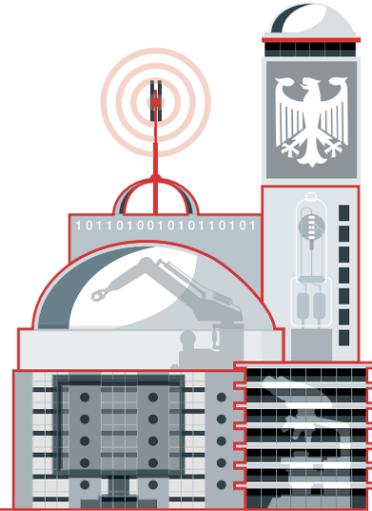




Wolfgang Clement was the governor of North Rhine-Westphalia from 1998 to 2002 before taking over the “Superministry” for Economic Affairs and Labor from 2002 to 2005 in the German federal government. In a 2010 book that Clement co-authored with former politician Friedrich Merz, he already asked the question, “What to do now – Germany 2.0”.



Time for a superministry.

THE INTERNET AND DIGITIZATION ARE AS CRUCIAL TO THE GERMAN AND EUROPEAN ECONOMIES AS POWER GRIDS AND ENERGY. BUT THESE ISSUES DON'T LEND THEMSELVES TO BERLIN'S BUSINESS-USUAL STRATEGY: MICROMANAGEMENT BY FIVE DIFFERENT MINISTRIES. WHAT GERMANY REALLY NEEDS IS A RESPONSIBILITY MODEL THAT PROMOTES A UNIFIED DIGITAL STRATEGY, BOTH NATIONALLY AND ACROSS EUROPE.

<Opinion Piece> Wolfgang Clement

WHEN WE LOOK AT OUR LIVES TODAY – are we really moving toward a gigabit society? Is that the honest truth? That's the party line that many publications toe. But there are at least as many reasons to doubt that assertion. Do we really have the resources to catch up and ultimately survive in a digital head-to-head with Asian innovators or with the US, the clear leader in the consumer Internet? The business environment in our country and Europe is far from grim, but there is an urgent expectation that the political stewardship of the digitization process will be changed and – dare I say – professionalized no later than after the upcoming parliamentary elections.

Let's not forget that Germany's government has been repeatedly accused of “state failure” and “loss of control” in recent years. And for good reason, too. The refugees that began pouring into our country in late summer 2015 quickly and brutally exposed a gaping adminis-

trative weakness: the lack of digital integration among local, state and federal governments as well as between agencies within each tier of government. Between the Federal Employment Agency and the Federal Office for Immigration and Refugees, for example, between police departments or between social service agencies in different German states. In some cases, this failure led to dramatic deficiencies that have compromised public safety and wasted considerable (and valuable) time that could have been more fruitfully spent on integration.

No wonder the National Regulatory Control Council, Germany's government commission for reducing red tape, is pushing for a top-level e-government agreement that gives the federal government a “digitization budget” for startup financing. This approach would, first of all, ensure smooth communications among all tiers of government, institutions and administrations – an absolute necessity in times like these. And second, but no less important, it would establish a binding digital service standard that applies to all important government services for individuals and companies. Digitization on this broad a scale is essential for agile, efficient government, will turn Germany and Europe into even more attractive and competitive places to do business, and therefore represents a vital economic policy initiative.

E-government that truly meets the demands of our time is only one – admittedly important – aspect of our overall political responsibility. But is it enough?

CLEAR RESPONSIBILITIES

To bring home the reality that an all-encompassing change is already transforming every aspect of our personal and work lives, Deutsche Telekom CEO Tim Hötting has for years insisted, with increasing urgency, that digitization and connectivity will come to everything that can be digitized and connected. We can no longer choose whether to participate in this process; we can only choose whether to participate in directing it as best as we can. That will demand all our entrepreneurial vitality, creativity and energy, from innovators and inventors to startups and small businesses right up to blue chip corporations. And it will require new, more flexible forms of cooperation between the public and private sector, ideally without blending and blurring the lines

between public and private responsibility while remaining open to new ideas from one another and having the courage to experiment. But is that even possible when three federal ministries (Interior, Transport and Digital Infrastructure, Economic Affairs and Energy) tinker away on the federal government's Digital Agenda 2014-2017? And as the Federal Science and Health Ministries join the mix, we have at least five federal ministries trying to impose rights, responsibilities and regulations onto the digital world? Is that possible without anywhere near enough competence in the educational sector? Last, but not least: is it enough to set up a digital agenda for Germany when all the facts and arguments favor the creation of a real European single digital market, a European digital union? A digital union, mind you, that despite its (still) embryonic powers, is overseen by a “Commissioner for Digital Economy and Society”.

“ALL THE FACTS FAVOR THE CREATION OF A EUROPEAN SINGLE DIGITAL MARKET.”

Indeed, everything favors putting our digital strategy in the hands of one entity at the national and European level. There is no doubt that certain issues belong together: digital infrastructure, network expansion, net neutrality, big data, data security, data privacy and intellectual property protection on the Internet. There is also no doubt that we need rules, regulations and instruments that can drive the digital transformation of our economy and society, avoid mistakes and missteps wherever possible, and move us ever closer to a Society, Economy and Industry 4.0 – both nationally and across Europe. But that won't happen – especially not at the pace that competition demands – if we work side-by-side or even against each other. It will only happen if we work together within a framework of clearly defined political responsibility.

Such responsibility would best be held by a Federal Economic Affairs Ministry with unequivocal authority over a convergent energy

and digital strategy and the mandate to forge a European energy and digital union. It would be wise, however, not to even try to entrust the direct management of this highly disruptive process to a ministry. That's a recipe for the patchwork policy-making we see today. Instead, this task could be turned over to a body modeled on the entrepreneurially run Federal Employment Agency – a Federal Agency for Digital Affairs and Society: self-managed, politically independent, constituted under public law and staffed in equal parts by representatives of labor, industry and government.

MOBILIZING OUR SHARED ENERGIES

Ideally, our state governments would come together to refocus and coordinate their educational policies in a way that addresses the burgeoning shortage of skilled labor and growing unemployment in the low-wage sector. What we need are more specialized vocational training programs; more teachers in schools and higher-learning institutions; dramatic increases in spending on daycare, schooling, universities, science and research; and daycare centers, schools, colleges and universities that are better equipped in every respect.

Our goal must be to mobilize and pool all our energies, both at the state and federal level and in industry, science and policy-making. This is serious business: it aims to do nothing less than create the digital conditions to future-proof the German and European economies and prepare them for ever-fiercer competition among the major regions of the world. And it requires bold, clear signals. One such signal would be the establishment of a Superministry for a Convergent Energy and Digital Strategy, an associated Federal Agency for Digital Affairs and Society, and coordinated state-level educational and research policies designed to kick-start our entrance into the digital economy and society.

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