Dissecting Digital IDs

Investigating the Infrastructures and Imaginaries of Digital Identity

A new mode of identity governance

Digital IDs are now core governance tools. Accelerated by COVID-19 and AI, their rapid rollout raises questions about citizenship and power. This study examines how Digital IDs govern access, who builds and benefits from these systems, and how publics contest them. We ask three core questions:

1. How do Digital IDs govern citizenship through socio-technical and political-economic arrangements?

2. Who designs, finances, and benefits from these infrastructures, and how do power and policy shape them?

3. How do different publics interpret, contest, and narrate Digital IDs across countries and platforms?

We apply this toolkit to five case studies from different geo-political contexts:

DigiD	BankID	Aadhaar
Netherlands	Sweden - BankID	India - Aadhaar

CIN	SPID
Brazil- Carteira de Identidade Nacional	Italy - Sistema Pubblico Identità Digitale

Methodology

To dissect the infrastructural networks and imaginaries of Digital IDs across five contexts, we developed a methodological toolkit that triangulates:

- **Actor-Network analysis:** Web research of public and private actors relevant to the historical development of country specific digital ID systems. Gephi-based mapping of actor relationships, weighted by impact and relevance to overall network function.

- **Policy and Regulation:** Textual analysis of policy texts (Voyant tools) to identify governance structures and dominant policy framings, manual scraping and metadata tagging.

- **End users and public opinion:** LLM-assisted analysis of sentiment and narratives across 4 platforms (YouTube, TikTok, Linkedin, X), complemented by keyword frequency (Voyant Tools).

Datasets

- **Actor-Network Graph:** 102 unique individual actors (Brazil: 26; Netherlands: 10; Sweden: 22; India: 19; Italy: 25) organized by actor type (public/private), and type of relationship (financial, legal, operative). Connections were weighted (1-5) based on relevance for the overall network and control lost or gained.

- **Policy:** 5 policy documents and original dataset of 7 governance indicators and 6 legitimation indicators for each context, and top 25 frequent keywords for each policy texts

- **User Experience:** filtered datasets collected through Zeeschuimer and YouTube Data Tools from LinkedIN (733), TikTok (93), X (264) and YouTube (734) for each country querying the searchwords DigiD Netherlands (101), SPID Italy (435), Aadhaar India (418), BankID Sweden (337), CIN Brazil (563). Merged to create a dataset of 1.834 items.

Key takeaways

- Most identity networks organize around a central, typically public node, position residents at the periphery, and rely on privately managed ‘infrastructural backbones’ such as data centers.

- Administrative rollout predominates over parliamentary processes, regardless of whether digital ID systems are publicly, privately, or hybridly governed.

- Contestation dominates over approval, especially in relation to troubleshooting, followed by security and surveillance concerns.

References

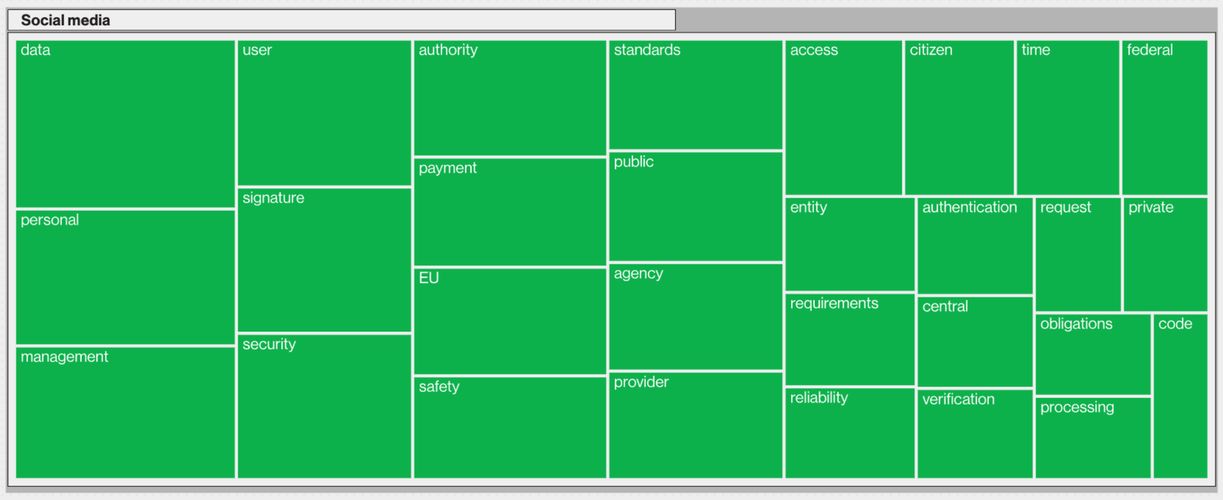
[1] Milan, S. (2024). Afterword: From Number Politics to Infrastructure Politics: Notes on Context and Methods. The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology, 42(1), 118–126. https://doi.org/10.3167/cja.2024.420108

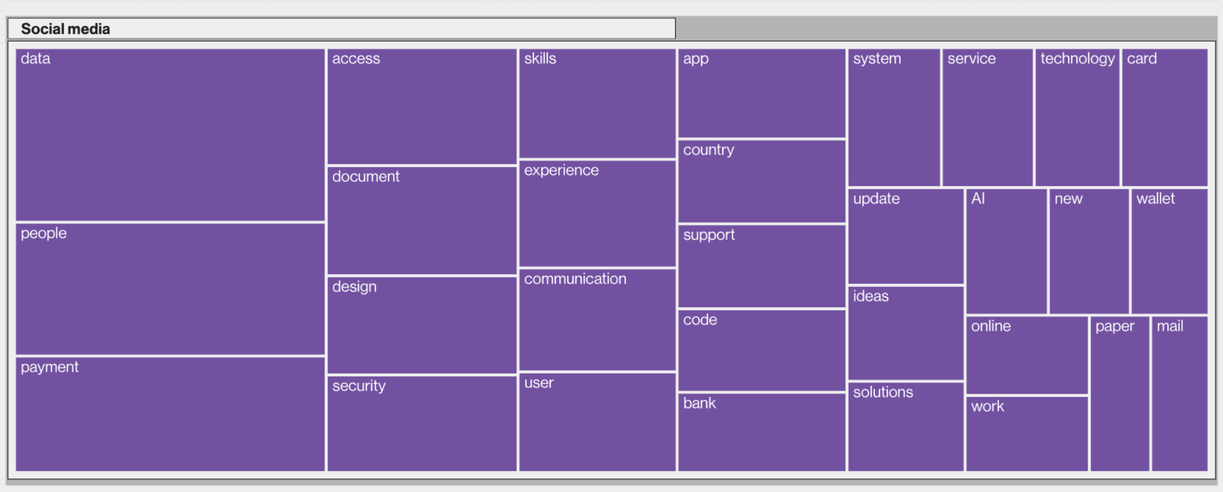
[2] Burton, A., & Tuters, M. (2025, December 2). Two Sovereignties, One Digital ID. Open Intelligence Lab. https://oilab.eu/two-sovereignties/

[3] Kitchin, R. (2025). Critical data studies: An A to Z guide to concepts and methods (First edition). Polity press.

Keywords across policy texts and social media

The treemap compares top 30 keyword frequencies across policy texts and social media. Some words recur, but the key finding is misalignment between legal-regulatory logic and user experience, exposing a gap between institutional justification and lived reality.





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