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Ideology and policy: Notes on the  
shaping of the Internet

by Katharine Sarikakis

## Abstract

Ideology and policy: notes on the shaping of the Internet by Katharine Sarikakis

This paper considers some of the ideologies that are shaping Internet policies. It addresses the priorities of international policy initiatives and identifies their discursive constructions. It takes stock of some of the most characteristic policy directions that seek to define the Internet and its uses within an agenda of predominant privatisation.

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## Introduction

Given increased international interest in information technologies — thanks in part to the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) — it is useful to trace the ideological constructions of policies affecting the future of interactive communications. This paper considers the relationship between Internet policy and the impact of broader social issues in an economic and political environment that is becoming increasingly globalised. Not only procedural and organisational factors, but also an underlying philosophy about the purpose and function of the Internet undermine efforts for a public policy with redistributive aims. In fact, the rhetoric used to justify choices distorts the

deliberations of a debate in favour of policy with socially responsible objectives (McNutt, 2003).

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## Between potential and purpose

Beyond a medium of communication, the Internet represents a very particular and significant technology where interactivity and networking constitute its most exciting traits. Speed and borderlessness turn the Internet into a supermedium of contemporary times. Most importantly, the Internet's dynamic infrastructure — based on decentralised communication nodes and points of entry into already existent spaces (Web sites, chatrooms, archives and specialised portals) — offers possibilities for the construction of *new* spaces. The theoretically infinite networking capability and storage capacity add to the utmost winning qualities of a medium that can be used in multiple levels, ways and for a variety of purposes. This 'world of opportunity' and potential presents many qualities mostly valued by cyberactivists and educators, but also by many in the world of trade and finance.

Given the dynamics of the medium, the debate around the future of Internet can be easily directed toward an over-admiration of its technological characteristics. Hence generated deterministic ideas about the force of this technology have infiltrated not only the world of computer 'nerds' but also political and social worlds. These ideological constructions are obvious in policy proposals articulated in national and international policy forums, think tanks and even prophesying literature (see Kroker and Kroker, 1999).

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**The supposedly 'interwoven' fields of business and Internet are presented as an inescapable but also neutral - almost natural - relationship.**

Inevitability is one major component in this construction. It refers not only to the inevitability of technological development, but also to activities designed to respond to the technologies in question, such as de-skilling and re-skilling of the work force and the associated provisions for 'lifelong learning' (Sarikakis and Terzis, 2000) or the further privatisation of functions of the state (Cameron and Palan, 2004) as part of an unavoidable and necessary strategy that addresses technology in its capacity to generate business. The world of business — or in the language of policy-making, the private sector — is therefore attended to, not as a factor influential on the very direction of technological development and use but as a necessary partner. As Kroker and Kroker (1999) observe "there is nothing more relentlessly ideological than the apparently anti-ideological rhetoric of information

technology." The supposedly 'interwoven' fields of business and Internet are presented as an inescapable but also neutral — almost natural — relationship. The obvious example of this normative construction is exemplified in the inclusion of the private sector in the public policy-making process. The Okinawa Charter on Global Information Society clearly states "the private sector plays a leading role in the development of information and communications networks in the information society" [1]. It further declares the decision of the eight powerful countries to continue the "promotion of market-driven standards" [2]. Similarly, the World Summit on Information Society presents the decision to include businesses in the policy-making process as a factual observation that the sector is among the stakeholders and therefore a natural partner. Furthermore, the participation of the private sector is claimed to be necessary, as it constitutes an important partner in development efforts. In this context, it is similar to policies designed by the EU or the U.S., where corporation- or market-driven technological development is not addressed as a process where social relations are reflected, but is presented rather as almost 'accidental' and therefore ideology-free output, beyond the domains of interests. Williams and Edge (1996) noted the intervention of these factors upon two intersecting areas: content of technology and the innovation process.

As Russell (2001) noted, policies that initially shaped the technological development and the use of the Internet were based on ideas of decentralisation and non-hierarchical definitions of the medium. In a way, the purposes of the medium defined its development and use: it would provide the American military a great degree of flexibility of communications if command centres were destroyed in a nuclear attack. The decentralising ideals behind the Internet found a fertile ground within the military and scientific complex. The developmental phase was achieved under a normative construction of five intersecting ideas governing different stages of the process. These ideas shaped policy in the early years of the Internet:

"Basic research would drive the system; commercialization and the creation of new markets should follow "almost automatically" government investments in basic research; the control of science through legislation was of less importance than promoting the growth of scientific research; technology would play a crucial role in foreign policy, to maintain military superiority and as an enabler of free trade; and the ideological support for the consensus came with the widespread faith in the progress of science and understanding that the "growth of federal research served everybody's interests — universities, government agencies, industry, [and] congressional committees."" (Smith, 1990 in Russell, 2001)

The collaboration of the military and scientific community was encouraged through a climate of ideological consensus. As Hart (1998) noted, figures in American politics and economics "forged" a consensus throughout the course of the twentieth century. This consensus, built upon a number of normative constructions, ranging from "associationalism" to the New Deal liberalism.

The twenty-first century is witnessing a new period of policies designed to secure the 'occupied territories' of the Internet, after the 'trial' period, where Internet use for (marginalised) not-for-profit purposes proved the success of the technology. As it is most often the case with innovations, and especially the communication technologies of broadcasting, the marginalised civic sector has taken the new technology "forward before the corporate world figures out exactly the ways in which it can turn them into profit making instruments" (McChesney, 1996). The ideological and normative constructions of policy-making for the Internet express a form of *neo-liberalist determinism* that can be categorised in three major narratives: technological determinism, economic and structural inevitability and the ideology of private-public partnership, asserting the involvement of the private sector in public policy.

Currently, the domination of commercialised content and services has a diminishing effect on the strategic organisation of the Internet for civic engagement and education. Just like securing newly 'conquered' colonial spaces through the re-organisation of space and administration through a legitimatisation process, so does the Internet become re-defined and re-organised as a borderless and timeless trading space. The commercialisation of the Internet is being well-documented, because market surveys are inherent in this process. Thus, it is estimated that by 2007, consumers will account for 60 percent of all Internet traffic generated (NUA Internet Surveys, 2003). Despite the fact that the commercialisation of the Internet is defined and structured by policy at various levels, the logic of profit-making is used as a self-evident priority. It is presented as a driving force in the fate of the technology and its adoption, in a model similar to the development of commercial communications in the U.S. and Canada (McChesney 1996; Winseck 1998). Media policies in general, and Internet ones in particular, are absent from the public debate. The WSIS is hardly discussed in mainstream media, despite the fact that it constitutes an event of enormous significance for the future of world communications and related rights (Raboy, 2003). Despite the fact that numerous representatives of NGOs and civil society attended the first phase of the Summit, their involvement in the articulation of policy agenda has been seriously undermined through procedural architecture. It is worth mentioning that the private sector is guaranteed a seat and voice in the negotiations alongside the elected governments of nation states:

"b) The commitment of the private sector is important in developing and diffusing information and communication technologies (ICTs), for infrastructure, content and applications. The private sector is not only a market player but also plays a role in a wider sustainable development context.

c) The commitment and involvement of civil society is equally important in creating an equitable Information Society, and in implementing ICT-related initiatives for development." (World Summit on Information Society, 2003)

The private representation of interests by states and private sector is the outcome of an ideology that recognises the right of the private sector to be involved in decision-making processes, unaccountable to citizens — or even consumers — or states. The unbalanced representation of states in world policy summits (G8, WIPO, WTO, for example), due to a variety of factors and conditions, undermines even further the legitimacy of international processes and raises questions about their genuine consideration of public interests.



## Public policy bytes

Policy frameworks surrounding the Internet can be divided into two categories: those policies designed to deal specifically with matters arising from the possibilities of the Internet as a new technology; and, those policies designed to address issues related to a number of contextual conditions that are not exclusive to the Internet, generally called information society policies.

The "information society" (IS) is an ill-defined term that refers to the emergence of a society (that is, the organisation of relations) where information is the commodity and the product. This term has been used to define global policies within the context of ongoing global negotiations of the WSIS. As a policy object and discursive construction, the IS expresses the technocratic and market-focused visions of governments and businesses. These visions are not necessarily compatible with those of the civil society that calls for "information societies," a term identifying political and social life of the twenty-first century (APC, 2003).

Interestingly, policies directly and exclusively dealing with the Internet are limited, compared to the enormous literature circulated by activists, analysts and scholars. One of the areas that attracts a great deal of

attention by national and international policy-makers deals with the protection of profit-making activities. These are not limited to transactions over the Internet but encompass 'real' trade as well as virtual transactions, with anti-piracy measures being at the centre of concern by both transnational corporations and international policy-makers at meetings scheduled by WIPO, WTO, and G8 as well as WSIS.

Within this context, *security* constitutes a powerful keyword for the normative justification of a variety of state actions, from military action in the face of specifically defined forms of violence to the protection of trade spaces against practices that undermine the authority of the market. The construction of moral panics about the dangers of the Internet comes with specially designed software packages to make the cybermarket safer for navigation. *Security* touches upon the sensitive chords of human instincts of survival and protection, in particular when it brings children to the centre of such campaigns. The protection of vulnerable groups, such as children, is a policy object of the EU in restricting harmful content (European Parliament and Council of Europe, 1999). Although the interest of the EU in restricting such content is one of the characteristics of Internet policy that distinguish the EU from the U.S. (Franda, 2001), it mainly stresses the importance of self-regulation, depending almost exclusively on a model of socially responsible industry. The definition of what constitutes "harmful content" is neither clear nor conclusive; the assumption most widely accepted is that hate speech and child pornography are considered harmful content. Laws tend to be unclear or unwilling to deal with the pornographic industry on the Internet, despite some provisions against the depiction of non-consensual sex and sexual abuse. There are ongoing debates questioning pornography as a matter of free expression and examining relationships between virtual and physical crimes (Huff, *et al.*, 2003; University of Michigan, 1995) [3]. Nevertheless, the hate language and images accompanying pornographic sites — targeting women — do not seem to present problems to those profiting from the Internet. Although a thorough discussion of these trends is beyond the purpose of this paper, it is worth noting that a number of "respectable" telecommunication companies are now joining up with pornographic portals to boost the sales and use of new generation GSM telephones (Sarikakis, 2004). As these profitable collaborations increase, the industry become more "proactive" in self-regulating provisions surrounding new services. For example, recently one of the biggest telecommunication operators drafted a code of conduct that would protect children from adult content on GSM phones (Wray, 2004). Historically, this is similar to the early days of the cinema, where women and young people would use the movie theatres as places to socialise; an industry-based group, the Kinematograph Manufacturers Association, administered the censoring board (Eldridge, *et al.*, 1997). In both cases, the industry is first and foremost concerned with the protection of its interests in a newly acquired territory. The option of being subjected to state and

social control is less appealing than keeping the "house tidy" through self-regulation.

In Europe, the information society became an umbrella term under which issues related to the exploitation and commercialisation of new media (including broadcasting developments) were addressed. The European Commission (1993), although exaggerating the potential for new jobs and trade and industry growth, primarily focused on the economic dimensions of new communications technologies. The information society, as envisioned by the EU, expressed conflicting visions of Europe as a space of national and supranational activities, summoned around corporate interests and a regionally universalised community. It was explicitly stated that the welfare practices — a great European tradition — could no longer be followed (Cameron and Palan, 2004; European Commission, 1993). Therefore, the welfare state was replaced by corporate competition with a limited role for citizens in the information society.



## **Policies of liberation, policies of control**

The prospect of the Internet to further develop as an anarchic, hierarchy-free space of political and cultural action, and as an educational and information-g geared medium, is subsiding with the increased control of companies and states over its infrastructure and technology. Increasingly, free distribution and sharing of information and knowledge resources on the Internet is criminalised, reducing the potential of emancipatory uses of this medium. WIPO's own agenda revolves around the commercialisation of copyrights and intellectual property, which, under the current conditions of distribution and production, benefits mainly corporations. This control over content and infrastructure is at odds with a medium that began as a facilitator of open information exchange. As Bonetti (2003) noted, "intellectual property has become strongly connected to electronic commerce." The visions of a liberating coexistence of humans and machines differ from Bill Gates' perspective of human assistants using communication systems in the service of business (Gates, 1999).

- The regulation of private behaviour is becoming an
- inherent part of Internet regulation, with attention
- being predominantly focused on the wrongdoings of
- individuals.

The very production of technology has often shifted from "describing the user to configuring the user" (Cockburn and Ruza, 1994). There are parallels in the development of e-commerce policies, seeking to configure Internet users into a corporate model of consumers,

accepting an Internet based on paid-for content. Above all, copyright-related issues are heavily lobbied by media transnationals that do not hesitate to sue even children who exchange products through peer-to-peer programmes (Martell and Stevenson, 2003). As a result, policies are being designed predominantly not to regulate economy, but to regulate individual behaviour (Cameron and Pala, 2004). These trends echo some of the ideas of Aglietta (1979) and others that argue that a regime of accumulation corresponds to a regime of regulation. Broadly speaking, that regime aims at controlling individual and institutional behaviour in order that the regime of accumulation (production, labour relations) can be accepted. In the Internet case, policies increasingly tend to aim at regulating consumerist behaviour, that of end-receivers and end-users. "Intellectual property law is increasingly concerned with private behaviour — whereas the consumption and use of copyrighted material was previously concerned with public actions or actions of consumption in public" (Bonetti 2003).

Any discussion related to the information revolution and the expansion of the Internet is directly linked to the "liberalization" of telecommunications. In a similar and subsequent way, privacy rights are seriously undermined and become subject to the economic viability or value of a traded services or products. Moreover, the rhetoric of new technologies invents new regulatory definitions. The notion of privacy undergoes a re-definition and its criterion becomes, not standards for dignity and respect of individuals, but the potential damage to profit-making, caused by personal use of products. The regulation of private behaviour is becoming an inherent part of Internet regulation, with attention being predominantly focused on the wrongdoings of individuals. Indeed, market strategies are dominant, without regard to improve the material conditions of many on the planet, largely those concentrated in the developing world (Sarikakis and Terzis, 2000). These priorities are based on the fact that most of the use of the Internet is concentrated in the developed world (Eurobarometer, 2000).



## **Digital divide and social exclusion**

Social exclusion has become a popular term and is widely used by policy-makers and civil society actors alike. The term is used to express the inequalities in the information society and is often used in conjunction with the term "digital divide," which refers to the gap between the "haves" and "have-nots" of the digital age. Both terms address the problem of social groups not being able to participate in the new organisation of the world economies based on an "information currency." The predominant policies that seek to shape the future Internet are concerned with the inclusion of disinterested masses in a predetermined cybersociety that consists of the makings of corporate

capitalism — defined by a marketplace, a bureaucracy and a school. In spite of the enormous amount of hyperbole and enthusiasm for this new world, it is the powers and values of the very "real," physical world that determine its future. National and global policy debates comprise of provisions for e-commerce, e-government and e-learning. E-commerce denotes a set of activities where individuals essentially participate in consumption exercises. Consumers are at the receiving end of transactions aiming to boost further increase in consumption. E-governance aims at reducing the potential of individuals to directly interact with a "central" state by reducing access to administrative information. Digital forms of government information replace hard copy, making it difficult for some citizens to complete even the most basic forms and documents [4]. Further problems arise when state services are privatised, raising costs and excluding even more individuals and creating new forms of inequality. Moreover, even those citizens with access and skills are not actively incorporated into Internet-based decision-making processes.

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**The digital divide is no longer about poverty and inequality but instead about skills needed to be consumers in an information society.**

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The narratives of social exclusion have come to replace any other analysis of the socio-economic aspects of Internet policies. Given that policies focus on consumerism and economics, specific social groups are unable to pursue the "fundamental" consuming activity of the information society. Hence, the digital divide is no longer about poverty and inequality but instead about skills needed to be consumers in an information society. Consequently, it masks social inequalities by "rebranding" poverty as "exclusion" and class as "divide." As Cameron and Palan (2004) remark, the "poor who have always been with us" become unwanted. Social exclusion places the responsibility of poverty on the shoulders of the disadvantaged and turns their inability, or unwillingness, to participate in the information society into a burden that deprives consuming societies from revenue. It furthermore reduces inequalities to technology-related inadequacies, mostly addressed as matters of skills and access. In Canadian policies, the digital divide is addressed as an obstacle to the vision of turning Canada the most wired country on the planet (Birdsall, 2000). Information is treated as the new capital and the information society incorporates the vision of a predominantly consumerist set of relations. However, as Guédon (2003) suggested, Internet users have created a communication society that revolves around the sharing of knowledge and the empowerment of citizens through the fostering of networks. This form of "society" does not treat social exclusion as a technological problem but seeks to address socio-economic inequalities within the broader context of social determinants. Civil society, and in particular organisations working for gender justice and human rights, consider the Millennium Development Goals and the Beijing Platform for Action as inseparable

and interlinked projects that belong within the same broader context of combating the causes of social inequality (Venturelli and Queau, 2001; Gender Strategies Working Group, 2003).



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## Conclusions

If we seek a broad categorisation of ideological priorities in Internet and consequently information society policy, we can identify two overarching directions: predominantly market-directed and profit-motivated policies, represented largely by American telecommunications and information industries [5], and those policies that examine social justice and wealth re-distribution. However, the shaping of the Internet through national and major international policies has increasingly concentrated on facilitating and protecting its commercial aspects, without at the same time protecting non-profit, civil activities as well as those rights that enhance citizenship. Furthermore, there is an increasing attention to measures that criminalise once widespread practices of information exchange initially developed by communities on the Internet. Indeed, new efforts to control private behaviour introduces a radical shift in Internet policies, protecting commercial and private interests in a public policy framework. In this process, the participation of civil society actors remains sketchy, while the private sector becomes an equal next to state. The preliminary outcomes of the first phase of the WSIS in Geneva reflect the technocratic approaches privileged by the dominating actors of the negotiations. The first phase has paid not enough attention to issues of wealth redistributive policies, while it tended to address social inequality in technological terms. These trends reduce the beneficial potential of this medium for individuals, enhancing instead its profitability for corporations. 

## About the author

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## Notes

1. Group of Eight (G-8), 2000, point 7.
2. *Ibid.*
3. The shift tends to be toward a higher degree of tolerance of pornographic products (that should not be considered identical to sexually explicit material), through processes of mainstreaming of pornography in everyday life (Sarikakis, 2004).
4. The variety of cases where problems have been created by the replacement of physical transactions by electronic ones is an underreported area. In Greece, self-assessment for tax purposes can only be submitted electronically, causing a number of problems for citizens without home Internet access. Also, see Warschauer (2002) for a discussion of further social and psychological effects of Internet-imposed isolation among unemployed citizens in Ireland.
5. Here we can also locate policies that are concerned with the maintenance of state/political control over citizens, while at the same time maintaining a pro-market attitude. China or Singapore are important countries, the former due to its market size and the latter due to its position in telematics and its geopolitical strategic position relative to southeast Asia.

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