Chapter 6

Internet: A Political Issue for Europe (1970s – 2010s)

Romain Badouard
University of Cergy-Pontoise, France

Valérie Schafer
French National Center for Scientific Research (ISCC, CNRS), France

ABSTRACT

How has the Internet come about in Europe? How did the “network of networks” and ICTs become political stakes for EU Institutions? This chapter sheds light on facts, limits, and tensions of the building of a political union in the ICT regulation field. It analyses the role of various stakeholders, from technical experts to ordinary citizens, according to a historical approach structured around three key notions: appropriating, governing, and using the Internet. By studying a relatively long period (from the 1970s to the early 2010s) and by observing the Internet as a tool for both internal consolidation and for asserting the EU on the international stage, the authors map the main features and trends that structure the European relationship to the “network of networks.” They, thus, show that the Internet’s political dimension encompasses numerous and heterogeneous issues in the European context.

INTRODUCTION

The European Union has often been seen as a secondary player in Internet governance. The development of its protocols in major American universities, and then the management of its technical resources by American law organisations, could have relegated European players to mere spectators. Nonetheless, the Europeans did not wait for the Internet to enter network history; and parallel to major American inventions, various projects were supported on the “old continent” to develop alternative technical solutions.

The role of the European stakeholders was not limited to the appropriation of the Internet, and the success of the TCP/IP protocol has not always been obvious: technical choices were open to discussion and “technical rationality” was not the only criteria for decision-taking. Industrial and diplomatic stakes have rapidly come to overtake
the infrastructure issue. In the specific ideologi-
cal context of the “information highways” and 
the “knowledge society,” social and political 
uses have mattered more than the governance of 
technical resources.

In this chapter, we address the political issues 
surrounding the development of the Internet in 
the European Union, using three different angles.
According to the first one, we give a description 
of the early European projects in data network 
deployment that allows us to analyze how the 
Internet was integrated into an already complex 
technical and political context (“Appropriating 
the Internet”). The second one relies on the study 
of the role that European experts and engineers 
groups, along with European institutions, played 
in the international governance of the Internet 
during the 1990s. We thus discuss the political 
challenges of building an “information society” 
at the time (“Governing the Internet”). The third 
angle explores the institutional strategies under-
pinning the development of mechanisms and 
measures for e-Government and e-Participation 
at the European level during the 2000s. What was 
at stake here was the uses of participatory tools 
to involve citizens in decision-making processes, 
in order for the institutions to have access to new 
sources of legitimation of their action, in the 
framework of an overall internal consolidation 
strategy (“Using the Internet”).

By studying a relatively long period (from the 
1970s to the early 2010s), and by observing the 
Internet as a tool for both internal consolidation, 
and for asserting the EU on the international 
stage, we intend to map out the main features and 
trends that structure the European relationship 
to the “network of networks.” We thus show that 
the Internet’s political dimension encompasses 
numerous and heterogeneous issues and actors 
in the European context.

BACKGROUND

At the crossroads of History of Innovation, Po-
litical Science and Communication studies, this 
chapter puts into perspective several political 
stakes of data networks and their uses, according 
to a diachronic perspective. It relies on fieldworks 
analysed by the authors during their PhD: the 
development of e-government and e-participation 
mechanisms by the European Commission for 
Romain Badouard, the development of data net-
works according to an historical perspective for 
Valérie Schafer (Schafer, 2012). This paper thus 
intends to contribute to two main research fields.

The first one is related to the birth of a “Eu-
rope of technologies,” i.e. the study of the role 
of technologies in the European construction 
history. Technologies developments indeed ap-
pear to have played a major role in the European 
construction (Bouneau, Burigana, & Varsori, 
2010) to such an extent that we could talk of an 
“Infrastructural Europeanism” (Schot & Schipper, 
2011). Researches dedicated to the development 
of European data networks have paid a specific 
attention to the academic actors involved in this 
history (Davies & Bressan, 2010). We would like 
this paper to contribute to this field through the 
analysis of several archival materials: official pub-
lications of the European Commission, technical 
reports from experts, and archives from INRIA, 
RENATER, CNRS, W3C or ERCIM.

The second one deals with governance issues 
related to the promotion of an information society 
at the European scale. If the study of e-governance 
mechanisms can be considered as a research field 
in itself (Dawes, 2008; Coleman, 2008), that gives 
rise to numerous publications in various academic 
discipline (Scholl, 2009), the European scale has 
been mainly tackled through the capacity of such 
technologies to fill the democratic gap between
Related Content

Definition of a Pervasive Architecture for a Central Monitoring of Homecare Systems
www.igi-global.com/chapter/definition-of-a-pervasive-architecture-for-a-central-monitoring-of-homecare-systems/209129?camid=4v1a

The Administrative Policy Quandary in Canada's Health Service Organizations
www.igi-global.com/chapter/the-administrative-policy-quandary-in-canadas-health-service-organizations/186091?camid=4v1a

www.igi-global.com/chapter/being-on-the-safe-side/139494?camid=4v1a

Visualizing Wikipedia Article and User Networks: Extracting Knowledge Structures using NodeXL
www.igi-global.com/chapter/visualizing-wikipedia-article-and-user-networks/139492?camid=4v1a