Date: 23 April 2018
Speaker: Stefania Milan, Associate Professor of New Media and Digital Culture, University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands
Chair: Nina Hall, Assistant Professor of International Relations, Johns Hopkins University SAIS Europe, Bologna, Italy

Citizenship Re-invented: The Evolution of Politics in the Datafied Society
Part of the Politics Beyond the State: Politics in the Internet Era series

Professor Milan's lecture investigated the impact of 'datafication' or big data on the nature of citizenship, and focused on the role of data activism. She argued that datafication is having a profound impact on the ways in which we experience, understand, and make sense of the world around us. In this context, data activism offers citizens new channels to interact with state institutions, and can re-vitalize citizens' democratic agency. Professor Milan suggests that data activism is a new way of thinking about citizenship.

Datafication is the ability to render into data and monetize aspects of our lives that have not been quantified before. Our existences unfold in real life as much as they do on digital platforms, which have become integral parts of our daily lives. Through the use of these digital platforms, we leave digital footprints everywhere we go, thus allowing our actions to be systematically recorded in data bases, and as a result monetizing our whereabouts, identities, relationships, and preferences.

Professor Milan chooses as a foundation for her research the theories of Marshall McLuhan, a media theorist who hypothesized in 1964 that technology is the extension of human senses, allowing us to perceive beyond our immediate surroundings. For instance, the television can be conceptualized as the extension of the eye, and similarly, the radio as the extension of the ear. Professor Milan explains that as the revolution of mass media, seen by these technological innovations, represented a paradigm shift, today, we can think of datafication as bringing about a similar paradigm shift, which alters our relations with and understanding of the world, thereby changing and re-constituting us as individuals and citizens.

Professor Milan investigates the evolution of civic participation and activism through the lens of data activism, which she defines as a way of thinking about how citizens engage with data and technology. While data activists generally take a critical stance towards massive data collection campaigns, they also believe in the novel opportunities that stem from big data as a means to engage with state institutions and exercise citizenship. Data activism can be understood as a continuum with pro-active data activism (seeing the positive side and leveraging big data for social change) on one end, and reactive data activism (reacting to what is perceived as an external threat such as government surveillance) on the other end.

Focusing particularly on proactive data activism, professor Milan explains that the objective is to make data available in order to empower citizens and bring about positive changes. In this context, she describes various projects that leverage big data (and sometimes 'small' data) for social change. One such projects is the 'left to die boat project' in which surveillance tools were repurposed by Forensic Architecture – a research agency in London, UK– to support a coalition of NGOs demanding accountability concerning the "left-to-die boat" case, in which sixty-three migrants lost their lives while drifting for fourteen days within the NATO maritime surveillance area in the central Mediterranean Sea.

Data activism (reactive and proactive) activates citizens' agency in an unprecedented manner, thus profoundly altering the nature of the relationship between states citizens. Though her talk does not cover this question, Professor Milan suggests investigating how governments in turn adapt and respond to this changing relationship.