
While several authors examine and evaluate the use of multi-stakeholder processes at the WSIS (see, for example, Banks, 2005; Kleinwächter, 2005; Raboy, Landry, & Shtern, 2010), Flyverbom’s approach is original in its distinct framing of the subject within science and technology studies (STS). *The Power of Networks* places heavy theoretical focus on actor network theory (ANT), and Flyverbom uses Foucauldian literature on power and governmentality to unpack associations between entities and capture the intricate and constantly changing political rationalities that shape the global politics of the Internet. The author’s analytical framework is based in *ordering* (Chapter 1), which he defines as “attempts at managing and controlling things” (p. 2). Flyverbom makes it clear that while his concept of ordering is similar to governance, it allows for a more agnostic approach that rejects governance’s privileging of “formal” rule-makers and tangible, regulatory effects, allowing for analysis of the many fluid and constantly shifting arrangements that comprise the global politics of the Internet.

The book focuses primarily on two UN-promoted organizational arrangements: the United Nations ICT Task Force (UNICTTF) and the working group on Internet governance (WGIG), which represent tangible projects that emerged through the problematization of the digital revolution and became ordered through a process of assembling and translation (Chapter 2). The bulk of the book (Chapters 3 to 6) breaks down and analyzes critical instances of ordering within each of these hybrid forums. The author first focuses on how the forums attracted and engaged social worlds (stakeholders), encompassing an instance of translation which “ordered objects, subjects, techniques and rationalities in new ways” (p. 40) and laying bare the power effects that exist in particular categorizations (Chapter 3). From there, Flyverbom looks at the fluid arrangements embodied in the WGIG and UNICTTF; the ways in which these hybrid forums managed to organize around issues pertaining to the politics of the Internet; and the techniques these hybrid forums developed to ensure diverse social worlds (stakeholders) could effectively work together (Chapter 4). In particular, the author stresses the importance of the forums as providing space for dialogue in which participants did not need to agree, since the ultimate goal of each forum became one of facilitating dialogue rather than reaching consensus or offering concrete policy solutions.

Chapter 5 illustrates the ways in which these hybrid forums located themselves as key players in the ordering of Internet governance, situating the politics of the Internet as a visible socio-political (as opposed to merely technical) area of concern.
While the WGIG and UNICTTF arrangements were eventually displaced (destabilized) by the UN Global Alliance for ICT and Development (GAID) and the Internet Governance Forum, respectively (Chapter 6), the continuation of dynamic multi-stakeholder approaches in each of these new manifestations illustrates a newfound acceptance of hybrid arrangements, which have evolved from WSIS-based experiments to established practice within UN-based Internet governance processes. Flyverbom suggests that in some ways these new manifestations represent an evolution of and improvement in the hybrid forum model that allows the mobilizations to maintain legitimacy and authority. The book concludes with a summary of how ordering shapes the “objects, subjects, techniques and rationalities” (p. 160) within multi-stakeholder processes and an analysis of the effects of governing through dialogue.

Interested readers should bear in mind that the purpose of this book is as much to demonstrate how an ANT-supported analysis is suitable for the study of hybrid forums as it is to untangle the complexities in the WSIS process itself. The author’s goal is to describe—but not necessarily evaluate—the hybrid forums used in the WGIG and UNICTTF and the results that they produced. Flyverbom does not address many of the controversies surrounding the WSIS process, such as the heated debates about the UN’s legitimacy in hosting such a discussion in the first place, or the reasons why some actors (particularly within civil society) made a conscious decision to exclude themselves from the multi-stakeholder processes. Nonetheless, Flyverbom makes an extremely thorough and convincing argument for the utility of ANT to untangle the complex (and often messy) relations that order multi-stakeholder processes. As a work focusing solely on the WSIS’s multi-stakeholder process through the lens of ANT, this book offers a solid contribution both to literature surrounding the WSIS and to the theoretical and methodological toolbox for understanding global media-policy events.

The Power of Networks is a very dense book, and giving it the consideration it deserves requires patience on the part of the reader. The author makes extensive use of long quotations; nebulous, STS-terminology filled sentences; and extremely lengthy paragraphs—a tendency that becomes increasingly pronounced in later chapters. However, for the interested reader who is at least modestly versed in basic STS, it offers a rewarding glimpse into the inner workings at the WGIG and the UNICTTF. This book may be of particular interest to new scholars hoping to become acquainted with the WGIG and UNICTTF processes, or those with an interest in the applicability of ANT to questions of global policy. In particular, Flyverbom’s thick ethnographic description—including, among other items, transcriptions of emails exchanged on listservs, snippets of discussion during the forums, and references to relevant working documents—leaves the reader with a satisfying sense of having retroactively observed the WGIG and UNICTTF processes.

References


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