

Hans Krause Hansen & Joop Hoffmeyer

Digital Governance:// Networked Societies

Creating Authority,
Community and
Identity in a
Globalized World

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Hans Krause Hansen and Jens Hoff (eds.)

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Series foreword

Traditionally, politics has been understood as the ways in which people negotiate and legitimate the allocation of values in society – often focusing on the institutions of parliamentary democracy. In recent decades, however, a somewhat broader understanding has gained ground, associating politics with more diverse social goals and with equally diverse means of attaining them. Politics includes what people practice in a range of social contexts where they conceive of themselves as citizens, consumers, and cocreators of culture. The field of politics does not have one center, but is distributed, partly because of the presence of the media.

Politics is, to a significant degree, conducted in and through the media. And, the media have themselves contributed to new practices of political participation that involve a growing range of actors and interests. From the local newspaper to the Internet, the media represent a meeting ground and battleground that is an integrated part of political activities involving both established and emerging social interests and groups.

This development has been addressed by a national research program in Denmark, 'Media and Democracy in the Network Society' (MODINET), during 2002-2006, with contributions by close to 50 researchers from media studies and social sciences.

The series of seven books presents the findings and implications of the research program. Each book identifies and examines a particular dimension of politics and media. From the local to the global level. Across state, business, and civil society. In the interplay between 'old' and 'new' media. And with reference to several contested notions of contemporary society as a 'network,' 'information,' or 'knowledge' society.

The book series includes empirical studies, theoretical reflections,

as well as policy deliberations concerning the field of media and politics. As such, it seeks to stimulate both further research and public debate on 'the network society' – what it is, and what it might become.

The MODINET research program was funded by a grant from the Danish Research Agency. During 2002-2004, it was directed by Professor Ib Bondebjerg, and during 2004-2006 by Professor Klaus Bruhn Jensen. Further information on the program and its activities is available at <http://modinet.dk>, which will be archived at <http://netarkivet.dk>.

Copenhagen, June 2005

Klaus Bruhn Jensen

1 Introduction

The purpose of this volume is to examine the role of new media, the Internet in particular, in the creation and reconfiguration of political authority, community and identity in a world marked by globalization, and thereafter to discuss some of the challenges these developments pose for politics and democracy. The rise of the new media and their spreading into social life on a global scale in recent decades has led to speculation about how these media impinge upon social organization and political life. Influential voices in the discussions include Manuel Castells, famous for his insistence on the new media as important “facilitators” of production, experience, power and culture in the network society (Castells, 1996: 469), and Ian Hutchby (2001a: 444-447; 2001b), who has proposed that we consider the “affordances” of the media, i.e. their functional characteristics and relational potentialities, which frame the possibilities for human action. In terms of their affordances, the new media make certain forms of communication easier than others, offering us a horizon of opportunities with ramifications for social life.

Organized around a string of case studies, this volume explores how the potential for social change is facilitated by the affordances of the new media. This potential is manifest in the formation of new organizational forms and authorities of a transnational and local character, as well as in the creation of public spheres, communities and identities that challenge existing notions of territoriality and functionality. Our acknowledgement of the new media as important facilitators of these processes should not be interpreted as a concession to

technological determinism. The dynamics of social practices and institutions will always shape the architecture of the media themselves. The Internet offers a good case in point. As Castells has pointed out, the Internet is “a particularly malleable technology,” which is “susceptible of being deeply modified by its social practice and leading to a whole range of potential social outcomes – to be discovered by experience ...” (2001: 5). These modifications, social practices and outcomes are all important matters for research to identify and understand. And they are, we argue, intrinsically related to the ways in which social actors choose to engage themselves with the new media. Choices are never made in the abstract, but always shaped by resources and the broader “technological frames” shared by social actors, i.e. the particular ideas as to how problems can be resolved and new opportunities created through the use of media (Bijker, 1995; Hoff and Bjerke, 2004).

To understand the facilitation of social and political outcomes by the new media, we will unravel how they shape the transformation of political authority and power, the diversification of the public sphere and the rise of new communities and identities. First, we recognize the foresight of David Easton (1971 [1953]: 137), that political authority can assume an infinite variety of forms by referring to entities, actors, processes and beliefs that are not necessarily related to the epitome of modern and formal political authority: the state.¹ The state is undoubtedly an important institutional and ideational system, but an exclusive focus on the state – *state-centrism* (Pierre, 2000) – has become insufficient when it comes to understanding the emergence of systems of governance that cross the conventional “public-private” and “national-international” distinctions. Jan Aart Scholte (2005: 185 pp.) has described this new set-up as *polycentric*, with multi-sited and decentred forms of governance, and with non-state actors as well as cross-cutting organizational forms playing an important role, fre-

1 Easton writes: “At most, the state ... is a particular institutional form that political life takes at some historical moment” (ibid: 142).

quently orchestrated by the state. We specifically examine some of the new organizational forms operating on different scales in Chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5, pointing out how they challenge traditional conceptions of power that have often been associated with notions of who gets what, when, and how in national political systems. Overall, we view power as determined by the access (or non-access) to, and the acceptance (or non-acceptance) of, the processes and decisions involved when different actors, possibly including non-state or hybrid organizational forms, seek to assert themselves as political authorities, as well as by the access to and recognition of these authorities themselves. In a polycentric set-up, in other words, the nature of political authorities cannot be taken for granted.

Second, as political authority has become decentred, with multiple authorities regulating territorially as well as functionally, the public – or *the public sphere* – has become diversified. This development has been recognized by Habermas (2001), among others, who analyzes the diversification of the public sphere in a variety of functional and thematic publics. While there is no one-to-one correspondence between the multiplication of political authorities and the diversification of publics, many of the new authorities regarded as important by decision-makers and citizens are possibly embedded in a public sphere in the same manner as formal political institutions are. At any rate, the emergence of new public spheres revolving around the agendas set by a plurality of political authorities is transpiring against the backcloth of the “media explosion”, which has been unfolding over the last 15-20 years (Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999). Dealing with the full extent of this development exceeds the scope of this book, but in Chapters 8, 9 and 10, we explore how the Internet might complement, undermine or reconfigure existing public spheres and traditional mass media, thereby impacting the contours of political communication in local settings.

Third, and related to the proliferation of political authorities and public spheres beyond the nation-state space in a context of media explosion, is the question of community and identity, specifically analyzed and discussed in Chapters 6 and 7. Recent research (e.g. Well-

man et al., 1996; Wellman and Gulia, 1996; Rheingold [1993], 1999) has revealed that different features of the Internet, such as usenet groups, chats, mailing lists, intranets and blogs, support a variety of social ties, be they strong or weak, instrumental, emotional, social or affiliative. In other words, the Internet constitutes communities that appear to differ from offline communities only when it comes to establishing relations of trust or making decisions on difficult issues (see also Chapter 4). However, the discussion is taken a step further in Chapter 6, which points to the fact that the identification of the body is required in computer-based social systems, especially as they assume more institutionalized forms. The connection between computer identities and corporeal identities creates new social systems, implying that new media such as the Internet do not only *reflect*, but also actively *create* sociality. In short, whereas membership in many contemporary online as well as offline communities is certainly a result of deliberative individual choice (Giddens, 1991), membership of other communities is defined by the manner of identification demanded by corporations, public sector institutions and other organizations. These varying types of membership all play a role in the structuring of identity in modern, reflexive societies.

New Medium Theory

It has become commonplace to argue that the technological potentialities of the Internet can serve democratic as well as non-democratic purposes (van de Donk et al., 1995; Hague and Loader, 1999; Hoff (ed.), 2006): the former when the Internet is used to decentralize control over information, thus undermining the information monopoly of authoritarian regimes, or when it enables an all-to-all public debate on pertinent public issues (see also Chapters 9 and 10 in this volume). Conversely, the Internet can serve non-democratic purposes when networks of neo-Nazis or Islamic terrorists construct websites and use email to promote their beliefs or coordinate subversive activities; or when the Chinese government seeks to restrict the access of the gen-

eral population to oppositional groups in China and abroad via the Internet; or when the “war on terrorism” leads the US Government to impose restrictions on Internet use (see www.citizenlab.org; see also Deibert, 2003; Bjerke, 2005).

However, the fact that the Internet can be utilized for both democratic and non-democratic purposes does not mean that its affordances are irrelevant – to the contrary. In this volume, our analysis of the role of the new media in politics is particularly inspired Ian Hutchby (2001ab) and Ronald Deibert (1997), both of whom place themselves somewhere between technological determinist and social constructivist views on technology. Deibert is particularly indebted to classical medium theory, known from the works of especially Marshall McLuhan and Harold Adam Innis. Through their lens, the transformation of basic information into knowledge is perceived as being dependent on the medium used. The medium is never neutral, and the question about how the transmission of conceptions and knowledge about the world is organized has a profound effect on conceptions and worldviews. However, Deibert refines this argument considerably by integrating insights drawn from social constructivist research on technology into the original formulations of medium theory. On the one hand, he criticizes the technological determinism of traditional medium theory in which media tended to be viewed as autonomous agents, suggesting instead that communication media be envisioned as structural features of the technological landscape – i.e. as *media environments* – in which human beings are interacting and continuously shaped by historically anchored social forces, knowledge and interests. Furthermore, he proposes that each communication medium be understood in terms of its own logic or nature – media are different. The point is that specific media will always impose certain constraints or limitations on the nature and type of possible human communications while facilitating other types. Importantly, however, they can never impose thought or behaviour in a one-to-one fashion.

On the other hand, Deibert also criticizes social constructivism: its strength lies in the emphasis on the role of human actors and social

context in shaping technologies and media, but it tends to ignore any effects attributable to the technology itself *once introduced*: “It is important to remember that although social forces may give direction to technological innovation, they are not completely determinant; once introduced a technology becomes part of the material landscape in which human agents and social groups interact, having many unforeseen effects” (Deibert, 1997: 29). Like Deibert, Castells views technology as embodied in socially conditioned technical relationships. Moreover, because technology is as decisive in the realm of power as in the realm of production, it must be considered a specific layer of the social structure (Castells, 2000: 8-9).

Hoff and Bjerke (2004) have developed a model of the dialectical relations between technology and social practices and thought, which Deibert and Castells are pointing at here. The model (see Figure 1.1) illustrates how the configuration of technology – here hardware and software – will have important repercussions for the practices that such hardware and software are part of, as well as for the discourses surrounding the very same practices. However, the model might also be read from the top, illustrating that discourses and their related practices will inevitably affect the development of software and hardware over time.

In this model, we understand the technological developments related to the rise of new media as a consequence of the interplay



Figure 1.1: The dialectical relations between hardware, software, practices and discourse

between four levels: hardware, software, practices and discourses. The upward-pointing arrows should be read as “constitutes the basis for”. Hardware thus constitutes the basis for software, software constitutes the basis for the practical usefulness of the new media, and the technologically mediated practices constitute the basis for the ways in which groups or actors in society can think and talk about such practices. The arrows pointing downwards should be read as “affects” or “place demands on”. In other words, discourses feed back on practices that create new demands on the applicability of the next generation of hardware and software, or practices affect software, e.g. by using it in ways not originally intended by its developers.

If “software” was removed from the model, the model would describe technology prior to the advent of the new media. Software performs an automatic transformation of abstract information, i.e. information processed independent of its meaning. This introduces a layer between the material technologies and the practices that handle information. This layer can substitute social practices (email is a good example, as it can substitute ordinary mail) as well as enable new practices and discourses.

Casting a glance at current developments can further exemplify the model. When digital technology emerged in the information industries, it changed the way they were organized and, by implication, important business practices. Digital technologies facilitated the rise of information networks capable of efficiently sending information over great distances at low cost. In this manner, business practices were transformed as regards suppliers and customers, production processes, management, finance and financial markets (Singh, 2002: 3; Castells, 2001). A related effect on practices more broadly speaking was the subsequent massive dissemination of hardware and software in society, implying a steeply increased access to this infrastructure by government, politicians, organizations, companies and individuals. Today, the leading software and hardware developing companies are those who manage the de facto market standards while simultaneously protecting their intellectual property rights. The concept of *wintelism* – Windows + Intel – captures what is at stake

here (Borrus and Zysman, 1997). Representing the combined power of Microsoft and Intel over the architectural standards of personal computers, "Microsoft's operating systems and Intel's microprocessors are not just superior pieces of equipment that the competition might hope to match or surpass with a reasonable effort," as Kim and Hart have argued (2002: 143). And they continue: "Rather, for some years now, they have served as structural constraints – the rules of the game – that every firm entering the industry has to accept." In a more general sense, Wintelism can be understood as a new form of industrial governance that originated in the computer industry and which introduces a new mode of competition. This mode of competition "puts pressure on firms and governments everywhere not only to adjust to the new principles of competition, but also to adopt new forms of industrial governance and state-societal arrangements" (Kim and Hart, 2002: 143; see also Borrus and Zysman, 1997).

A series of political implications flow from these technological and economic developments. First, operating systems, programs and microprocessors have overtaken much of the reproduction, dissemination, storing, presentation, formatting, organising, filtering and control of politically relevant information, meaning that important aspects of the exercise of power have been automated. Automatic surveillance, registration, filtering, authentication and permitting are proliferating practices, and trusted computing, where companies and others may require checking the programs on private computers, appears to become yet another crucial step in intensifying the automatic exercise of power. This kind of power is absolutistic in the sense that when the programs have been thoroughly tested and implemented, they exercise power strictly according to the rules without any organizational slack or corruption. In other words, new ruling techniques seem to emerge.

It goes without saying that the control over programs rendering such activities possible becomes decisive for the availability of information. This has given rise to discourses addressing the question of Internet governance, including issues such as access, privacy, copy-

right, supervision, standards, and so on. While some of these issues are not entirely new, they take on new meaning and importance in the context of the Internet. The outcomes of political struggles concerning these issues have potentially important repercussions for democracy, e.g. the current changes made to copyright legislation rendering access to political information more difficult.

Second, the new media are increasingly being adapted by governments on a global scale and vividly referred to in a discourse that stages the new media as an important vehicle for improving public sector organizations' internal operations and external communication with companies, civil society organizations and citizens (Hansen and Salskov-Iversen, 2005ab). Bodies of administration have adapted database and communication technologies that have improved the capacity to register and acquire information as well as expanded the production and dissemination of political information. These developments have not only implied huge investments in areas relating to e-government, e-governance, e-business, e-learning and so on in the Western world, but equally so in the Global South, where the Internet is increasingly used to expand mass learning opportunities, and mobile phones offer cheap and flexible means of spreading information and campaigning for changes extending to every corner of society. International development organizations are also increasingly taking the Internet as not only the most effective and cheapest means of reaching into poverty stricken areas with updated messages and direct campaigns, but also to coordinate their own activities. In this sense, the new media impinge on established patterns of management and governance in a variety of ways. As pointed out in Chapter 3, the growing attention to the potentials inherent in the new media in any context of government and society, and not least as regards the sustainable development of the Global South, has prompted the creation of specialized policy and knowledge networks in which politicians, state professionals and other specialists share knowledge and co-operate on issues related to the new media. To phrase these observations differently: the new media have come to represent a new

space of and for management and governance.

A third implication concerns the ways in which the Internet has become an intrinsic aspect of the social, economic and political landscapes, more broadly speaking. As individuals, groups, organizations and authorities have begun to adopt and use the new media extensively, a dislocation of communicative action from territorialized spatial units such as the nation state has become increasingly possible. Global financial issues can be settled instantly; politics – high or low, local or global – can be made and arranged on strategic sites in cyberspace, as pointed out in Chapter 2, and not least, as Chapter 6, 7 and 8 illustrate, identities and communities of various sorts can be (re)constructed through online or offline activities, or by a combination of both.

In other words, if certain types of media make certain types of communication easier and others more difficult, this will have consequences for social organization, although these consequences may be difficult to specify in detail. In the long run, some forms of social organization, production and culture may survive and proliferate, while others may wither away. In order to understand how and why, however, we must investigate the historical and social embeddedness of technology, how the creation and dependence of technologies rely on the knowledge and structures of authority characteristic of a given point in time.

Power, authority and governance in the network society

Castells has suggested that we refer to our current epoch as the Information Age, the fundamental feature of which is “the information technology paradigm” (1996: 60pp), which permeates all spheres of society. Cheap inputs of information derived from advances in micro-electronics and telecommunications technology are replacing or subsuming the technological paradigm of the Industrial Age, organized primarily around the production and distribution of energy. With the