Chapter 6

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

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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

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-6038-0.ch006
the infrastructure issue. In the specific ideological 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 underpinning 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, Political 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 networks 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 “Europe of technologies,” i.e. the study of the role of technologies in the European construction history. Technologies developments indeed appear 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 publications 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
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