'Accounts' of Information Technologies and an Information Society

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Kenneth L. Hacker and Jan van Dijk (eds), *Digital Democracy: Issues of Theory & Practice*. London: Sage, 2000. ISBN 0–7619–6217–4 (hbk), 228 pp.

Scott Lash, *Critique of Information*. London: Sage, 2002. ISBN 0–7619–5269–1 (pbk), 234 pp.

Christopher May, *The Information Society: A Sceptical View*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002. ISBN 0–7456–2685–8 (pbk), 189 pp.

The social analysis of internet-centred information and communication technologies (ICTs) has involved a great deal of side-taking. In the words of one recent analyst, it has seen 'spells of skepticism', 'bouts of optimism' and 'waves' of commentaries (Latham, 2002: 102). Optimists maintain that the internet does a lot of good things to democracy, community and citizens (Cairncross, 1997; Klein, 1999; Rheingold, 1993). Pessimists argue that a democratic distribution of access to the internet is unlikely (Norris, 2001), that those who do have access to the internet do not necessarily use it in any civil or democratic manner (Lea et al., 1992), and that the internet is a new arena of capitalist monopoly and state regulation and surveillance (Lessig, 1999; Lyon, 1994). Debates between these two camps are endless, since both sides seem to have evidence to support their arguments. It is not surprising, therefore, that inbetween these two opposing sides may be located a third camp, namely, skeptics. Skeptics have an ambivalent attitude toward ICTs. They see some possibilities of change but emphasize that ICTs are embedded in social structures, implying that the uses of ICTs are determined by social structures, not the other way round.

All the three books listed above are implicated in this side-taking game. *Digital Democracy* and *The Information Society* are both guided by the assumption that ICTs are an addition to, not a replacement of, what already exists. Their authors are skeptics. In his *Critique of Information*, Scott Lash goes in the opposite direction. He not only sees ICTs as transforming the world, but begins with the assumption that information and communication structures are displacing social structures. What I would attempt to do here, besides reviewing the main arguments in these books, is to argue that no single side involved in these side-taking efforts holds the whole truth. Rather, each study provides an 'account' of its own version of reality. Understood in the context of Harold Garfinkel's (1967) ethnomethodology, an account is a narrative attempt by social members to make sense of their own world, which is at the same time constitutive of the phenomena that it makes observable and reportable. It is a story, and like all stories it is about some parts of the 'thing', not everything. It is the coexistence of different sides that attests to the open and contested nature of the new technologies. I argue that such side-taking precisely shows that the meaning of ICTs lies in their diversity, not in any one of their numerous dimensions.

In *The Information Society: A Sceptical View*, Christopher May debunks what he considers as exaggerated views of the information revolution. He argues that it is not that the new ICTs have not brought about real changes, but that the changes are quantitative, not qualitative. Focusing on the effects of ICTs on labor and property, community and politics and the role of the state, May argues that ICTs have added some new elements, but have replaced nothing. First, May contends that the claim about the obsolescence of class in the information society is greatly inflated, because the information society remains divided by the ownership of intellectual property. Second, he argues that new ICTs may have enhanced already existing communities and forms of communication, but have not transformed them. Finally, he maintains that in fact, instead of being weakened in the information age, the state, with its power to institute and enforce jurisdiction, plays a crucial role in facilitating and delivering the sort of information society that we want. Challenging the assumption that new technologies will change the world automatically, May suggests the possibility of alternative trajectories and creating different kinds of information societies. Thus he ends on a 'sceptical yet hopeful' (2002: 158) note, stating: 'We can recognize the possibilities and potentiality of the information society, but we have to make it happen, there is no "natural" development path' (2002: 160–1). From the point of view of practical action, this is a very appealing ending. Its message is that we are all responsible for the kind of information society that we are in, yet it is unclear what alternative trajectories there are and how to choose among them.

However, May's book cannot be faulted for not offering alternatives. Its main purpose is to assess various claims about the information society. As

such, the book provides one of the most comprehensive and wide-ranging critical assessments I have seen. It is a valuable handbook for teaching and research. But while I agree with May's assessment, I come away from the book ultimately dissatisfied: the problem is that I have no problem accepting both his arguments and an opposite argument at the same time.

In some ways, *Digital Democracy*, edited by Kenneth L. Hacker and Jan van Dijk, repeats Christopher May's attempt to adjudicate the celebratory and pessimistic claims about the information revolution. The editors define digital democracy as:

> [A] collection of attempts to practise democracy without the limits of time, space and other physical conditions, using ICT or CMC [computer-mediated communication] instead, as an addition, not a replacement for traditional 'analogue' political practices. (2000: 1)

The argument that ICTs are an addition to, not a replacement for, existing practices, sounds remarkably like Christopher May's argument. Also somewhat resembling May's work is an attempt among some authors of this volume to evaluate current claims about digital democracy. Three such claims are scrutinized. The first is that digital democracy improves political information retrieval and exchange between governments, public administrations, representatives, community organizations and citizens. The second is that digital democracy supports public debate and community formation. The third is that it enhances participation in political decision-making by citizens. The authors conclude that digital democracy has contributed in reaching the first claim, but the second claim is only partially justified and the third is untenable.

As interesting as these assessments may be, they cannot be taken as definite. To do so would violate the very principles underlying the volume. The 12 essays in this volume constitute a strong plea for deeper understanding of the conflictual nature of politics as well as of the contradictory role of new information technologies within it. To these authors, the nature of politics, political institutions, community and citizenship matters more than any technology. Thus, in exploring the effects of ICTs on democracy, the authors follow two guidelines. First, they argue that political will and political choices play a central role in shaping the use of technology. Second, they accept a message from Thomas Friedman's best-seller *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (2000) that 'we live in an age in which everything is true along with its opposite' (Hacker and van Dijk, 2000: 209). Guided by these arguments, the authors set out to examine the problems of democracy, the fragmentation of public spheres, as well as the technological features of the internet and its multiple and contradictory uses. Jan van Dijk's chapter on 'Models of Democracy and Concepts of Communication', for example, begins with a discussion of different models of democracy and then moves on to an analysis of how these

different models may shape the applications of ICTs. In this context van Dijk raises the question of interactivity in online political activities, arguing that instead of being an automatically interactive medium, the internet, like other kinds of interactive media, has to be combined with face-to-face interactions to achieve fully developed social interactions. Similarly, John Keane argues in his chapter on the 'Structural Transformations of the Public Sphere' that an adequate understanding of the role of new media requires new understandings of the nature of public spheres. For this purpose, much of his chapter is devoted to an analysis of three different levels of public spheres, micro, meso and macro. Sinikka Sassi (2000: 95) shares Keane's concerns with the fragmentation of public spheres but makes the interesting argument that while 'the publics are fragmenting, the issues are uniting'. These authors all point to the contradictions and tensions surrounding ICTs, thus lending force to the central argument articulated by the editors that the age of the internet is an age of opposites.

Given the authors' explicit concern with empirical developments, it is surprising that neither *Digital Democracy* nor *The Information Society* explores the uses of ICTs by transnational civil society organizations, namely, organizations that stretch beyond national borders in their activities. Christopher May mentions several well-known internet-based transnational protest movements (the Zapatistas, the campaign against the Multilateral Agreement on Investment and the Seattle protest against the World Trade Organization), but dismisses the role of the internet in them too hastily. While the editors of *Digital Democracy* define digital democracy as an attempt to practice democracy without the limits of time, space and other physical conditions, they do not take the new time–space dimensions seriously enough. They stay focused on state-centered politics, thus ignoring the important ways in which ICTs have contributed to the linkages among transnational civil society organizations (for one interesting account of internet use by transnational non-governmental organizations (NGOs), see Warkentin, 2001).

While the authors of *Digital Democracy* and *The Information Society* are concerned with the empirical implications of ICTs, Scott Lash's concerns in *Critique of Information* are mainly theoretical. For some readers, it might even seem to be a stretch to discuss Lash's book alongside the other two, but it turns out that such an exercise is instructive. Scott Lash's *Critique of Information* tackles a broad range of themes on information and critical theory. Three related themes are of particular interest. First, Lash offers a sociology of the information society or, in his own terminology, a 'mediology'. Building on the 1994 *Economies of Signs and Space,* which Lash co-authored with John Urry, Lash argues in *Critique of Information* that the world has entered a global informational order where information and communication structures are displacing social structures. It is through this argument that Lash grounds his claim that

sociology itself has been displaced by mediology. While sociology has to do with social structures, the displacing of social structures by information structures means that only mediology (which is about information and flows) can explain the new logic of media and communication.

Lash's notion of the information society both resembles and differs from Castells' (1996) notion of the network society. Like Castells, Lash emphasizes flows, circulation and networks. Unlike Castells, Lash takes a rather literal view of these attributes: they are the attributes of information, whereas Castells emphasizes the sociocultural dimensions of the network society. For Castells, a network society is a system of social structures based on network structures. For Lash, an information society is a system of information and communication structures. Where Castells sees society, Lash sees the 'primary qualities of information itself' (2002: 2).

The central part of Lash's sociology of the information society is his analysis of the logic of the new information and communication structures. Clearly influenced by the actor–network theory associated with Michel Callon and Bruno Latour, Lash argues that this is an immanentist logic, in the sense that humans and non-humans, cultural objects and material objects, are interfaced into one immanent plane of actor–networks. This is the logic of technological forms of life, the interfaces of humans and machines. As Lash puts it:

> As such an organic-technological interface, I say, 'I just can't function without my WAP mobile phone. I can't live without my laptop computer, digital camcorder, fax machine, automobile.' (2002: 15)

If Lash's notion of informational logic has some element of truth, then neither the technological determinism that the other two books explicitly reject nor the sociological determinism that they implicitly adopt makes much sense. Indeed, the thrust of Lash's immanentist argument, which is ultimately grounded in phenomenology, lies in its forthright rejection of the dualistic mode of thinking that is implicit in various versions of technological or sociological determinism.

Lash also offers a sociology of power and inequality, which derives from his sociology of the information society. Much like Castells, Lash argues that power is about exclusion, not exploitation. To have power is to be in the networks; to be powerless is to be left out 'from the loops of information and communication flows' (2002: 75). In addition, power is no longer as discursive as Foucault took it to be, but is informational. Discursive power operates under conditions of reflection and argument, informational power does not. On this basis, finally, Lash proposes a critical theory of information, arguing that in the information order, critique is possible only as 'informationcritique'. It is just another informational object in the world of information. Much like the flows of other kinds of information, a critical text works not through meaning or

reflection but through performance and operationality. Within the immanent plane of actor–networks, critique cannot be transcendental (as in traditional critical theory), but is only supplemental. Too modest to be 'the earlier "judge" of critical theory' (2002: 201), the critic of the information age can only be a modest witness. Lash borrows the notion of 'modest witness' from Donna Haraway (1996). As Lash puts it:

> To be a witness now means . . . 'to call to account' . . . You give an account to make sense of what you do and you are accountable for the consequences of what you do. Today's modest witness – who is so different from the neutral and immodest pure-scientific judge – bears witness to facts that are at the same time power. She bears witness to information that is trademarked, patented and accumulated as capital. (2002: 192)

In the world of political action, being a witness is a far cry from being a revolutionary or even a social reformer. Yet perhaps the image of a witness producing just another informational text in an information-overloaded world is precisely Scott Lash's way of capturing the hegemonic nature of this new order and the impotence of the transcendental critic in it.

Is Scott Lash implicated in the side-taking game of the social analysis of ICTs? Whether he intends it or not, the answer would have to be yes. The starting point of his analysis is the new informational order. For him, an information revolution has already happened and what he tries to do is to come to terms with its implications for critical theory. For him, an information revolution is an assumption; for the authors of the other two volumes, it is a hypothesis. How to reconcile the two sides, or for that matter, all the different sides implicated in this side-taking game?

I wonder whether a sociology of accounts might not provide some clues to this question (see Orbuch, 1997, for various sociological approaches associated with 'accounts'). Scott Lash himself uses Harold Garfinkel's language of accounts in outlining his phenomenology of information, but I hope that is no reason for considering my approach as being unfair to the authors of the other two volumes. What I would like to suggest here is that given all the side-taking in the debates on the social implications of ICTs, it makes sense to think of all different sides as merely offering their own 'accounts' of ICTs and the conditions of the contemporary world, that no one side holds all the truth and that the diversity of accounts reveals more about ICTs than any single account. Seen through this perspective, the new ICTs are all at once reasons for optimism, pessimism and doubt. They embody all the contradictions of our times. Collectively, they are probably as good a statement about the spirit of our age as about anything else. For their own part, the authors of *Digital Democracy* and *The Information Society* seem to still assume the role of the earlier judge of critical theory, a role which, according to Scott Lash, is no longer relevant in the

information age. Perhaps, after all, they are no less modest witnesses to the information age than Scott Lash. Even in rejecting the transformative role of ICTs, they offer accounts of them. They do so as actors within, not above, contemporary life. Thus, their accounts join those numerous other accounts to testify to the relevance of new ICTs in today's world.

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