Interview – Andrej Zwitter

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Dr. Andrej Zwitter is Professor of Governance and Innovation and Dean of the Faculty Campus Fryslân, University of Groningen, the Netherlands. He has founded the University College Fryslân and pioneered the interdisciplinary BSc "Global Responsibility and Leadership". Prof. Zwitter has led several national and European Projects and chaired and reviewed for ERC, NOW, Austrian, Swiss, Swedish and Swiss funding agencies. He is frequently consulted on matters of interdisciplinary research, digitalisation and sustainability. His expertise includes Governance of Public Affairs and Political Philosophy of Statehood, Data Ethics, Digital and Blockchain Governance, Emergency Regulations, and Innovation in Humanitarian Action. He has consulted for, amongst others, the European Commission, Austrian and Dutch Ministries, as well as international and national NGOs. He frequently appears in press and media, particularly on issues concerning public order and data governance.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

In the larger social sciences, there have been some exciting developments concerning the renegotiation of whether materialism in indeed the correct ontological foundation to describe all of human experience. The critique of this ontological materialism, often termed new idealism, considers this approach that stems predominantly from the 19th century adaptation of the hard science methods in the social sciences and humanities as a reductionist view towards the complexity of the human condition. In essence, this new idealist turn is concerned with whether the phenomenon of consciousness is a product of our biological functioning. This debate is further accelerated by ground-breaking insights from the field of quantum physics and neuroscience. If there is indeed consciousness that is independent of the material basis of our body, this has huge implications on the social sciences at large. Questions such as meaning, values, reality etc can no longer be reduced to the realm of intersubjectivity. As Alexander Wendt argued in his latest book *Quantum Mind and Social Science Unifying Physical and Social Ontology* , considering the implications of quantum physics we might need to fundamentally rethink our approach to consciousness and as such the whole social sciences. If quantum theory holds true, and there is increasing evidence that it does, we need to update our outdated set of social science methods based on 19th century physical sciences.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

Probably the most important shift in my understanding of the world in the last few years was the realization that in facing climate change conflict and poverty, it is not the planet that needs saving, but humanity. The planet as any composite organism has mechanisms to rid itself of irritants. Humanity's hubris, that it is in the center of all creation has for too long, justified the continuous exploitation of natural resources at the expense of the biosphere and of other people. Unless we understand ourselves as part of a biosphere with individual and collective purposes and obligations, acts of "fixing the planet" and "sustainability" are mere attempts at preserving the status quo. From that perspective, we need to fundamentally rethink our relationship with each other and within the biosphere that we are inhabiting with countless other non-human entities. This requires us to understand that our role in this complex dynamic should not be driven by the humanist perception that humans are on top of the food-chain, but as symbiotic part of a larger whole. This will be a necessary task of current and future generations.

How is big data transforming international relations? What data-driven innovations have had the biggest

impact?

Big data needs to be seen in conjunction with the method of extraction most commonly used, namely artificial intelligence and machine learning. One important change has been the utility of and the reliance on big data for a variety of processes. Large scale and high frequency data transmissions have become the dominant form of Stock Exchange trade -for example, high frequency trading- as well as for all our communication needs and how we access information and news. Data has become a raw material or resource; in short, data is the new oil. This has also dramatically changed the importance of tech companies and required many companies to shift from solely hardware production to hosting data infrastructure, data processing and software design. These companies act in cyberspace as the new sovereign states.

Has the ethics behind big data kept up with the pace of development of big data methods and technology? What are some of the most significant risks facing the misuse of big data for unethical ends?

Yes, and no. Researchers are in real time highlighting the problems of new developments in the field of big data and artificial intelligence. Questions such as deep fakes – artificially created pictures through tools, such as Dall-E 2- or automatic text generation such as ChatGPT are well known to the research community, who also explore their potential risks and threats. Likewise, a large group of researchers rang the alarm bell about the dangers of political manipulation well before the Cambridge Analytica scandal became public knowledge. The fundamental question is not so much that the ethics are lagging behind, but whether policymaking is swift and powerful enough to prevent the misuse of digital technologies. Ongoing developments, such as the governmental and private tracking of citizens, even if the purpose is health and well-being, poses the risk of putting society under a restrictive tutelage; thus, deciding every individual's best course of action. Individual freedoms in a democratic society are at risk.

Who are the main actors currently involved in big data? Are these actors currently doing enough to manage the risks and ethics of big data?

States and intergovernmental agencies remain important players when it comes to cyberspace. However, with the ascendance of data as the new oil, our relations have shifted towards new players, such as Google, Meta, Amazon, Apple, Nvidia, and many more. Add to that data brokers, hackers, cyber terrorists, and the field of international relations appears very different than from the perspective of traditional realism where only states were relevant actors. It has to be mentioned that governmental agencies such as the European Union have had a tremendous effect on managing the risks of Big Data. The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), as well as the upcoming AI-Act are certainly steps into the right direction. They force companies that interact with citizens or other entities in the European Union to adopt certain measures to reduce the negative impacts of artificial intelligence on individual freedom and privacy. In this respect there exist two camps, those that argue too much regulation can suffocate innovation, and then those who argue that too little opens the door for misuse. This question can be resolved by looking at whether private actors have been able to impose upon themselves principles and codes of conduct that limit the misuse of technologies. These principles and codes of conduct are few and often lack the force of law or effective enforcement mechanisms, leaving a big regulatory gap that asks for it to be closed. Also, without regulation, individual citizens have no recourse in law to hold companies liable.

In your article *Ethical, legal and social challenges of Predictive Policing*, you highlight that it is unclear whether predictive policing is effective if its main objective is to reduce crime rates. Could you explain how predictive policing works and the main ethical challenges faced in carrying it out?

There are many different tools of predictive policing. Some tools focus specifically on individual criminals and compare their track records to those criminals of similar backgrounds in order to predict their behavior. One such tool that was heavily criticized was the compass recidivism algorithm, which was used to assess the likelihood of a defendant in a criminal court case becoming a recidivist. This tool suffered from severe biases coming from skewed data that disadvantaged predominantly African-American communities. Another tool would be the use of crime heat-maps. Search heat maps use data of the past to predict whether crime in certain areas of the city or county are more

likely on specific days. In theory, this approach allows for a more efficient use of policing resources. This tool, however, suffers from the fact that with every intervention and preemptive placement of police forces, the data changes because fewer crimes are recorded in previously high crime areas. This feedback effect makes the long-term deployment of similar tools relatively unreliable. Many police agencies have in the past reported that predictive policing has had only a limited impact on the efficiency of policing.

In *Big Data Ethics*, you state that "in a hyperconnected era, the concept of power is changing into a more horizontal networked fashion." What does this imply for the existing structures of cyber and political governance? What is being done to modernise these structures?

The concrete implication of this hyperconnected concept of governance is that we have to view power increasingly from a network perspective. That means effective power is a function of the amount of network connections and what place in the network one has. One can then distinguish between different kinds of power such as networking power, networked power, network power etc. For example, we distinguish in terms of different network related powers:

- the power of switching on and off a network,
- the power of a network (the larger the network, the larger the power),
- the power of actors within a network as determined by their connections and how central they are to information exchange.

This leads to new forms of governance that we have developed as decentralized network governance, see also my 2020 article on the subject. Policy implications coming from this approach view governmental actors in a new light, where they are facilitating the power within the network, and its individual agents through its traditional reach to all citizens. The state becomes a power broker between citizens and private actors, such as social media companies. The implications, for example in Blockchain technology, can be viewed as on-chain and off-chain decision making.

You've also stated that "big data requires ethics to do some rethinking of its assumptions." What are the salient base assumptions that need to change for big data ethics to adapt to the future?

Some fundamental effects that big data has had on traditional ethics is a shift away from viewing ethics as only an individual responsibility with individual consequences. Network effects are in most cases the results of many individual actions that contribute to an overall outcome. This makes individual culpability and judgment very difficult. As a consequence collective measures need to be taken. Such measures are indeed to be found in viewing digital technologies as common goods and imposing regulations on large companies, which can otherwise not be steered through democratic processes.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Politics?

Read the classics. Read Aristotle, Augustine, Hobbes, Kant, Rawls etc. Don't read excerpts, don't read summaries, don't rely on the information of textbooks. The classics have become classics for a good reason. They were inspired books that have changed societies. They will inspire you equally.