

**Policy, Politics, and the Local Internet  
(an introduction to the special issue)**

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## Policy, Politics, and the Local Internet

### An Introduction to the Special Issue

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Today, those who hope to transform society have a wide range of technologies at their disposal, not least the Internet. Yet some time ago, Thomas More set out to transform society using only an egg incubator. In the book that provided the genre of utopianism with its name, More's 16th century Latin best seller *Utopia* (1516/1965), technology appears only glancingly. The perfectly happy Utopians thought that the only implication of the egg incubator was eggs: More's imaginary future was made possible not through technology but through social organization. Five hundred years later, it seems that the implications of technology are more than eggs, and technology is thought to produce transformative social change. Each of the articles in this volume considers change and the Internet: specifically, how those in different societies have tried to define it, predict it, use it, and control how it can be used. Each of these articles also addresses utopianism, and tries to find the cultural locations where our visions of Internet technology make their home. This research puzzles over the interpenetration of technology and social organization. Taken together, these three stories tell us how the Internet in St. Petersburg is a different Internet than the one in Washington, D.C. or Singapore. Even if the wires and computers are identical, each culture uses the Internet and public policy to pursue a private utopia. In these accounts, while everyone cares about progress, one nation dreams of a new capitalism, another of a streamlined public opinion. Thomas More's Utopians dreamed of many things, but eggs and technology were merely footnotes.

"Technological utopianism" has become a commonly unexamined catchphrase in the scholarly study of technology, and the practice of this utopianism is a mundane part of public policy. A utopian narrative presents an ideal future, and as such it is social criticism of the present. Stories of perfect future societies suggest to us what must be changed to achieve perfection; they are a chance to dream but also to complain. Utopianism began as social criticism unrelated to technology. When describing his imaginary society, Thomas More mentioned at most three technological advances: the egg incubator, instruments for charting the stars, and a vague reference to warlike machines (Segal, 1985, p. 57). As a social critic and not a technological

prophet, More was keenly aware of the dangers of his craft. At the time the book appeared, subversive writing was cause for execution. As a defense, in *Utopia* (which means “no place”) he mixed trenchant attacks on current social ills and realistic reform proposals with humorous, fantastic, and absurd social arrangements. He added a further layer of indirection by structuring the book as a tale told to him by one Raphael Hythlodæus (Hythlodæus meaning “dispenser of nonsense”). This allowed More to be “as serious as he likes, while retaining, for use in emergencies, the excuse that he is only clowning” (Turner, 1965, p. 12).

While social criticism is not quite so dangerous as in More’s time, it remains risky. More’s distancing strategy is at work in past predictions about the Internet. As a hypothetical example, imagine the president of the United States making a speech to declare that the political process in the U.S. is fundamentally broken and nonparticipatory, economic opportunity is nonexistent for the lower classes, the U.S. is no longer a technological leader in many areas, the delivery of government services to citizens is often inefficient, the public education system does not adequately prepare children for satisfying jobs, and basic healthcare is not available in a large number of rural areas. Second, the president outlines a single public policy remedy for all of these social ills, at once. The scenario is fantastic: the first part political suicide, the second suicidal naïveté. Yet this list of social problems is adapted directly from the “Benefits and Applications of the National Information Infrastructure” (Clinton & Gore, 1993). Speaking about what new technology will do allows political actors to appear to engage social problems that resonate with the electorate, appear familiar with the positive image of technology and progress, and yet remain uncommitted to radical proposals for change, or even remain free of any public acknowledgment that such change is necessary. The National Information Infrastructure (that would become the Internet in later policy statements) represents positive if unspecific action for all of these problems. When problems remain unsolved this must mean that the technology has failed, and not the politicians. At least at first, the Internet was Thomas More’s imaginary island of Utopia where everything worked right. These visions of the Internet, therefore, tell more about the perceived problems of the society where they are spoken than they do about any actual, specific characteristics of technology.

Americanist Leo Marx eloquently described how the tension between cultural ideals and

technological change can produce culturally specific notions of technology. In American literature, machines were seized upon as the path to a Jeffersonian pastoral ideal, and imbued with awe and emotion formerly reserved for nature. In short, this rhetoric allowed Americans to know that the same steam engine that turned Britain black with pollution would keep America green, small, and democratic (Marx, 1964). Each of the articles in this issue uses different methods to reveal what different cultures know about Internet technology. For the case of the Internet, this overall project might take its cue from Miller and Slater's (2000) compelling study of the Internet in Trinidad. They argue that it is not useful to talk of the Internet as though it were about "localization or the appropriation of a global form by local cultural concerns. It is not about domesticating a technology" (p. 7). Instead, the Internet that one knows is their local Internet. This is more than the realization that the Internet "is subject to geography after all, and therefore to law" (*The Economist*, 2001 cited in George, this issue). As Miller and Slater explain, "The notion of cyberspace as a place apart from offline life would lead us to expect to observe a process in which participants are abstracted and distanced from local and embodied social relations . . . we found utterly the opposite" (p. 7). This is a plea for a contextualized Internet viewed from a particular nation, a particular culture. The research projects in this issue respond to this charge.

Cherian George considers freedom of the press in East Asia, and shows two steps in the consideration of new communication technologies in Singapore and Malaysia. When technologies like cable television and satellite TV were first introduced, they were regarded as transmitters of political and cultural messages, and only incidentally seen as modes of production. That is, first the technologies were regulated as mechanisms for political control, only secondarily as industries. More recently, the introduction of the Internet was seen as something that would produce a new Information Economy. This reversed the steps, creating a temporary opportunity for freedom of expression that Mahathir and others guaranteed in the name of industrial advantage with projects like the Multimedia Super Corridor.

Philip Howard examines the production of political culture in the United States with two cases from a larger study of political consultancies. Consultants who specialize in using Internet technology in political campaigns explain that new media allow them to grasp the unrealized

potential of earlier, cruder public opinion measurement tools. The Internet can systematize politics to the degree that opinions no longer need to be actually expressed, and political representation can be accomplished without the fuss of involvement or even awareness. In this “thin citizenship,” the Internet allows database interactions and “data shadows” to substitute for votes and preferences.

In the United States the Internet was thought to be revolutionary, but this “revolution” means something entirely different in postsocialist St. Petersburg. Dawn Nafus attempts to explain how the Internet is or is not in Russia. She relates the difficulty her interlocutors had in understanding how a new technological object could possibly transform society. Nafus reminds us not only that the Internet means different things across cultures, but also that newness, “object,” “society,” and any other concept can be just as unstable. Then Nafus uses the disjunct between the western Internet and St. Petersburg’s Internet to elaborate the cultural dynamics at work in the West that have produced our own understandings of what the Internet “can do.”

This issue has been a pleasure to edit because each of these stories sits so well with the others. When reading these articles about three local Internets, I found that a clear argument for grounded, local consideration of the Internet and public policy emerges when these pieces are read together. The Internet in Singapore is a place where a wing of the ruling party scans bulletin boards and chat rooms and corrects “unbalanced, ill-informed, and irresponsible opinions” (George, this issue). The Internet in Russia is a place where remnants of Marxian-Hegelian determinism still lead officials to say, “scientists have proven that the Information Society is the next step in economic development” (Nafus, this issue). The Internet in the U.S. is a place where lobbyists use databases and banner ads to create “grassroots” campaigns on demand: social movements formed entirely of bits, meetings that never meet, all for the sake of lobbyist-driven democracy.

As can be seen in these examples, this special issue is titled “Policy, Politics, and the Local Internet” because it is about both policy and politics. Where English differentiates “policy” and “politics,” in Russian, French, German, and other languages these are combined into one word (*politika*, *politique*, *Politik*). In English, “policy” often connotes cool reason, “politics” a heated

contest. The articles in this issue are about how we move between the two, or how one can mask the other. As Streeeter (1996) explained, “policy is a realm for the experts, not for ‘politics’ in the broad sense of governance in a democratic society. High political questions are not on the agenda, they are considered to be resolved, and thus to be taken for granted or at least best left to others” (p. 128).

In the research presented here, “Internet Policy” functions much the same. What we know about what the Internet can do can mask political struggle.<sup>1</sup> Each author considers how the Internet comes to be politicized or not, and each explicitly investigates the rude struggle for advantage (politics), the rational, scientific progress of technology and the Information Society (policy), and how the latter covers for the former.

I would like to conclude with a few acknowledgments. This issue began at the Programme in Comparative Media Law and Policy at Oxford University, with the idea of finding researchers who were examining particular local Internets in particular places and introducing them to policymakers who deal with Internet regulation. This overall concern with the Internet and public policy across the disciplinary boundaries of social science originated for me with Price and Nissenbaum (forthcoming). Monroe Price, Damian Tambini, and Denis Galligan at the Centre for Socio-Legal Studies provided the encouragement and resources to turn this idea into the one day conference *Ethnographics of the Internet* in March 2002.<sup>2</sup> Research from 17 countries demonstrated the value of understanding these local Internets, and for that I would like to thank the participants and the conference committee: Sonia Livingstone, Andrea Press, and Don Slater. For editorial assistance with this special issue, I am indebted to David Brandon and Amanda Hinkle. Finally, this work was kindly supported by a Markle Foundation Information Policy Fellowship and a Visiting Fellowship at the Oxford Internet Institute.

### Endnotes

1. As we know from other studies of technology (see e.g., Winner, 1980; Bijker, Hughes, and Pinch, 1987).
2. See: <http://pcmlp.socleg.ox.ac.uk/Ethnographics>

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