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Digital Formations of the Powerful and the Powerless

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Specificity of 'socio-digital formations'

- A basic proposition is the importance of capturing the diversity and specificity of 'socio-digital formations'


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Different kinds of socio-digital formations make legible different articulation between the technical and the non-technical (cultures of use of, aims of users)




Focus is on digital interactive domains


- Analytically, I distinguish the technical capacities of digital networks from the socio-digital ecologies within which those tech capacities get activated.
- Intervening mechanisms that may have little to do with the technology per se can reshape network outcomes.
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Digital Formations of the Powerful and the Powerless


- The technical properties of electronic interactive domains deliver their utilities through complex ecologies that include non-technological variables, such as the social and the subjective, as well as the particular cultures of use of different actors.
 - One synthetic image we can use is that these ecologies are partly shaped by the particular social logics embedded in diverse domains.
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Making a “whole” via recurrence

Multi-sited knowledge

- The technology can accommodate multiple particular settings or struggles, and still encompass them into a “whole” through horizontal dynamics, such as for instance, recurrence, rather than vertical integration.
- *Recurrence* of conditions/situations constitutes those localized settings/struggles as a multi-sited whole.
- Such possibilities and systemic drives *undermine generalization*. –about the local, the powerless, immobility, potentialities



Velocity: a driver for informalizing knowledges

- The greater velocities that digitization makes possible further drive the informalizing of whole bodies of knowledge, or some of their components.
 - Velocity also makes legible, or helps us realize, the fact that a given knowledge might be in a trajectory that can go in different directions
 - This in turn can generate emergent types of knowledge – that is, knowledge that is as yet informal, though it may eventually become formalized.
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Two cases

- The two cases used to develop the argument empirically are electronic financial networks and electronic activist networks.
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Features of digital networks

- Both cases are part of global dynamics and both have been significantly shaped by the three properties of digital networks :
- decentralized access/distributed outcomes
- simultaneity and
- interconnectivity.

But these technical properties have produced strikingly different outcomes in each case .



Different outcomes: Global civil society

- In one case, these properties contribute to distributive outcomes: greater participation of local organizations in global networks.
- Thereby they help constitute trans-boundary public spheres or forms of globality centered in multiple localized types of struggles and agency.
- Use of distributive capacities of the tech to produce a a broad multi-sited platform.



High finance

- In the second case, these same properties have led to higher levels of control and concentration in the global capital market
- even though the power of these financial electronic networks rests on a kind of distributed power, that is, millions of investors distributed around the world and their millions of individual decisions.
- Uses the distributive potential of tech to maximize scale-up and concentration



Three comparisons

- First, perhaps the most significant feature in both cases is the possibility of expanded decentralization and simultaneous integration.
- That local political initiatives can become part of a global network parallels the articulation of the capital market with a network of financial centres
- Among the technical properties that produce the specific utility in each case is the possibility of being global without losing the articulation with specific local conditions and resources.




- Second, once established, expanded decentralization and simultaneous integration enabled by global digital networks, produce threshold effects.
- Fin: e.g. the orders of magnitude that can be achieved through decentralized simultaneous access and interconnectivity, and through the softwaring of increasingly complex instruments which enables far more traders to use these instruments.



GCS

threshold effect: is the possibility of constituting transboundary publics and imaginaries rather than being confined to communication or information searches.



Insofar as the new network technologies strengthen and create new types of cross-border activities among nonstate actors, they enable the constitution of a distinct and only partly digital condition variously referred to as global civil society, global publics, and commons.



Third comparison

- The significant difference between Fin and GCS lies in the substantive rationalities, values, objectives, and conditionings to which each type of actor is subject.
- Once we introduce these issues, we can see a tendency in each domain toward cumulative causation leading to a growing differentiation in outcomes.



The mix of digital and non-digital variables

- The constitutive capabilities of the new ICTs lie in a combination of digital and nondigital variables.
- It is not clear that the technology alone could have produced the outcome.
- The nondigital variables differ sharply between these two cases, even as digitization is crucial for constituting the specificity of each case.



contradictions

- These two cases also illuminate an emergent problematic:

the extent to which the combination of decentralized access and multiple choices will tend to produce power law distributions regardless of the social logics guiding users.




Thus civil society organizations may well produce outcomes similar to finance in that a limited number of organizations concentrate a disproportionate share of influence, visibility, and resources.





Political formats


- One way of thinking about this is in terms of political formats.
 - Many civil society organizations have been subjected to constraints that force them into a format akin to that of incorporated firms with conventional accountability requirements.
 - This keeps them from using the new technologies in more radical ways.
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Finance and its new formats

- I would argue that finance succeeds in escaping conventional formats when two or more financial exchanges merge and thereby constitute a networked platform, allowing them to maximize the utilities of network technologies.
- In this sense, I would argue that finance has been far ahead of civil society in the use of networked technologies. It has actually invented new formats to accommodate its aims: multi-sited networked platforms, where each financial centre is a node in the network.




Civil Society Organizations and their formats

- Civil society organizations have had many obstacles put in their way towards these types of networked arrangements.
 - In many ways they have been forced to take the form of incorporated firms, closed entities, rather than networked platforms.
 - There is, in my analysis, a political issue here that is yet another variable that contributes to produce diverse socio-digital formations even when based on similar network technologies.
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Social logics can alter tech capacities

- Interactive domains are inherently distributive given their technical properties.
 - But once we recognize that social logics are at work in such interactive domains it is not necessarily the case that those distributive outcomes will be present every time.
 - In both situations though, informal knowledge is ascendant –holds for high finance and for civil society orgs. Both exit bureaucratized and formalized systems.
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The weight of social logics

- It is in good part the social logics of users and actors that contribute to the outcomes, and hence to the 'distortion' of technical properties.
- The logics of users may not correspond to the engineer's design. The outcome of their interaction is a hybrid, an ecology that mixes technical properties and social logics.
- The fact of this re-shaping by the social logics of users and digitized actors carries implications for governance and democratic participation.

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- - They will not necessarily allow users to escape state authority, nor will they necessarily ensure democratic outcomes.
 - They will not inevitably globalize users and eliminate their articulation with particular localities, but they will make globality a resource for users as diverse as the two examined here.
 - The outcomes are not unidirectional and seamless. They are mixed, contradictory, and lumpy.

