis of the content of the archive.

At the Sustainability of Digital Environments table first questions about what a sustainable digital environment is arose. Is it a digital environment or an actual environment, or an environment in which both interlink? Can we talk separately of the sustainability of a digital environment and an actual environment at all? It would seem not. The group came up with the idea to develop a rating for the amount of energy etc. that our devices, tools, and platforms need. This way people could become aware of how much their actions, like watching Netflix or Youtube, impact the environment. The group wants to take this awareness to a higher level and create regulations that force the industry to implement an environmental rating for their product. They propose to develop a rating, a GDPR, for the CO2E emissions of products, services, and platforms, which is part of the interface. The table next also discussed the accumulation of e-waste. They propose to tackle this through creating a right to repair: it should be regulated by law that devices can be repaired. We now have environmental colonialism, because we 'outsource' our e-waste recycling and e-waste management. This makes us not face how much e-waste we produce. Maybe we should see the effects closer to home. Next to this, server infrastructure should be developed more on a local level, creating a re-decentralization of the internet allowing for peer to peer access and limiting the necessity and use of polluting large server farms. The group worries about the green washing of server farms by using water for cooling the servers and the effect this might have on the environment.

Last but not least the Digital Infrastructures group discussed how to design infrastructures to serve the people. They see a need for access to more unlicensed spectrum (radio/wifi/telephone etc frequencies), the right to repair, having access to more open systems on hardware such as on routers (to for example be able to upload your own firmware). The limited time of 45 minutes made the group come up with more questions rather than answers to things. They see two major conflicts. One is how to reconcile commercial and community interests. How does one set up collaborations between non-profit organizations and commercial companies? The group sees a direct conflict there. The other is the use of commercial software and hardware by community networks. How to get a critical mass of people using p2p non-commercial open source software and hardware? Though the group had more questions than answers they felt the need for more open source software and hardware, and for more unlicensed spectrum.

Second session: Development of Agreement items

What followed next was an intensely structured session in which we tried to have everybody voice his or her view on what should be DCA agreement items. Though the strict protocol may not have been to everybody's taste, in general people were happy afterwards because it was impossible to waver much or drift into endless discussions dominated by a few, making the session more productive and inclusive than a general discussion would have been. First the groups were mixed so people would be sitting with folks from other tables during this session, resulting in five new groups. Keeping the reports from each discussion group of the first session in mind participants were asked to draw up one to three possible items for the DCA individually. They were then asked to discuss these items with someone else and decide on one to three agreement items between the two of them. Because of time constraint the discussion of the agreement items was then opened to the entire group one was in. Again the question was to bring down what were by then around ten agreement items (of about six to seven people per table) down to one to three final agreement items for each table.

These are the agreement items that came out of this session:

Table 1:

- CO2e label for the impact digital actions have on the climate

- Digital Climate education in schools

- Actively create diversity (representing all layers of society) within DCA organization

Table 2 (had difficulty coming to agreements, ideological discussion):

- Digital Climate education / create awareness of impact digital tech

- The right to tinker (repair and reflash)

- Transparency of digital tech, to be able to locate accountability

Table 3:

- The need for digital literacy / consciousness (education)

- Commitment to repair

- The right to self host - the freedom to build your own infrastructure and store data where ever you want (one person's addition: even in your own body)

Table 4:

- Political level - algorithmic accountability, where to go politically

- Education - digital literacy - participation: what do we want to save and how do we work with these issues (?)

- Transparent climate interface and infrastructure: also environmental considerations built into u ex (user experience/user design in software)

Table 5:

- A GDPR for the environment: routing (infrastructure), content providers, consumer device manufacturers must declare their carbon footprint in transparent and public way, and make these data available as a file in an open format

- Right to repair and reflash

- re-decentralization of the internet: the internet was originally decentralized but has become less so.

Individual addition:

- More unlicensed (electro-magnetic) spectrum

- Limit growth of consumption of both hardware and data (web pages for example are too heavy because of ads, videos and other fancy extensions to the content. This creates a lot of unnecessary data traffic and also the need for constant upgrades in software and hardware, leading to e-waste and more carbon emission)

All agreement items appear on screen for all in the room to see.

Two agreement items stand out, because they appear at four out of five tables: the need for something like a GDPR for the environment and the need for more education about digital tech and its effect on the planet and society. The right to repair and reflash is mentioned by three groups. Two mention transparency, and it is linked to accountability (something table 4 mentions or emphasizes separately). Then the right to self-host and to create one's own infrastructure is mentioned by one group, and seems to overlap with the need for a re-decentralisation of the internet as mentioned by table 5. An interesting remark is made about this re-decentralization: it is suggested that peer to peer networking instead of platform based communication (social media) greatly reduces the need for large server farms and thus would cut energy consumption and environmental pollution. The development of further claims on the electromagnetic spectrum by commercial, government and military, blocking individual and experimental use of the electromagnetic spectrum is criticized. There is a need for more unlicensed spectrum, and both individuals and companies would benefit from it.[[1]](#endnote-1) Group 1's reminder that the DCA should be inclusive does not seem an agreement item but may refer to how the DCA meetings should be organized in the future.

Third session: round up

During the final discussion in which the entire room comes together it becomes clear how many issues are interrelated. Table 4's agreement item 'transparent interface and infrastructure' for example also relates to the re-decentralization proposed by table 5 as well as to the right to repair and reflash. Transparency of interface and infrastructure also goes against the development of "platform capitalism"[[2]](#endnote-2). It is suggested more labels than only the GDPR/ecolabel for CO2e impact could be used: there could also be a privacy label or personal data exploitation label. These would make the backlog of software more transparent and educate people about the tools they use. The right to repair is not about making everybody obliged to repair their own devices, but it asks for a cultural change in which the repair of devices is obligatory and enabled. It is mentioned our society's drive for more consumption and throwaway culture needs to be addressed. The way the internet and devices develop is deeply connected to it: think of the enormous amount of energy and equipment wasted by the bloating of websites and endless upgrades of software and hardware.

At the end of the meeting there were both pessimistic voices, who think it will be very difficult to have people from the IT industry sign the DCA, and optimists. Some see the development of the DCA and a conscious handling of digital technologies as happening in steps. Consumers could for example put pressure on companies: many people changing to a more environmental friendly internet provider could help more companies signing the agreement. Some companies (though often non commercial such as ngo's) already try to work in a more sustainable manner. One participant came with the following examples that seem to suggest something like the DCA could be successful, or the DCA is a way to help an existing development grow faster or spread more widely:

"In the last few years software, particularly the kind one would normally expect to be hosted on a high grade commercial enterprise level, is now freely available and significantly easier to administer and install. We are seeing in fact an actual real kind of platform capture we would normally associate with the big guys and girls. Google Drive and Dropbox are rapidly becoming obsoleted by freely available and high quality software like for example Nextcloud. You see alternatives to Slack, like Mattermost. There is also a surge in small data centers - boutique data centers if you like - many of which are selling renewable energy as a kind of plus direct from grid. This happens for example in Switzerland and Iceland, it is huge there. This itself is a natural market shift. When I am setting up servers I am seeing the users of those servers getting excited they are using a service provided by direct from grid renewables. There is a backchannel cultural shift that I think is very exciting."

These examples show a trend towards climate awareness, but it is a trend that needs to develop both quantitatively and qualitatively. The Swiss system of using water for cooling servers for example leads to new issues in water ecology. The DCA could stimulate the search for better solutions while it could also prevent the market to do green washing alone rather than towards actual solutions. The DCA meetings should therefore be accompanied by as much information about the issues at hand as possible. The DCA website will be used for this.

The meeting ended with a call for collaborators, which seems to have worked, and the announcement of at least three more meetings this year (2019). The outcome of the meeting/workshop at Transmediale will be the basis for these next sessions, in which we will further work on the development of a working agreement. Next sessions may have a completely different character. The table discussions may need more focus and time. More expert input may be needed at meetings next to the background information on the website. We may have left urgent issues out of the discussion, asking for a broadening of the scope of discussion. All in all the first meeting was a success though, making us hopeful and inspired to move forward. We hope to approach the DCA agreement as close as possible within a year (by producing a first draft), while it should fully develop within a few years, for which more collaborators and supporters are needed. Time is limited because of the urgency of the issues involved. The development of the agreement itself should function as a wake up call.

1. Participant: "Without access to unlicensed spectrum you would have no wifi. All your data would be transported via cable (good luck finding an ethernet portal on your smartphone) or you pay for it. Unlicensed spectrum is a massive benefit for society and for the big companies, because they do mobile offloading, using access pints of their consumers to offload mobile data because otherwise it is impossible to satisfy the demand for broadband. There is a development to sell off the entire available spectrum to enable the 5G standard. We are going to pay dearly for it." [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. https://impakter.com/platform-capitalism-economy-future/ [↑](#endnote-ref-2)