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MODINET: Challenges and Achievements

The article reviews the achievements of MODINET by commenting on the Center's publications, approaches and methods. Dividing the publications into three broad themes - democracy studies, journalism studies and studies of interfaces - the article discusses the Center's findings and results against an international research agenda.

MODINET - the Center for Media and Democracy - was established in 2002 and financed by the Danish Research Council in the period 1 April 2002 until 1 September 2005.[1] The center, or perhaps research program, set out to analyze media and democracy in the digital era. This article represents an attempt at reviewing and commenting on MODINET's research and results. The task is not an easy one: the number of publications is huge, the variety of themes great, and the findings manifold and diverse. Nevertheless, three areas stand out in my reading: first, the studies of the implementation and usage of ICTs in local democracy and everyday life and the challenges that this represents for democratic governance; second, the studies of news and news production, spanning from ethnographic studies of newsrooms to the study of the reporting of war; third, the studies of the interface, the way in which culture and technology shape the interface, as well as the manner in which the technologies, in particular websites, contribute to reshaping and reconfiguring the political, the social and the cultural.

One of MODINET's main ambitions has been to seek an understanding of how contemporary democracy works in the context of digitization, globalization and the changing conditions that these driving forces create for citizens. In particular, MODINET theoretically and empirically probes the themes and concepts of governance, network society and the tensions between human agency, technology and social structure. These themes are pursued through a large number of projects with a range of different perspectives, methods and themes, resulting in the collection of huge quantities of data, qualitative as well as quantitative, and a proliferation of analyses. In terms of scale and scope alone, MODINET is a rather impressive formation and the number of research questions posed, themes addressed, perspectives employed and the amount of data collected and analyzed bear witness to an equally ambitious objective in terms of research and knowledge production.

In this review, the objective is to assess MODINET's contributions by examining the following aspects: first, what are the most important findings of MODINET and to what extent are they relevant for the international research community? Second, what, if any, are the weaknesses of the research undertaken under the MODINET umbrella? The following will seek answers to these questions by assessing a number of publications published within the MODINET framework.

ICTs and challenges for democratic governance
Under this heading, projects regarding the use of ICTs in local democracy, in organizations, by citizens, in planning processes and the like are subsumed. A group of 'local democracy projects' are made up by studies of

the three municipalities Hals, Odder and Søllerød, and a single inner city locality, Nørrebro in Copenhagen. They are path-breaking not only in terms of their interesting results but also because few studies of how ICTs are used and implemented in municipalities have been undertaken in Scandinavia. The publications report results from the introduction of ICT in local administration and democracy, partly with reference to one municipality and partly by comparisons between them. The case studies make up a substantial empirical base for drawing theoretical and substantive conclusions. The findings are discussed in the theoretical framework that is laid out in the two anthologies (Hoff & Storgaard 2005; Hansen & Hoff 2006, Hoff 2006).

"MODINET's main contributions to the arena of international research lie in the construction and discussion of the theoretical framework."

In the respective introductions to the anthologies, the editors spell out the underlying and guiding premises for the case studies (Hoff & Storgaard 2005, Hansen & Hoff 2006, Jensen 2005). Hoff & Storgaard (2005) discuss the approaches that have laid the theoretical foundations for the case studies: conceptions of the public sphere, the network society, democracy and the Internet and the relationships between them, thereby constructing a rich theoretical background for the rather small-scale analyses that are documented in the case studies. The objectives are ambitious far beyond the insights that can possibly be gained in each individual case study; a starting point that is stimulating as well as challenging.

In my opinion, MODINET's main contributions to the arena of international research lie in the construction and discussion of the theoretical framework that links up with all of the major debates in the area. This is not to underestimate the richness and importance of the case studies as such, but the discussion of them in a framework of governance, globalization and networks carries more interpretative strength than each of them are able to provide unto themselves. One quality of the approach is that the theoretical framework suggests linkages between shifts in governance on the local, national and transnational levels without resorting to technological determinism or predicting swift and dramatic shifts of social and political orders.

The case studies provide unique insights into the implementation of ICTs in the local communities and, in particular, how and to what extent usage is influenced and structured by institutional practices, political decisions and concrete events within each municipality. The combination of overarching theories and deep-structured case study analyses yields findings and interpretations that are relevant beyond the borders of each municipality and, for that matter, Denmark. For instance, Hoff & Jauert (2005) analyze OdderWeb from the perspective of whether the introduction of ICT in local administration and local democracy represents a reconfiguration of the public sphere. OdderWeb was one of the top websites in Denmark in 2003 and 2004, mainly because of its news site. News production was, interestingly, an important OdderWeb service, together with the opportunity for citizens to establish their own website. Both of these features appear to have contributed effectively to the high usage of OdderWeb. It is reasonable to believe that the popularity of the site contributed to rendering the website a 'new structure for political opportunities'; a space for increased democratic participation and dialogue. However, one of the unintended consequences was a widening of the digital divide between those using ICT and those remaining offline.

In Lars Torpe's (2005) analysis of hals.dk, the municipal website of Hals, the starting point is an explicit deliberative democracy perspective, and the study investigates the audience as public sphere and the extent to which digital communication is present in public opinion-formation. The findings reveal that digital communication had a weak position in the public sphere compared to print media, but the analyses of citizens and Net users suggest that the web supplements town meetings. The public sphere was, accordingly, extended both quantitatively and qualitatively: some issues in the debate were exclusive to *hals.dk*, and the audience was not quite the same as in other channels. Ulrich (2005), however, in light of the findings in his analysis of a partly web-based hearing process in Hals, remains cautious. The website in itself is no guarantee that there is established communication in the local democratic landscape. The case studies provide few or no indications that ICTs replaced existing patterns of participation; rather, they supplemented and reinforced the existing structures and patterns.

Taken together, the results of the local democracy studies are, in the first place, sobering and enlightening.

They show that ICTs have thus far only had modest impact on how local politics and democracy are carried out. Furthermore, they demonstrate the importance both of local cultural and structural factors and of local decisions and actions in the implementation processes. More than anything, the Internet and other ICT applications supplement and extend - but do not replace - the existing channels of political communication and participation (Olsen, Rieper & Torpe 2006). Lars Torpe (2006) emphasizes this point in the conclusion in his article on 'Online citizens':

> "As shown, the employment of the Net in local politics leads to an extension of the public. Not only is something more added to the public with regard to information and deliberation. In a limited sense, something new is also added in terms of the issues debated and the persons involved. It is not the introduction of a new medium that in itself makes a difference; success or failure appears to be closely related to that which transpires in the municipalities" (Torpe 2006).

MODINET's findings are interesting - also from a wider perspective - because they reveal the importance of what we may refer to as the 'extra-technological factors' that make ICTs work. This is not a novel discovery but a well-known observation from studies of previous phases of introduction of technological innovations. Examples taken from the case studies are, for instance, the effect of news production as part of the municipal website in Odder, which seems to have been conducive to high usage (Hoff & Jauert 2005); or the top-down structure of the hearing process in Søllerød, where even active intervention aimed to increase knowledge about the process and usage of electronic media failed to enable a high degree of participation (Ulrich 2005).

Bolette Christensen's (2005, 2006) main findings point toward the same tendencies: established and integrated communication structures prior to the implementation of ICTs are conducive to usage. In her studies of internationally organized social movements, she describes 'bodily communication' as an irreplaceable component of the communication processes in the move-ments. She refers to websites as useful instruments for recruitment and mobilization, but maintains that the establishment of trust between participants, dialogue, the exchange of ideas and the development of lasting connections require physical presence and bodily communication. Accordingly, she concludes that the Internet can only be a supplement to - as opposed to a self-sufficient condition for - mutual recognition and trust between the participants; a necessary premise for the joint action that defines social movements.

Similar findings are found in a Norwegian study consisting of case study material from four municipalities together with nation-wide surveys: the implementation of ICT makes a difference, but there are widely different methods and manners of employment in different local and regional contexts. Municipal websites and electronic versions of the local newspapers are used by citizens to gather information and participate in debates and discussions, but only to some extent. Email (and probably mobile communications) have become new and important channels for contact between and among citizens and their elected representatives, but the new communication channels should thus far be perceived as supplements - not substitutes - for the 'traditional' means of political communication (Winsvold, forthcoming, Hansen, forthcoming). Michael Schudson suggests some of the same when he states: "The Internet can do some things for democracy and not others." He agrees with Philip Agre's argument "that the effect of the Internet on politics should be understood as one of amplification" (Schudson 2006). Given MODINET's findings, one could perhaps add that this amplification only takes place sometimes, in some contexts. Indeed, as Hoff & Storgaard (2005:37) insist in their introductory chapter, there is "absolutely no guarantee that the potentials are put into practices and discourses that support democratic developments." Nevertheless, it would be equally wrong to conclude that no potentials exist.

Whether the effects of the Internet - or more broadly

defined, the implementation of ICTs in democratic pro-cesses - will continue to amplify and extend existing practices, or whether they will contribute to other forms of innovation, remains to be seen. Further, how long it will take until e-democracies or online citizenship can be studied as integrated and well-functioning forms of governance is a task for future projects to uncover; howe-ver, MODINET's findings add to the insights that structu-ral and cultural factors must be included in the equation when predictions of possible effects are requested.

"It leaves the reader with a strong feeling of having been granted privileged access into a more or less closed universe, making it a study deserving a wide readership."

In a number of other case studies, issues of demo-cracy, empowerment and participation are discussed in the context of the network society, globalization and governance (Loft & Humphrey 2006, Flyverbom & Hansen 2006). Dorte Salskov-Iversen (2005, 2006) re-fers to the increasing internationalization of local poli-tics in her analysis of three municipalities in an intere-sting and revealing discussion of how globalization alters the conditions for local governments. One study deserving specific attention is Charlotte Kira Kimby's PhD-dissertation (Kimby 2006a, see also Kimby 2006b). Kimby does not research democratization as such; rather, the work represents an everyday life-stu-dy of individual technology use. She analyzes how wo-men with breast cancer use the Internet. Bearing in mind that the findings may be unique, as they are gene-rated from a small, non-representative number of weblogs and interviews with women who have experi-enced breast cancer, they nevertheless reveal fascina-ting and deeply moving knowledge about a universe of ICT-users that rarely reaches the headlines, be it in the news media or in scientific journals of communication studies. Kimby starts her study with a critical view on the popular assumption that the Internet empowers patients. She criticizes the image of the patients as ra-tional actors with easy access to information and the-reby capable of enabling themselves and assuming re-sponsibility for their health and treatment. This is an image of the patient as an Internet user closely resem-bling a rational actor that is fully informed as well as fully capable of handling her own situation.

Kimby discovers a rather alternative image of the patient in her study. She shows that the women who had breast cancer experienced the illness as a crisis; socially, emotionally and physically. The women indeed used the Internet for various purposes, but their weblogs were designed to recreate a sense of order and identity in a situation where chaos, disorder and a sense of bodily be-trayal were dominant emotions. Instead of the image of the rational actor using the Net to gain information and select methods of treatment and thereby master her si-tuation, Kimby describes and analyzes the way the wo-men used the Internet as tools for regaining some mea-sure of power and control over their bodies and lives. By providing numerous examples of how the women told their own stories, she manages to convey a rich analysis of the women's experiences and their employment of the Internet for therapeutic purposes as well as collecting information in order to deal with the crisis. It leaves the reader with a strong feeling of having been granted pri-vileged access into a more or less closed universe, ma-king it a study deserving a wide readership.

Journalism and news production
If the democracy studies are one of the MODINET ben-chmarks, research on journalism and news production constitutes another. Several studies have been dedicated to better understanding the relationship between news, news production and politics (Bondebjerg 2006, Bro et al. 2005, Hjarvard et al. 2004, Kristensen 2005, 2006, Schultz 2005). The construction of political news has always played a pivotal role in media studies, and this centrality is reflected in MODINET's publications. Nete Nørgaard Kristensen analyzes the relationship between 'spin doctors', or the professional PR-business, and the media. She is concerned with the construction of poli-tics and political news formation and the role of PR-con-sultants in these processes (Kristensen 2005, 2006). Theoretically, Kristensen proposes a synthesis between management theories and theories from critical media studies. She establishes the concept of 'news manage-ment' as a combination of the two different traditions. This makes up the theoretical starting point for the ana-lysis of the PR business. Kristensen's analysis delves into different characteristics of the Danish PR-business

and is particularly occupied with the nature of the interaction between the PR-business and the media business. All in all, Kristensen provides a rather fascinating picture - with a new and interesting optic - of the 'dance' (Allern 1997) between sources and journalists.

Whereas both Kristensen and Schultz (2005), in her ethnographic newsroom analysis, dive into relatively new fields and thereby represent more or less innovative perspectives, empirically and theoretically, respectively, several other studies are surprisingly traditional in their approaches and choices of object of study. For example, Bro et al. (2005) analyze the media coverage of the Danish parliamentary election (Folketingsvalget) in 2005, whereas Hjarvard et al. (2004) study the coverage of the war in Iraq in six Danish news media during a month in spring 2003. Both studies are comprehensive and ambitious studies of numerous media and a vast number of news items and are undoubtedly tied to the overall MODINET theme in the sense that they investigate events essential to modern democracies. Nevertheless, neither of them appear to have been carried out with an ambition to extend the theoretical framework of journalism studies or contribute to the overall theoretical perspectives in MODINET.

Hjarvard et al. (2004) employ a discourse-theoretical perspective in which 'interpretation packages' represent a key concept. The focus hereis again on the relationship between journalists and their sources. In short, the study found that the news on the war in Iraq was not clearly separated from 'views' (Hjarvard et al. 2004: 102). One of the main conclusions was that military sources controlled the information flow, and the report critically emphasizes the use of Danish military personnel as experts in the news programming. The report could have benefited from a more elaborate justification for the overall force of the critique from its authors. Indeed, compared to many other reports on war coverage, there are few indications that war coverage in the Danish media was worse than elsewhere; a point that is not made in the report, as there is no effort to compare.

Interfaces - Technologies and cultural form

The anthology *Interface://Culture: The World Wide Web as Political Resource and Aesthetic Form* (Jensen, 2005) can be read to represent a third research theme, namely that of the interface between the technology and

its context; or in more theoretical terms, the exploration of interfaces as the intersection between structuration theory, human agency and medium theory. Jensen argues that: "Interfaces come with cultural assumption, and they carry political perspectives. Interfaces provide for agency and anticipate structure." The combination of structuration and medium theory is pursued throughout the anthology, as is the discussion of the multiple and divergent meanings of 'interface'.

Jørgensen and Udsen underline that they "at a concrete level ... approach the interface from the perspective of human-computer interaction", while "at an abstract level ... we conceive the interface as a form of expression or an aesthetic category which both structures and is itself structured by social and cultural practices" (2005: 41). They study how the historical background has contributed to the technological potential of the computer and its interface.

"One of the main conclusions was that military sources controlled the information flow, and the report critically emphasizes the use of Danish military personnel as experts in the news programming."

Niels Finneman (2006) seeks to uncover the 'cultural grammar of the Internet' combined with other perspectives, such as the one on 'affordances', a line of theory on essential human needs (Gibson 1979) and the pragmatic tradition concerned with a medium's 'enabling or disabling qualities', associated with Ithiel de Sola Pool. The concept of affordance is indeed state of the art within medium theory nowadays (Ytreberg 2006:27), and this theoretical framework for understanding interfaces contributes to the discussions of how technological change has an impact on the transformation of governance and society (Hansen & Hoff 2006), but it also makes up an independent and very interesting approach to the study of the interaction between individuals, texts and culture.

As in the local democracy studies, the empirical research approach to interfaces is dominated by explorative case studies and has theory construction as one of its main ambitions. The contributions in Jensen (2005: 32) "take the concrete texts, images, sounds and func-

tionalities as their analytical point of departure." Unlike the local democracy studies, they do not study the audiences, i.e. the users, of the websites, but instead address the web interface as 'technology' and 'institution'. For instance, Jensen & Helles are concerned with websites as participatory resources in politics, business and civil society. By means of the key concept of 'affordances', understood as "an ongoing social and cultural 'programming' of technologies" (2005: 96). They conduct a content analysis of randomly selected websites from five social domains: national parliaments, political parties, non-governmental organizations, businesses as economic actors with political stakes and private individuals.

"The most productive and interesting new aspects of MODINET are undoubtedly the interdisciplinarity and richness in analyses and theoretical perspectives."

In another case, Anne Ellerup Jensen (2005) raises the questions: what are the main characteristics of a 'caring' company, and how are these characteristics articulated in discourse? Which conceptions of ethical conduct appear in the self-presentation of 'caring' companies on the web, and which types of stakeholders are being addressed through a discourse of social commitment? She finds cultural variations between companies and is occupied with "strategies or functionalities of communication relating to ethics" (2005: 128). Altogether, the contributions to *Interface://Culture* bring to the fore new insights on the 'cultural grammar' of interfaces, and offer a rich theoretical approach to the field. Not unexpectedly, however, there is quite a distance between the coherent and ambitious theoretical framework offered in the first part of the anthology and the rather small-scale and less obvious selection of cases making up the second part.

What are MODINET's main research achievements?
The most productive and interesting new aspects of MODINET are undoubtedly the interdisciplinarity and richness in analyses and theoretical perspectives. Interdisciplinarity is not necessarily a strategy that secures success - despite the many celebrations of its virtues. There are many examples of so-called interdisciplinary

projects paying no more than lip service to the term. This is not the case in MODINET. The approaches, studies and research groups are marked by the dedication of researchers to the project from widely different backgrounds. The results, particularly as they come out in the three anthologies and the present journal, are vastly more interesting because they have been studied from different perspectives. Confessing that in the form of working papers, it was not necessarily easy to see the linkages between the many and different publications, the project emerges as coherent and consistent in each of the anthologies.

A second question, however, may be what contribution MODINET has made to the study and theorization of media and democracy? What, if any, new concepts, theories or application of theories do we find in the numerous studies? Has the project set a new research agenda? These are demanding questions, but MODINET deserves to be assessed according to high standards given the lofty ambitions and comprehensive studies of the project.

First, from the perspective of the discourse on democracy, network society and globalization, perhaps the most exciting insights gained by these studies are represented by the efforts to spell out what the findings imply for politics and democracy in the Information Age. They place MODINET's contributions into the center of debates on how technology, Internet in particular, reshapes democracy, authority and power. The insights from the multiple case studies are put into perspective in the discussion on the implications of the findings for politics and democracy (Hansen & Hoff (2006a/b). By drawing on references to the classic power studies of Dahl, Bachrach & Baratz, Foucault, Lukes, and many other theoreticians (e.g. Castells and Habermas), MODINET contributes directly to the ongoing debate on the impact of the technological change on politics and society together with the broader issues of globalization, governance and digital democracy.

However, it must also be stated that MODINET, similar to most recent studies of the impact of technological change on democracy, does not provide clear-cut answers and findings that are easily interpreted as pointing clearly in one direction or another. Conversely, this is also one of MODINET's strengths: offering a balanced view in place of the easy and all-too-familiar optimism on behalf of new technology. Adding insight and know-

ledge without finding evidence of dramatic shifts seems much more in tune with other recently published projects on the impact of ICTs on democracy and social change. The analyses indicate incremental processes of change, gradually shifting usage from analogue to digital means of communication, and often time-consuming transition processes. Hoff & Hansen (2006b) discuss how these phenomena ought to be understood in a networked and polycentric globalized world and point to the challenges raised by contradictions between the network model of democracy and the constitutional model of democracy. They emphasize that the network characteristics of democracy not only present problems; they also present immense opportunities for the development of democracy and politics. MODINET's most important contribution to these debates are, in my opinion, to bring these debates 'home', i.e. to reveal how findings and insights from case studies in a Danish setting shed light on and contribute to the understanding of globalization and transformation of power in a transnational context.

Given the authors' impressive capacity to synthesize, however, one does occasionally wish for a more explicit balance sheet on the democratic potential of the new technology. While MODINET does not support the technology-optimists, obviously it would be excessively simplistic to place them in the pessimistic camp. Such a dichotomy simply will not do. Nevertheless, do they not tilt the balance slightly in favor of a more society-centered - less medium-orientated - approach to the future of democracy?

One critical intervention that must be made concerns the limited technological perspective: when communication technology is explicitly discussed in the MODINET projects, the focus is, with a few exceptions, exclusively on the Internet. The network society is represented by the importance of the Internet; the usage of new technologies is exemplified by references to websites and email; the studies of everyday life experiences with new technology is delimited to weblogs and information collection on the Internet; and the theorizing on and analyses of interfaces are mainly concentrated to websites on the Internet. Although this is an understandable and easily defendable delimitation, the fixation on the Internet as the only digital medium worth studying neglects many interesting perspectives on the impact of digitization and convergence. For instance, mobile pho-

nes and not least the integration of wireless and mobile technologies are in the process of transforming patterns of personal communication (mobile telephony, SMS and MMS, the integration of email and web access on the mobile telephone), and there are clear indications that mobile technologies also play increasingly important roles in politics by making politicians more accessible to voters.

Concerning the journalism studies, the convergence of traditional mass media with digital media constantly creates new media formats (e.g. Internet publications of newspapers and Net journalism, television programs based on SMS-massages from the audience) and eventually not only makes the audience potential publishers but also of course provides opportunities for governments and power holders to become the producers of news and information producers and, thus, gatekeepers of increasing importance. These and other possible foci are neglected because of the dominant Internet focus. This is a pity, not because it should be a priority for a project with its main focus on the social and cultural aspects of change to study any possible new technology, but because the hypotheses and research questions generated by including more technologies may have opened for many new perspectives.

"The fixation on the Internet as the only digital medium worth studying neglects many interesting perspectives on the impact of digitization and convergence."

Further concerning the journalism studies, there is an almost complete lack of focus on new media. This is somewhat surprising. Although several of the contributions focus on recent developments in journalism and journalism research (N.N. Kristensen 2005, 2006 and Schultz 2005), the media studied are traditional news media, such as newspapers and television. No particular reasons are provided for why these choices were made, and again they are fully defendable, given the fact that newspapers and television remain the most important news media for the majority of society. Nonetheless, it would have been refreshing and interesting to read discussions of how e.g. digital media influences the status of the news criteria. An example of Internet journalism provided by the local democracy studies - but only brie-

fly commented upon - is the OdderWeb news site, where the municipal authorities in the role of news editor competed with the local newspaper. This example potentially generates a number of questions concerning journalism, editorial freedom, power and control over information, none of which are new to journalism studies, but potentially new when placed in a new context. MODINET's main methodological approach has been to use a rather large number of explorative case studies. This is a method that has long traditions for producing interesting and path-breaking results, as they allow both for in-depth studies and comparisons among the cases. The case comparisons make them less vulnerable to the standard criticism that the results from case studies cannot be generalized beyond the case. In MODINET, case studies and the comparison of case studies is the preferred (but not exclusive) methodology, and they have also produced rich and valuable insights on many issues, as discussed above. However, the cases and the comparison of cases are more or less exclusively restricted to Denmark, again an easily defendable choice given the time and resources required for international comparison. Nevertheless, as the ambitions of MODINET extend well beyond the Danish setting, an obvious and recommendable next step would be to discuss the findings from Denmark in a wider global setting, a step that would nudge the empirical achievements closer to the theoretical ambitions.

NOTES

¹ The author extends his gratitude wants to to thank research assistant Andreas Ytterstad for invaluable help and assistance in writing this article.

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