

Book Review

Digital Governance://Networked Societies. Creating Authority, Community and Identity in a Globalized World, by Hans Krause Hansen and Jens Hoff, eds, (Samfundslitteratur Press/NORDICOM, 2006)

This book is an edited collection based on a working group under the Danish national research programme, ‘Media and Democracy in the Network Society’ (MODINET), which, during 2002–2006 comprised close to 50 researchers from social science and humanities (mainly from media studies and political science). This edited collection is one of seven different books in the overall series related to the research programme. As the initial sentence in the introductory chapter explains, the book has set an overall aim of examining the role of new media (in reality, the Internet) in the creation, and reconfiguration, of political authority, community and identity, in a world marked by globalisation. In addition, it aims to discuss some of the challenges this development poses for politics and democracy. Although this is an admirable goal, one must naturally question whether this is actually possible to achieve, given this is an edited collection with predominantly Danish case studies, and with scarce space for developing new theory. This being said, the book presents in fact some novel, in particular empirical, insights within the on-going discussion on the Internet’s role in various political processes.

The introductory chapter by Hoff, Krause Hansen and Bjerke presents a number of conceptual points of departure for the volume. The authors premise their framework on three, interrelated ‘meta-transitions’ in politics and society. First, the authors address the dislocation of the nation-state, and consequently, state-centric accounts of political authority, where political authority has become decentred, and not necessarily related to the formal authority of the state. Instead it is dispersed and resides among both state and non-state ‘authorities’. Equally, power is determined by the access (or non-access) and acceptance (or non-acceptance) of the processes and decisions involved when different actors seek to assert themselves as political authorities. Consequently, it is no longer possible to take the nature of political authority for granted. Secondly, and as a consequence to the dislocation of authority, the *public sphere* has become diversified. New public spheres evolve (such as ‘debate realms’ on the Internet), old spheres disperse (such as classical media), and others manage to transform themselves. Thirdly, the changes in political authority and public sphere lead to changes in our communities and identities. In particular, the Internet contributes to new social, emotional and instrumental bonds, and ties, beyond the ‘off-line’ equivalents.

Following this presentation of the meta-transitions in society, the authors present their own theoretical framework which entails, according to the authors, a new perspective on ‘medium theory’ (including a revised understanding of society-technology relationships), power, authority and governance, publics and media, and finally, community and identity. However, for the readership of Manuel Castells (and other scholars in the field of Internet/media and politics), I surmise that the perspectives presented are neither radical nor novel. Assertions like ‘new communication media dislocate the public sphere’, ‘power/authority in the information age/the globalised world is no longer located to (nation-) states and formal institutions’ and ‘the new media enable the creation of versatile identities’ have almost become truisms in the Internet literature. I would personally like to have seen something more solid in the theoretical chapter that went further than the ‘usual suspects’ of vague, sweeping, and sometimes esoteric, *Zeitgeist* observations. The authors simply try to encapsulate far too many different theoretical

discussions, and do not provide a coherent and solid theoretical framework that can guide any empirical work. Also, I did find it a little unsettling that the terms Internet, medium and technology are used as interchangeable terms throughout the chapter, in particular since I gained the impression that the purpose of the chapter was to present a generic theoretical framework. Having said that, the new notion of authority, as well as the new understanding of power (as access and acceptance), serves well as a backbone for the book. The authors should have developed that area instead of trying to capture the notions of global changes and theoretically revise the relationship between technology and society. Even though the ambition of the theoretical overview chapter is to give concepts of globalisation, political power, authority and media, and therefore should guide the rest of the contributions to the book, the empirical chapters in the book are rather disparate in terms of the theoretical foundation, and only to a limited extent guided by the introductory chapter. Some of the empirical chapters are limited to Danish case studies without any references to the globalisation discussion, others have very little to do with politics and governance (not even in the widest conception), and some only mention ICT in a passive voice.

That being said, most of the empirical contributions represent interesting reading, and the book comprises several high-quality examples of theoretically well-informed empirical case studies which transcend our present understanding of the relationship between political authority and ICT politics and policy. I will in particular mention four contributions.

In their chapter on the International Federation of Accountants (IFAC), Loft & Humphrey analyse the importance of the Federation's use of modern ICTs for constructing global authority. This authority, exercised by a formally private association, goes beyond state borders, and has had a significant impact on global governance by setting certain standards for international auditing and accounting across the world. While professional standards of international auditing at first glance might seem insignificant (and at least to this reviewer a bit 'gloomy'), the authors demonstrate how significant these standards are for national market regulators, central bankers, and naturally accountants, thereby regulating the world markets in an efficient, but subtle, way. The Federation's website (IFAC.ORG) becomes, in this context, not only a virtual representation of the organisation, but also perpetuates the organisation's authority world-wide.

Flyverbom and Hansen's chapter on global networks in the field of ICT and sustainable development is another interesting chapter in the volume, even though it actually concerns global governmentality from a policy perspective, rather than new media. The authors investigate how two different global networks (The UN ICT Task Force and the Global Knowledge Partnership) have been able to create authority despite the lack of coercive instruments. Instead, these rather small, networked and transnational organisational forms have through the articulation of *political rationalities* (i.e. problems and solutions), and through the intervention of *governance techniques* (e.g. multi-stakeholder participation and the creation of consensus) been able to gain political authority in the policy field in the global arena.

The next chapter in the volume to which I would like to draw attention to is Christensen's chapter on how new ICTs are used to shape transnational networks among social movements (more exactly, *alter-globalisation* movements which, according to the author, sometimes are wrongly called anti-globalisation movements). Even though the author emphasises the importance of face-to-face encounters for the normal practice of these social movements, she also concludes, on the basis of empirical studies, that the Internet is an important tool for these social movements to co-ordinate actions, mobilise actors across the world, recruitment, and not least, to create a global common discourse of knowledge and views.

The final contribution I would mention, is by Kimby on the on-line identity shaping among women who have been diagnosed with breast cancer. Even though the chapter stands out as odd in the company of

the other chapters on political authorities, it is a well written chapter about an interesting theme. Kimby shows, in contrast to much prior work on online empowerment of patients, that the use of the Internet among this patient group is to a limited extent about becoming more active in the decision-making about therapy and treatment. Instead, empowerment of this group is more about re-articulating the self after experiencing a loss (i.e. the breast) and regaining power of an 'anarchistic body'. The use of the Internet, through personal websites and debate boards, has more to do with the subjective experience of the illness than the actual clinical decision-making process *vis-à-vis* the medical expertise.

In conclusion, even though the editors do not fully succeed in producing a workable and consistent theoretical framework, many of the individual contributions demonstrate ground-breaking and high quality research which empirically show the importance of going beyond traditional perceptions of political authority when we study the significance of the Internet. In addition, I should also like to point out the uneven quality of English, which made certain passages difficult to comprehend. This, given the nature of the book, is quite unacceptable.

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