

# **Tracing the Trajectories of Issues, and their Democratic Deficits, on the Web :The Case of the Development Gateway and its Doubles**

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To be published in : *Information Technology and People*, Special Issue “Actor-network Theory and Information Systems,” Marc Berg, Ole Hanseth and Margunn Aanestad (eds.), Sage, forthcoming.

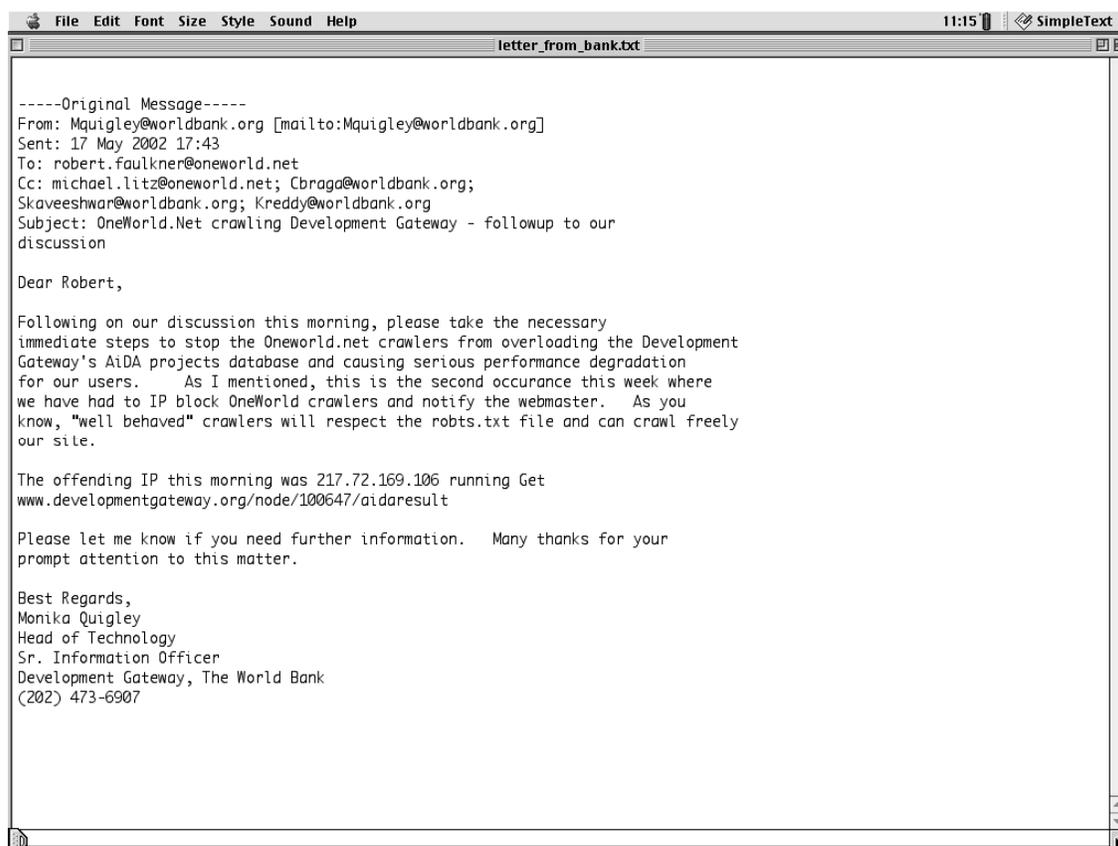
## **Abstract**

This article explores the ways in which the political tactics that governmental institutions and their critics can be seen to engage in on the Worldwide Web, may provide a basis for reconsidering a type of politics called issue-politics. From the vantage point of an ethnography of public controversies on the Web, informed by actor-network theory, the debate on the merits and defects of issue-politics must be re-opened again. Engaging with arguments that have been made in favor of the re-invention of political institutions, on the one hand, and the reinvigoration of the global public sphere, on the other, it will be argued that a re-evaluation of the viability of issue-politics is more than timely. Tracing public controversies on the Web unsettles these arguments, which have advertently or inadvertently, contributed to the marginalization of issue-politics, as a viable form of politics. In doing so, we may begin to articulate an alternative understanding of the significance of information and communication technology (ICT) for institutional as well as extra-institutional forms of democracy. The controversy around the Development Gateway, a portal for development information set up by the World Bank, serves as a case in point. It will be shown how a piece of software called IssueCrawler, may help us to tease out a number of requirements on effective democratic action, as they come into view on the Worldwide Web.

## **Introduction**

In the spring of 2002, my colleague rather unexpectedly received an email from the World Bank (see figure 1). The message had been forwarded to him by Oneworld, the organisation that hosts the Web crawling software we use in our research. The week before, I had been collecting data on the Web, using this software, about the controversy surrounding the Development Gateway, a portal for development information originally set up by the World Bank. Now the World Bank had sent us a message that our crawling software clogs the Development Gateway Web site. According to the Bank, our software ignored the robot files of the Gateway, lines of code with « do's and don'ts » that visiting crawlers encounter on the Gateway site. If we did not stop the crawler from visiting the site, they wrote, they would block it. Now, the « cease and desist » email we thus received from the Bank, could lead us to

pose all sorts of questions, for example, about the inevitable involvement of Internet researchers in the phenomenon studied (the anthropologist's problem of « meshing with the natives »). It equally raises questions about the sophistication, technical and otherwise, that may be required if we are to successfully undertake social research on the Internet. However, at the time, the most interesting fact about the email for us was the signature at the bottom :



**Figure 1** : the email from the «Development Gateway, The Worldbank.»

« Development Gateway, The World Bank ».

In our research, we had found that one of the points of contention in the controversy around the Development Gateway was the independence of the initiative. According to the Gateway Web site, the portal is a project of a non-profit organisation called the Development Gateway Foundation. But judging from the criticisms of the initiative that can be found on the Web sites of non-governmental organisations (NGO's), the Gateway is really still governed by the World Bank. The email from the Worldbank now seemed to prove the critics right. It provided a pretty solid indication, that the story told by the Gateway Web site about its « independence » comes down to a public relations move. While this fact is perhaps little surprising in itself, it may shed a different light on the public controversies that the World Bank and its policies have given rise to over the last decade or so.<sup>1</sup> In these controversies,

<sup>1</sup> Worldbank projects have been the subject of public controversies at least since the mid-eighties, when the Brazilian Polonoeste Amazon Road Project was taken up by non-governmental organisations and social

with thematized the Bank's involvement in the deforestation of the Amazon, or its national debt-repayment policies with respect to developing countries, the NGO's and social movements that criticize the Bank often appear to be engaging in quite superficial forms of politics. They organize street protests, such as the demonstration in Washington DC in March 2002, and publicize critical documents on the Web and elsewhere. But in most cases they do not seem to succeed in producing a tenable accusation against the Bank, let alone a tenable alternative for the institutional arrangement it represents.<sup>2</sup> However, as we find that the Bank too, can be considered guilty of pursuing a rather superficial kind of politics, — that of « re-branding » the Development Gateway, while not making the correlating institutional changes — the charge of engaging in merely cosmetic, ineffective action, might be just as applicable to the institution itself. As we shall see, such a finding may lead us to re-open the debate on the type of politics pursued by NGO's and social movements, on the Web and perhaps also beyond it : the politics of issues.

During the nineties, the politics that social movements and NGO's engaged in was often characterized as « issue-politics. » This type of politics never had a very good name, and the term « single-issue movement » is often used in a pejorative sense. The politics of issues is rarely taken serious as a form of politics. However, from the standpoint of actor-network theory (ANT), the issues around which public controversies revolve appear as a particularly fruitful entry point in the study of politics. This approach has become famous for its analysis of social processes of articulation in which socio-technical entities acquire a definition, from the vaccin to the computer user.<sup>3</sup> When it comes to grasping political process, actor-network theory invites us to focus on the processes in which issues come to be defined as objects of public contestation. Such an ANT-informed approach to the study of political process is especially fruitful, I want to argue, when it comes to the theme of democracy and information and communication technology. In recent work in this area, much attention has been paid to the opportunities the Internet offers to institutions as a platform for deliberative processes and consultation procedures. Another often recurring theme is the possibilities that the Internet offers to NGO's and social movements for partnership-building and information-exchange. However, from the vantage point of an ANT-informed analysis of political process, both as it is supported by ICT and in as far as it has ICT as its object, these features turn out to be insufficient conditions for democracy. Neither the implementation of ICT-supported consultation procedures by institutions, nor the networking activities of civil society organisations, can assure that a democratic process is indeed taking place. From the

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movements as a paradigm case of the Bank's complicity in rainforest destruction. See J. A. Fox and L. D. Brown (eds.), *The Struggle for Accountability : The Worldbank, NGO's and Grassroots Movements*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1998, p. 5

<sup>2</sup> The word « tenable » here is used in the sociological sense of the term. That is to say, the accusations of critical NGO's and social movements against the World Bank have as of yet not reached the wide acceptance (or at least aren't seen to have reached it), that seems required for their claims to be no longer ignored by the institution in question.

<sup>3</sup> B. Latour, *The Pasteurization of France*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1988. For an early and interesting example of an analysis of ICT informed by actor-network theory, see T. Bardini and A. Horvath, « The Social Construction of the Personal Computer User, » *Journal of Communication*, 45, 3, 1995

standpoint of ANT, whether a political process counts as democratic or not, depends on the continuities and discontinuities among the different articulations of a given issue, as they are produced in networks of both civil and institutional actors.

This paper presents a theoretical discussion, notably of actor-network theory, that leads onto the argument that issue-politics must be taken seriously in the account of democracy, especially in relation to ICT. This argument is further explored in a case study, a Web-based ethnography of a public controversy around the Development Gateway, the portal for development information set up by the Worldbank. Bringing the approach of actor-network theory to the Internet, the case study brings into view a trajectory of issue formation, in which both civil and institutional actors contribute to successive articulations of the object of contention, « the Development Gateway. » As such, it draws attention to a number of requirements on democratic action in the context of ICT, that move beyond the celebration of the opportunities provided by ICT for the implementation of deliberative procedures in institutions, and partnership-building among civil society organisations. The politics of issues here comes to the fore as a form of politics that may have to be taken seriously, by institutional and civil actors alike, if ICT are indeed to serve as a vector of democratization.

### **1. After the crisis of political institutions, the unfortunate fate of issue-politics**

Actor-network theory invites us to approach democratic process (and its failure) as a process of issue formation, and, I hope to show, it provides us with the conceptual tools to do so. When it comes to questions relating to democracy and information and communication technology (ICT), this approach may shed important new light on the socio-technical conditions for democratic action. It shows that on-line discussion and information-exchange in themselves cannot assure that democratic process is indeed taking place. Much depends, instead, on the contributions of both institutional and civil actors to processes of issue formation. However, to tell the story of issue-politics as a suitable concept to study democratic process (and its absence) in the context of ICT, we must begin somewhere else : in political theory.

Incentives to pay special attention to the issues, in the account of democracy, abound in recent political theory. However, to my knowledge, political theory has as yet failed to develop the notion of issue-politics into a constructive concept for the study of democratic process. Especially in as far as work in the area of democracy and information and communication technology tends to derive its conceptualizations of democracy from political theory rather unquestioningly,<sup>4</sup> we do well to evaluate this incomplete argumentative

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<sup>4</sup> Work in the area of ICT and democracy has mainly drawn its conceptualizations of democracy from the work of Jurgen Habermas. For a critical evaluation of this tendency see M. Poster, "Cyberdemocracy: Internet and the Public Sphere." in : *Internet Culture*, David Porter, ed., pp. 201-217. New York: Routledge, 1996. Also in the discipline of information Systems Research, the democratic theory of Jurgen Habermas has served as one of the main sources for the conceptualization of democracy. See R. Varey, T. Wood-Harper and B. Wood, « A theoretical review of management and information systems using a critical communications theory », *Journal of Information Technology*, 17, 2002, pp. 229 – 239. For a critical commentary on the reliance on Habermas in the

movement in political theory explicitly. Rather than importing ready-made elements from political theory that suit our purposes without much further consideration of these elements themselves, a critical re-consideration of the arguments put forward there is crucial in this case : political theory itself has gone only halfway in the conceptualization of democratic process as a process of issue formation. Moreover, in this way we may begin to make clear in what ways work in the area of democracy and information and communication technology, inspired by ANT, can *add* to the conceptualization and empirical study of democratic process. A second reason to turn to political theory, is that the merits of actor-network theory, as an approach to democratic process, derive to a large degree from the way in which it provides a re-evaluation of a key-thesis of recent political theory : the thesis of the crisis of political institutions.<sup>5</sup> The thesis, in turn, is intimately connected with the attention that political theory recently has paid to issue-politics, and its halfhearted appreciation of this phenomenon, when it comes to the conceptualization of democratic process. The re-evaluation of the thesis of the crisis of political institutions, as undertaken by researchers working in actor-network theory, makes clear why it may be particularly fruitful to zoom in on issue formation as the vector of (non-)democratic process. It is thus in the critical encounter between ANT and political theory, that it becomes clear why ANT has a special contribution to make to the study of democracy, also in the context of ICT.

To pinpoint the particular moment in which the politics of issues became an object of special concern in the study of democracy is of course an artificial operation, but the recent emergence of the diagnosis of the crisis of political institutions, can be classified as one of those moments. Especially since the mid-eighties, an impressively wide range of actors has issued declarations about the institutions of national representative democracy being under pressure.<sup>6</sup> It was notably the rise of environmental, humanitarian, health and women's issues, among others, that was singled out, inside and outside the university, as the prime symptom of this rather abstract problem. In this context, issue-politics, as a general term to cover the political practices of issue-specific social movements and NGO's — from media campaigns, street mobilizations to boardroom negotiations — came to the fore as a crucial intervention in the political landscape. In political theory, in particular, an intimate connection was pointed

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conceptualization of democracy in Information Systems Research, see A. Adam, « Exploring the gender question in critical information systems, » *Journal of Information Technology*, 17, 2002, pp. 59 – 67 The criticism of an uncritical reliance on concepts of democracy developed in political theory, may also be extended to some work in the area of actor-network theory. The philosopher Rein de Wilde has argued that research in ANT tends to import models of democracy from political theory without questioning them much, and failing to modifying them as radically as ANT has modified concepts of science and society. See R. de Wilde, "Ironies of the Eighth Day. Reflections on the Modern faith in compatibility of community, Democracy and Technology," paper presented at the MTV conference on Technology and Democracy, Oslo, January 1997.

<sup>5</sup> It can be argued that work in the area of democracy and ICT is a response, either implicitly or explicitly, to the widely acknowledged « crisis of political institutions ». For a study that makes this connection explicit, see the publication by Infodrome, the Dutch government's thinktank on the information society : R. van der Ploeg and C. Veenemans, *Spin in het Web*, Sdu Uitgevers, Den Haag, 2001

<sup>6</sup> At least from where I am based, in Amsterdam, such statements could be picked up from academics, activists, government officials, and journalists, from the most diverging backgrounds, from the most militant to the most conservative.

out between the insufficiency of existing democratic arrangements and the rise of environmental, humanitarian and social issues over the last decades. The political analyses in which this relation was established can be grouped under at least three thematic headings: the rise of social movements, globalization, the renewal of political institutions. The sociologist Ulrich Beck, in his famous theory of the rise of the risk society, made much of the fact that the German government initially failed to respond effectively to the environmental problems that social movements and NGO's brought to their attention. He presents it as one of the more important pieces of evidence for his claim that national governmental institutions have lost their political efficacy, and ultimately, their legitimacy.<sup>7</sup> Theories of globalization, as developed by the sociologist Manuel Castells, and the political scientist David Held, for example, equally present the unmanageability of issues as proof of a crisis of political institutions. According to these authors, the emergence of environmental, humanitarian and economic issues that transcend national boundaries signals the crisis of nation-state-based forms of governance, and democracy.<sup>8</sup> Conceptualising this situation in philosophical terms, the political philosopher William Connolly, has come up with the term « generalized contingency », to capture the phenomenon of the disintegration of frameworks of manageability, both in institutions and in the home.<sup>9</sup> According to Connolly, social, technological, environmental and economic complications have ceased to respect a number of crucial premises built into the frameworks on which institutions and individuals rely in acknowledging and resolving such problems, such as the containment of issues within the boundaries of nation-states and the reliability of knowledge and information. However, whereas « the rise of issues » for these authors brings home the point of the crisis of political institutions, issues and their politics play far from a major role in the remedies they propose.

It is true that it is often acknowledged, also by the above authors, that issues will increasingly play a decisive role in the organisation of politics in the future, more so than before, or at least more ostensibly so. Ulrich Beck claims that political events will increasingly revolve around single issues. As governmental institutions are not equipped to acknowledge humanitarian, social and environmental issues when they first arise, committed as they are to what Beck calls « simple modernity », extra-institutional agents, that is, actors with no formal status as political actors, will increasingly come to play political roles.<sup>10</sup> Such actors inevitably take, not institutional procedures, but the problems they seek to thematize politically, as their guiding principle. David Held claims that in the context of globalization, the borders and constitution of political communities will vary according to the issue at hand. While some issues can be treated perfectly well within the arrangements of national, regional

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<sup>7</sup> U. Beck, *Die Risiko Gesellschaft, Auf dem Weg nach eine andere Moderne*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am M., 1986

<sup>8</sup> D. Held, « The Transformation of Political Community : Rethinking Democracy in the Context of Globalisation, » in : *Democracy's Edges*, I. Shapiro and C. Hacker-Cordon (eds.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999. M. Castells, *The Power of Identity, Information age: Economy, society, and culture*, Vol. 2, Blackwell Publishers, Cambridge, 1997.

<sup>9</sup> W. Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization*, Minnesota University Press, Minneapolis, 1995, p. 22.

<sup>10</sup> Beck captures this tendency in the phrase the « subpoliticization of politics ». See U. Beck, *The Reinvention of Politics: Rethinking Modernity in the Global Social Order*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1997, pp. 98 - 100

and local representative democracy, other issues can only be effectively taken up by a different kind of political community, which he calls « cosmopolitan », involving actors from a variety of organisational backgrounds.<sup>11</sup> William Connolly argues that in the light of the rise of global contingencies, issues come to serve as crucial coordinates of public spheres. As the issues defy institutional arrangements grounded in the nation-state, they are first and foremost taken up by actors that are not tied by these arrangements, notably social movements and NGO's. These actors, in their turn, will come to recognize the issues as crucial points of reference in the otherwise amorphous transnational political spaces in which they are active. These authors thus to a degree recognize the issues as an important organising principle of politics. However, they largely fail to acknowledge them in their formulation of actual remedies for the incapacity of established institutional arrangements to accommodate the issues. When it comes to proposing solutions for the « institutional deficit », political theorists tend to shift the analysis to a more structural level, that of underlying political arrangements. The remedies they propose target on the one hand the design of political institutions, and on the other hand, the architecture of what they call a global public sphere. With regard to the design of institutions, David Held refers to intergovernmental organisations like the EU and the Bretton Woods Institutions (the Worldbank, the IMF and the WTO), and makes a plea for the establishment of more democratic versions of this type of institutions, which could provide a platform for the cosmopolitan communities mentioned above. For Held, these institutional efforts are to be combined with the project to assure a vibrant culture of political engagement outside of the institutions. This allows the issues to be observed when they emerge, and to be brought to the attention of the relevant institutions.<sup>12</sup> William Connolly equally makes the distinction between on the one hand legislative and administrative institutions of democracy, which assure the issues will actually be dealt with, and on the other hand, a global public sphere which allows for the observation and articulation of issues.<sup>13</sup>

In this shift to the level of underlying political arrangements, the issues as an organising principle of politics to a large degree disappear from view. The mobilization of actors around single issues, indeed the process of their articulation, inevitably begins to take on the appearance of a « surface activity, » that relies on the presence of more fundamental political architectures. The problematic consequences of this shift become clear if we focus on one particular move made by these authors, which we could call, in taking up another term of William Connolly, the disaggregation of democracy.<sup>14</sup> That is, the above authors argue for a

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<sup>11</sup> D. Held, « The changing contours of political community : rethinking democracy in the context of globalization, » in : *Global Democracy – Key Debates*, B. Holden (ed.), Routledge, London, 2000, p. 30

<sup>12</sup> D. Held, see fn. 11. A similar proposal for a two-track approach to democracy is made by the theorist of deliberative democracy, John Dryzek. As a response to the rise of environmental issues, he proposes that a redesign of institutions so as to host what he calls « communicative democracy », is combined with the sustained efforts of issue-movements to register and articulate emerging issues. Issue-movements for him are to be recognized as the second « vector of communicative democracy as regulative ideal » J. Dryzek, « Political and Ecological Communication, » in : *Debating the Earth : The Environmental Politics Reader*, J. Dryzek and D. Schlosberg (eds.), Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998,, pp. 584 – 597

<sup>13</sup> W. Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization*, Minnesota University Press, Minneapolis, 1995, p. 155

<sup>14</sup> As mentioned above, Connolly makes the distinction between democracy as mode of governance and democracy as cultural disposition. He calls this conceptual move the « disaggregation of democracy ». One of the

two-track approach to democracy, sharply distinguishing the project of institutional re-design, from the project of invigorating extra-institutional democracy, as embodied in a global public sphere, or as it is increasingly being called, global civil society.<sup>15</sup> This analytical move of splitting democracy into an extra-institutional versus an institutional arrangement, is deeply engrained in political theory.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, that a distinction must be made between the public sphere or civil society on the one hand, and the administrative and legislative institutions of democracy on the other, is for most purposes self-evident. However, the definition of democracy in terms of such a bi-partite arrangement has substantial limitations, when it comes to the evaluation of democratic processes in the context of the rise of issues. As I will show in the following, processes of the definition of issues involve both extra-institutional and institutional actors, plus hosts of actors that are more difficult to position according to this distinction, as they serve as interfaces between these constituencies. Moreover, these processes are spread out in time as well as in space, among more or less professional non-governmental organisations, and more or less « governmental » organisations, acting in many more or less « institutional » settings. As long as the disaggregation of democracy is respected, however, such distributed processes of issue formation, which cut across the boundary between institutional and extra-institutional arrangements of democracy, are likely to go unscrutinized.

As we'll turn to now, actor-network theory leads to scepticism with respect to the thesis of the crisis of the institutions, as well as with respect to the assumption of the disaggregation of democracy. When it comes to the study of democratic practices, actor-network theory invites us to re-conceptualize democracy as a process of issue formation, that continuously transgresses the boundaries between « extra-institutional » and « institutional » sites of the articulation of issues. Before turning to the discussion of the alternative approach to democratic practices provided by ANT, however, it should here already be noted that much

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main motivations behind this distinction for him is to assure that the emigration of decision-making to transnational bodies, as is the case for many global issues, does not imply that democracy as societal event ceases to be performed. His argument about the division of labour in treating the issues in that sense comes second in his argument. W. Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization*, Minnesota University Press, Minneapolis, 1995, p. 154 – 158. The one exception among the authors discussed above is Ulrich Beck. In fact, Beck refuses to disaggregate democracy and proposes that institutional and extra-institutional actors all participate in the same « roundtable ». As will become clear in the following, such a proposal has the problem of collapsing the distributed process of articulating issues into one super-process, missing out on the mediations required for issues to achieve articulation. See U. Beck, *The Reinvention of Politics: Rethinking Modernity in the Global Social Order*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1997, p. 122

<sup>15</sup> The notion of the global public sphere assumes the cosmopolitan citizen as its subject, while global civil society refers to NGO's and social movements as primary agents of extra-institutional democracy. On the distinction see the introduction of M. Walzer, *Toward a Global Civil Society*, Berghahn Books, Providence, Oxford, 1995, p. 2

<sup>16</sup> The distinction can be traced back to Hegel's introduction of the concept of civil society in political theory. Especially since J. Habermas conceptualised the democratic public as autonomous from the state, the distinction is one of the prime organising principles of democracy acknowledged in democratic theory. See J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere : An inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1995 (1962). For an illuminating history of the notion of civil society, see P. Wagner, « An Entirely New Object of Consciousness, of Volition, of Thought : The Coming into Being and (Almost) Passing Away of "Society" as a Scientific Object,» in : *The Biographies of Scientific Objects*, L. Daston (ed), University of Chicago Press, 1996.

research in the area of democracy and information and communication technology, tends to respect the rule of the « dissagregation of democracy ». Most studies on this topic treat as two separate questions, the potential of ICT in supporting institutional democratic procedures, such as deliberation and consultation, on the one hand, and the importance of ICT to the democratic activities of civil society, on the other hand. Work in this area treats either one of these questions, and when treating both, the strict distinction between the two tends to be carefully maintained.<sup>17</sup> Thus, as ANT invites scepticism with respect to the dissagregation of democracy, it also invites us to develop an alternative approach to questions relating to democracy and information and communication technology.

## **2. Actor-network theory, and the study of democratic politics in times of « crisis ».**

The approach of actor-network theory (ANT) is particularly well-suited to the study of democracy in the context in which political issues increasingly seem to unsettle existing democratic arrangements. The approach, originally developed by Bruno Latour and Michel Callon for the social study of scientific and technological practices, has become well-known especially for the concept of *co-construction* that it proposes. Rejecting both technological and social determinism in the study of science, technology and society, ANT focuses on the ways in which science & technology *as well as* society are re-configured in scientific and technological practices.<sup>18</sup> Thus, ANT posits that both techno-scientific products and the roles of social actors acquire new definitions in the process of the integration of these new techno-scientific products in society. In order to understand the roles played by science and technology in society, ANT argues, one must zoom in on this process of the genesis and social integration of science and technology, and document how scientific and technological products as well as the roles of social actors both come to be re-defined in the process. When

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<sup>17</sup> For the impact of the Internet on civil society, see S. Sassen, «Electronic Space and Power,» *Globalization and its Discontents*, New Press, New York, 1998, pp. 177 – 194. J. Naughton, « Contested Space: The Internet and Global Civil Society », *Global Civil Society 2001*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001. C. Warkentin, *Reshaping World Politics. NGOs, the Internet, and Global Civil Society*, Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham, 2001. For the Internet as public sphere, see H. Buchstein, « Bytes that Bite: The Internet and Deliberative Democracy, » *Constellations*, Vol. 4, No. 2, Blackwell Publishers, 1997, pp. 248 – 263. B. Barber, « The New Telecommunications Technology: Endless Frontier or the End of Democracy? », in : *The Passion for Democracy : American Essays*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1998, pp. 258 – 283. For the impact of ICT on institutional democracy, S. Coleman and J. Götze, « Bowling Together: Online Public Engagement in Policy Deliberation, » Hansard Society, London, 2001, <http://bowlingtogether.net>. S. Ward, R. Gibson (eds.), *Reinvigorating Democracy? British Politics and the Internet*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2000. For work that treats the impact of the Internet on both institutional and extra-institutional democracy, but treats the two as separate questions, see P. Ferdinand (ed.), *The Internet, Democracy and Democratization*, Frank Cass Publishers, London, 2000. A. Wilhelm, *Democracy in the Digital Age : Challenges to Political Life in Cyberspace*, Routledge, London, 2000. Wilhelm makes the distinction between ICT as a platform for what he calls, after Derrida, « the New International » (« as the non-institutional global alliance of friendship ») and ICT as a platform for the formulation of specific policy-proposals (« which could then be implimented as new laws »), See pp. 154 – 157

<sup>18</sup> For the argument how the critique of both social and technological/scientific determinism, leads onto the notion of co-construction, see B. Latour, *We've never been modern*, translated by C. Porter, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1993 and M. Callon, « Some Elements of a Sociology of Translation : Domestication of the Scallops and the Fishermen of St. Brieu Bay », in : *Power, Action, and Belief: A New Sociology of Knowledge?*, John Law (eds.), Sociological Review Monographs, 32, Routledge, London, 1986, pp. 196-233

it comes to the study of democratic politics, in the context of « the rise of issues », this approach may prove particularly fruitful on at least two accounts. Firstly, ANT invites us to resist the claim that the inability of democratic arrangements to effectively process many contemporary issues is pathological, i.e. indicative of crisis. In the empirical study of processes of the genesis and social integration of techno-scientific products, ANT in its analysis has been prepared to disrespect formal arrangements, when the practices under scrutiny do so. Thus, ANT has shown that the formal separation between science and society, as two more or less absolutely distinct domains, is precisely violated in techno-scientific practices, in which social actors are continuously implicated in the process of scientific discovery and technological invention. This prioritization of practice over theory is particularly useful with respect to the diagnosis of the crisis of the institutions, according to which the issues that politics has to deal with don't respect formal democratic arrangements. ANT, as it has documented how practices in science and technology do not respect formal arrangements, invites sceptics with respect to the interpretation of the transgressive nature of contemporary issues as a sign of institutional crisis. Secondly, the empirical method developed by ANT, to follow through processes of the genesis and social integration of new entities in society, is well-suited to be adapted to the study of democratic practices in this context of « the rise of issues ». Authors in ANT have started to explore the possibility to account for democratic politics as a process in which issues are progressively articulated as political in nature, in a variety of settings by a variety of actors.<sup>19</sup> ANT invites us to acknowledge the issues as a focal point of democratic political practice, and to account for democratic process as a process of issue formation.

To begin with the negative critique of the thesis of the crisis of political institutions, ANT gives rise to the question whether it is perhaps first and foremost concepts of democracy, and not necessarily political practices, that are « in crisis. » As we have seen, the thesis of the crisis of political institutions posits that established definitions of democracy, particularly in as far as they are grounded in the nation-state, have today come under pressure. But from the standpoint of actor-network theory, the fact that practices fail to comply with official definitions of the functioning of institutions, does not necessarily imply that either these practices or these institutions are « in crisis ». ANT holds open the possibility that the failure to respect the boundaries and prescriptions of formal arrangements could turn out to be a condition of success for practices. Thus, in his famous study of the discovery of the vaccin

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<sup>19</sup> It can be argued that actor-network theory has been in the business of doing ethnographies of politics for a very long time already. After all, ANT is often held responsible for approaching all *other* social practices as if they were political in nature — Bruno Latours famous variation on the Clausowitz principle, « science is politics by other means. », being the favoured piece of evidence for this. However, as Emilie Gomart and Maarten Hajer argue, ANT has tended to economize on the question of the social labour that goes into *the explication* of practices as political in nature. When it comes to the explication of the political dimensions of social practices, ANT has tended to draw from imported, « ready-made » models of (participatory) democracy from political theory (see also note 4). For this critique see E. Gomart and M. Hajer, « Is that politics ? For an inquiry into forms in contemporary politics », in : *Looking Back Ahead, The 2002 Yearbook of the Sociology of the Sciences*, B. Joerges and H. Nowotny (reds.), Kluwer Publishers, Dordrecht, 2002. For Latours variation on the Clausowitz principle, see B. Latour, *The Pasteurization of France*, translation by A. Sheridan and J. Law, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1988.

by Louis Pasteur, Bruno Latour has shown how this achievement depended on the fact that Pasteur, as part of his project, actively negated the formal distinction between science on the one hand, and society on the other. The vaccin could come into being, Latour argues, precisely because Louis Pasteur continuously transgressed the boundaries between his laboratory (science) and social contexts.<sup>20</sup> As part of his scientific project, Pasteur actively went out to « meet » social actors, from farmers, veterenaries to hygienists, so as to implicate them in this project, and the vaccin only could be said to work properly, and thus exists as a vaccin, once it was shown to work outside the lab. The vaccin, as a scientific project, was succesful by virtue of Pasteurs continous transgressions of the boundary between science and society.<sup>21</sup> Bruno Latour thus shows that the active negation of the formal arrangement of the separation between knowledge-production and societal processes, is part and parcel of scientific practice. Drawing on this methodological and conceptual commitment of Bruno Latour, to follow practices also where this means that formal arrangements are actively negated, Emilie Gomart and Maarten Hajer have questioned the thesis of the crisis of political institutions. Building on actor-network theory, these authors suggest that the worrying diagnosis of the state of contemporary democratic institutions may change quite drastically, as we move on to study politics ethnographically. In their case study of a public controversy surrounding a regional planning proposal for the Hoeksche Waard, a region in the South of the Netherlands, they suggest that the success of democratic practices may precisely depend on a healthy disrespect of actors as to what are the appropriate sites and forms of democratic debate.<sup>22</sup> They show how in the controversy on the regional planning proposal for the Hoeksche Waard, citizens were only effectively drawn into the controversy, when it was taken up by a group of architects of Rotterdam, as the subject of a cultural event. Drawing on this case study, the authors claim that what appears a chronic failure of existing political arrangements when approaching politics from the side of formal definitions, turns out to be a less pathological situation, or at least a situation that must be deemed pathological on very different counts, if these notions are momentarily left aside.<sup>23</sup> While democratic practices

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<sup>20</sup> B. Latour, *The Pasteurization of France*, translation by A. Sheridan and J. Law, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1988 (1984). See also B. Latour, « Science's Blood Flow: An Example from Joliot's Scientific Intelligence », in : Pandora's Hope, Essays on the Reality of Science Studies, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1999.

<sup>21</sup> Latours argument in *The Pasteurization of France* is far more interesting than I can make clear here. His conception of the « displacement accross boundaries » of techno-scientific entities, in this case, the vaccin, as the movement that is constitutive of scientific practice, is especially relevant when it comes to the conceptualization of politics.

<sup>22</sup> A. Barry, « Demonstrations : Sites and Sights », in : *Political Machines, Governing a Technological Society*, The Athlone Press, London, 2001. E. Gomart and M. Hajer, « Is that politics ? For an inquiry into forms in contemporary politics », in : *Looking Back Ahead, The 2002 Yearbook of the Sociology of the Sciences*, B. Joerges and H. Nowotny (reds.), Kluwer Publishers, Dordrecht, 2002. For a recent treatment of the history and future of actor-network theory, see B. Latour, « On Recalling ANT, » *Actor-Network Theory and After*, J. Law and J. Hassard (eds.), Blackwell Publishers/The Sociological Review, London, 1999.

<sup>23</sup> Their argument could have been inspired by Mary Douglas characterization of the « crisis of the institutions. » She sees in this slogan a legitimacy tool. According to her, the diagnosis of crisis thrives on nostalgia for a time in which « the institutions were still well respected », and implicitly presupposes an institutional arrangement that is *not* called into question as the ideal situation, to which we must return. M. Douglas, *How Institutions Think*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, 1986

might fail to comply with the prescriptions of the « classico-modern tradition », they might be alive and kicking in different guises. Gomart and Hajer propose that politics may instead be going on in other locations that those conventionally favoured by democratic theory. Democratic politics, they suggest, goes on in the in-between, « next to or accross institutionalised political orders», and that this may very well be its *modus vivendi*.<sup>24</sup>

If actor-network-theory, as taken up by Emilie Gomart and Maarten Hajer, leads to a refusal of the diagnosis of structural institutional failure, and indeed to a momentary disregard of formal institutional arrangements, what then, serves as ANT's « lead » in the study of politics ? The answer is given only implicitly by Gomart and Hajer, but in their account of the public controversy surrounding the regional planning proposal for the Hoeksche Waard, they elevate the object of public controversy to the focal point of democratic politics. In their description of the controversy, the authors follow the process in which the regional planning proposal is successively taken up in a variety of settings, from the offices of the policy-makers at the House of the Province of South-Holland, to the public event organised by architects of the city of Rotterdam. Their study describes how the issue at stake is increasingly politicized as it subsequently takes the center of attention in the policy-makers practices, and those of the architects of Rotterdam. That is to say, the case study of Gomart and Hajer can be read as a proposal to account for democracy as a process of issue formation. This is a second reason why ANT may provide a fruitful approach to the study of democratic practices, in the context of « the rise of issues. » ANT invites us to focus on issue formation as a practice that may be constitutive of democracy.

The argument to elevate the object of public controversy to the focal point of democratic politics, has also been made by the sociologist Andrew Barry, who equally draws on ANT in the study of politics. In his case study on anti-road protests in Southern England at the end of the nineties, Andrew Barry explicitly proposes to attribute a leading role to the object of controversy in our understanding of democratic politics.<sup>25</sup> He explicitly develops the proposal to mobilize ANT's sensibility for practices of the articulation of techno-scientific entities in the study of democratic politics. In making this proposal, Barry departs from the observation that the environmental protest he studied, can impossibly be accounted for in terms of political representation as it is conventionally understood, in terms of the representation of actors opinions, positions, or, more classically, their « will. » Barry points out that the activities involved in setting up a roadblock cannot be reduced to the presentation of a « position » on the particular issue of road-building in Britain. The anti-road

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<sup>24</sup> The argument by Gomart and Hajer risks to be interpreted as a dismissal of pathologies of current institutional political arrangements. While this interpretation might be to some degree intended by the authors, it has unfortunate relativistic implications. As if a switch of perspective to ethnography might suffice for legitimacy problems to dissolve. Moreover, the authors hereby fail to appreciate the social and political practices of articulating institutional crises. I would rather argue that from an ethnographic vantage point, institutional political practices appear pathological *on different counts* (see conclusion).

<sup>25</sup> A. Barry, *Political Machines, Governing a Technological Society*, The Athlone Press, London, 2001. For his work on the European Union, see also A. Barry, « In the middle of the network, » in : *Complexities. Social Studies of Knowledge Practices*, J. Law, A. Mol (eds.), Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2002, pp. 142 – 165.

protestors are not taking an ecological, romantic, conservative or anarchist standpoint on the matter of road construction. Their backgrounds are too diverse and their slogans too inconsistent for that. Accordingly, Barry proposes to shift attention from the question of the protesters « position » on the issue to the *event* of demonstration, in the attempt to decipher the message of protest. In doing so, he arrives at a substantial definition of the protest event: the point of the event, he claims, is to « *tell the truth* ». <sup>26</sup> Barry argues that the demonstration is about placing a specific object at the center of public attention, and making it visible. The site at which the protest takes place, the location of a future road, « the Newbury by-pass, » is mobilized to publicize the issue : the trees and the birds and the coffee-tent at the protest site are made to tell the story of the contestable future of this particular landslot. According to Barry, the protest revolved principally around the question of what will happen to this landslot, and perhaps too, those other landslots on the point of turning into roads, or shoppingmalls, that this particular landslot may stand in for. In Barry's account, protest thus stands in the service of objectivication — or perhaps more appropriately, issue-making.

Barry's argument to foreground the object of controversy in accounting for political practices is a very specific argument indeed. The argument is limited to a particular contemporary practice of in situ protest. As to the analysis provided by Gomart and Hajer, the decision to follow the process of redefinition of the issue at stake in the public controversy, the regional planning proposal for the Hoeksche Waard, could be understood as a purely methodological decision. As actor-network theory inspires a profound disrespect for formal definitions of institutional practices, the « case study » — in this case, of a particular public controversy — is simply the only workable « research format » left, as has been noted by Gerard de Vries. <sup>27</sup> Indeed the specificity of the arguments made by these ethnographers of politics cannot be brushed over. The decision to elevate issues to the focal point of politics, might be entirely inappropriate for the study of other political practices than the ones accounted for by them. However, the decision to put the issues in the center of the analysis of political practices, is more than a merely methodological decision. It is a conceptual one, implying a specific theoretization of what it means to do democratic politics. This becomes clear if we take into account that both Barry and Gomart & Hajer, following ANT, describe the process of politization in terms of the circulation of the object of politics among settings. Bruno Latour and Michel Callon, as part of their argument that the analysis of science and society must zoom in on the process of the genesis and social integration of scientific and technological products, put forward the methodological precept to follow a given techno-scientific entity, along trajectories of articulation accross social practices. Thus, in his study of Pasteur's discovery of the vaccin, Bruno Latour conceptualized this process as one of the circulation of this entity, in both its material and discursive guises, among the laboratory, the farms where it was put to work, the studies of the hygienists, who were studying epidemological solutions, and the popular press. The vaccin acquired its definition, as the

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<sup>26</sup> A. Barry, *Political Machines, Governing a Technological Society*, Athlone Press, p. 178 and pp. 192-193

<sup>27</sup> G. de Vries, « Wetenschaps- en techniekonderzoekers, waar is de geest gebleven? » *Krisis, Tijdschrift voor empirische filosofie*, 2 (1), Boom, Amsterdam, 2001, pp. 62 - 78.

effective answer to the anthrax epidemic, Latour argued, along these paths of circulation.<sup>28</sup> Gomart & Hajer and Barry implicitly adopt this approach, as they account for the emergence of politics in terms of the circulation of a particular issue among various sites.

In the ANT-inspired ethnographies of democratic politics by Gomart & Hajer and Barry, the circulation of a political object comes to the fore as constitutive of politics. As Gomart and Hajer follow the process in which the « regional planning proposal for the Hoeksche Waard » is provided with alternative definitions in the offices of the policy-makers over at the Province of South-Holland, and during the public event staged by the architects of Rotterdam, they develop the argument that the process of politization of the proposal, must be located in the *deviations* from previous stagings the issue. Gomart and Hajer argue that it is in the *shifting* of the stagings of the issue, by the policy-makers, and after that, during the cultural event, that the design for the Hoeksche Waard becomes politized. In Barry's account, the notion that the circulation of the issue is constitutive of politics also returns, albeit more implicitly. In his account, mass mediatization of the protest is part and parcel of this political event. He describes how the anti-road protest was formatted explicitly for distribution by news channels. The politics of *setting*, where the trees and the birds and the coffee-tent at the protest site are made to tell the story of resistance against the projected Newbury by-pass, are particularly well attuned to visual media. The wider circulation of the issue thus comes to the fore as crucial to its politization here too. In this way, the ethnography of public demonstrations make clear that the politization of an issue consists to an important degree of a particular type of circulation. At this point, it may become clear why ICT presents such a crucial context for the study of democracy, as informed by actor-network theory.

### **3. Catching up on the trajectories of issues on the Worldwide Web.**

Actor-network theory, as it invites an account of democratic politics in terms of issue formation, implies a critique of the assumption of the disaggregation of democracy, which studies of ICT and democracy tend to subscribe to. But before addressing on what grounds exactly an ANT-inspired account of democratic politics justifies this critique, and what alternatives for the study of democracy and ICT is to be developed as a consequence, it must first be recognized that ICT present ANT with a new *site* of research.<sup>29</sup> The prime relevance

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<sup>28</sup> For the argument that scientific facts emerge from their circulation among the domains of science, politics, the economy, media, see among others, B. Latour, « Science's Blood Flow: An Example from Joliot's Scientific Intelligence, » in : *Pandora's Hope, Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1999

<sup>29</sup> The new information and communication technologies (ICTs), it can and is indeed being argued, also present an *object of study* to which an ANT-inspired analysis is particularly well-suited. In quite some ICT-related studies ANT is brought in to provide the much needed conceptual tools and guidelines. C. Kelty, «Free Software, Free Science, » *First Monday*, 6, 12, 2001  
[http://www.firstmonday.dk/issues/issue6\\_12/kelty/index.html](http://www.firstmonday.dk/issues/issue6_12/kelty/index.html) Moses Boudourides, « Actor-Networks and Genres Analysis of a Mailing List, » Paper presented at the the Third International Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers, 3.0: Net/Work/Theory, Department of Infonomics & Maastricht School of Management, University of Maastricht, Maastricht, the Netherlands, 14-16 October 2002. E. Rommes, E. van Oost, and N. Oudshoorn, « Gender and the Design of a Digital City, » *Information Technology, Communication and Society* (2), 4, 1999, pp. 476-495.

of the social domestication of information and communication technologies, it has been argued by Bruno Latour and also by Madeleine Akrich, is that they provide ANT with an especially fertile research field.<sup>30</sup> Perhaps surprisingly, the argument that Latour makes is *not* that ICT and ANT make for a happy marriage because they share the concept of the network.<sup>31</sup> The fact that ANT has described the genesis and social integration of scientific and technological products in terms of the configuration of networks of actors, certainly makes this approach especially adaptable to ICT-based research, as we'll come to. But Latour prefers to emphasize that ANT in its empirical studies has always been obsessed with *informational traces*. According to him, it is first and foremost the careful documentation of such traces which allows ANT researchers to describe social realities without having to resort to the formal definitions as to what constitutes a particular practice (i.e. science). ICT, Latour stresses, provide previously unheard of possibilities when it comes to the traceability of social interaction : the most ephemeral social phenomena, like conversation and the circulation of rumors, are documented and archived, as ICT serve increasingly as their platform. Now this claim can be extended to political practices. The minutes of a meeting of an expert committee, the plans of an activist group, fresh scientific data, that is, many of the snippets of information that might at some moment, in some location, feed into an issue, can be found online. The Net can be regarded as a practically limitless storage space of issues-in-the-making. As such, it appears as a particularly fruitful site of research for empirical inquiry into distributed processes of issue formation.

The Internet, as a platform where different actors engage, more or less simultaneously, in the performance of issues, on Web sites and discussion lists, seems particularly well-adapted to the project of tracing « the shiftings of the stagings» of politics.<sup>32</sup> In line with Latour's emphasis on the traceability of social interaction facilitated by ICT, we can say that in its capacity of an infra-medium<sup>33</sup> of politics, that is, as a medium embedded in political practices, the Internet, is one of those locations where the circulations of an political issue throughout a whole stock of media — other electronic and print media, and live mediations,

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<sup>30</sup> B. Latour, « Thought Experiments in Social Science: from the Social Contract to Virtual Society, » 1st Virtual Society? Annual Public Lecture, Brunel University, London, 1998.

<sup>31</sup> Bruno Latour has become increasingly critical of the network metaphor. He proposes to shift attention to the notions of attachment and association. See B. Latour, « On Recalling ANT,» in : *Actor-Network Theory and After*, J. Law and J. Hassard (eds.), Blackwell Publishers/The Sociological Review, Oxford, 1999

<sup>32</sup> Of course, to put issues on the foreground as crucial carriers of the political, already means to smuggle in an informational notion of politics. To foreground the politics of issues, is to zoom in on the distributed processes in which virtual entities are produced. These processes, leaving telepathy out of account, are obviously media-based. The notion that issues emerge from « passages across settings », can be regarded as an economical way of saying that for their emergence, issues depend crucially on circulation as facilitated by media — in their various, print, electronic and digital guises.

<sup>33</sup> The name meta-medium has been made up to stress the fact that ICT, in particular the Web, often serve to distribute content from other media. P. Agre, « The Internet and Public Discourse », *First Monday*, 3, 3, 1998, [http://www.firstmonday.dk/issues/issue3\\_3/agre/](http://www.firstmonday.dk/issues/issue3_3/agre/) However, the Internet is perhaps better understood, in analogy with Michel Foucault's notion of infra-power, as providing a platform for social practices « from the inside out.» In as far as the Internet can be regarded as a socially domesticated medium, it must be located within social practices, as opposed to a conceptualisation of the Internet as « imposed » on them from the outside. See M. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-77*, C. Gordon (ed.), Harvester, Brighton, 1980

e.g. discussions — get collected and archived. As such, the Net can facilitate an empirical operationalization of the conceptual point that the circulation of an issue among sites allows for the transformation of a given object into a political matter. A web-based ethnography of the circulation of issues on the Web, may make it possible to bring into view the politization of issues, as it happens, as Emilie Gomart and Maarten Hajer suggest, in the « in between », between formally distinct settings of politics. While actor-network theorists, at least to my knowledge, still have largely to develop a research practice that effectively harnesses the Internet for the ethnographic study of such distributed practices, in the broader field of the anthropology of technology this possibility is now beginning to be explored. Thus, the anthropologist Christine Hine argues in her introduction to the fresh discipline of virtual ethnography, that the Internet is particularly suitable for doing multi-sited ethnography, — an ethnography, she stresses, that cares particularly for the constitution of objects in processes of mediation across sites.<sup>34</sup> When approaching the Internet as an site of ethnographic research, as Hine puts it, « connections take precedence over location, and the pursuit of a mobile ethnographic object takes over from the attempt to map a culture. »<sup>35</sup> For our purposes, we can derive from Hines more programmatic claims the particular proposition that the Internet, with its evolving architectures of hyper-reference among sites, appears to be a most suitable site of research for studying issue formation as a distributed process, in which different sets of actors, located in different settings, participate in the formation of issues. As Barry, Gomart and Hajer provide accounts of the situated articulation of issues, in local settings, an ethnographic account of issue-politics on the Web is rather more suited to bring into view how an issue is formed and formatted in distributed practices, giving rise to what could be called trajectories of politization among settings.

In exploring such an ethnography of issue-politics on the Internet, and most notably the Worldwide Web, we will take up the classic commitment of actor-network theory to the notion of the configuration of networks, as the preferred mode of description of social, and in our case, political, process. As was already briefly referred to hereabove, actor-network theory classically conceptualizes the process of the genesis and social integration of scientific and technological products in terms of the configuration of actors in socio-technical networks. As part of its resistance to both social and technological determinism, the notion of the network made it possible for ANT to marginalize the distinction between the social and the technical in its analysis. The network is at once social and technological, and it produces articulations of social and technological entities in tandem. Thus, in his study of the discovery of the vaccin by Louis Pasteur, Bruno Latour describes the configuration of a network that connects Pasteur's lab in Paris, the hygienists in their studies, the farms in the French countryside, and the statistical institutes of France, showing how it is at once technical and social, in the sense that both the vaccin as well as the social interests in the vaccin circulate in this network.

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<sup>34</sup> C. Hine, *Virtual Ethnography*, Sage, London, 2000. For the notion of a « multi-sited ethnography », see A. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large, Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1999.

<sup>35</sup> C. Hine, *Virtual Ethnography*, Sage, London, 2000 p. 10.

Moreover, it is from this network that the scientific fact that the vaccine effectively combats the epidemic emerges, as well as the social fact that French society is reconfigured now that farming entered into a relation of dependency with laboratory science, among others. It probably needs little argument that the Worldwide Web provides a particularly fruitful site of research when it comes to the empirical study of network configuration. When it comes to the study of the processes of issue formation, more particularly, the Web allows us to trace the formation of hyper-link networks around issues. As such, it offers a particularly clear-cut way to capture empirically the political process that we conceptualized as the successive articulation of issues in distributed practices. The particular methods adhered to in this research practice will be discussed as part of the case study presented here below, on the public controversy around the Development Gateway, the portal for development information set up by the Worldbank.

When it comes to the conceptual commitment of our analysis, it proposes an alternative understanding of the relevance of ICT for democracy. To work in this area, ANT-informed research on the Web adds the claim that we may only be able to assess the success or failure of the mobilization of the Internet in doing democracy, if we take into account the trajectories of issues among various settings inside and outside political institutions. In undertaking an ANT-inspired ethnography of issue formation on the Net, we let go of the theoretical and methodological assumption of the disaggregation of democracy.<sup>36</sup> As our commitment here is to follow issues through along their trajectories of politicization among distributed settings, we must be prepared to disrespect the analytic separation between different sites and forms of democracy, when the issues turn out to do so. That is to say, when trajectories of issue formation cut across the distinction between institutional and extra-institutional forms of democracy, between on the one hand, state-based and -affiliated institutions, and on the other hand, civil society, then our account of political process must do so too. But in disrespecting the distinction of the disaggregation of democracy, we also get into view its limits. As suggested by the empirical findings presented here below, the distinction may actually make it impossible to grasp and evaluate democratic process, as it can be followed on the Internet, and as it revolves around ICT-related issues. Our case study provides indications, following the case study done by Emilie Gomart and Maarten Hajer on the controversy around the Hoeksche Waard, that it is precisely in the translation of issues among different settings of democratic practice, that the issues are politicized, and as such, may become the objects of democratic process. From this vantage point, as we'll come to, the democratic nature of processes of issue-formation must be understood in terms of continuities and discontinuities between issue

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<sup>36</sup> As such, our argument to turn to an ANT-informed approach to democracy and ICT is close to the proposition made by Bill Doolin and Alan Lowe, who present ANT as a viable alternative for critical research in Information Systems, which is more conventionally informed by Habermasian critical theory. However, to the proposition made by Doolin and Lowe, the additional argument is made here that the shift in perspective that ANT proposes with respect to other approaches in social and political theory, as well as proposals to re-furnish the toolkit of ANT itself, must be taken into account, if we are to fully appreciate the contribution ANT can make to critical research in the context of ICT. B. Doolin and A. Lowe, « To reveal is to critique : actor-network theory and critical information systems research », *Journal of Information Technology*, 17, 2002, pp. 69 – 78.

definitions along these trajectories. The degree to which successive articulations of issues get picked up in the following, further down on the trajectory, will be crucial for our answer to the question whether a given process of issue formation, counts as democratic, or not. As long as the disaggregation of democracy is respected, however, such an evaluation is unlikely to be undertaken.

#### **4. The Development Gateway and its shadows : on opposing interpretations on what it means to restore a severed public relation.**

For a initial exploration of the trajectories of issues as they can be traced on the Worldwide Web, we'll follow the controversy around the Development Gateway, the portal for development information on the Web initially set up by the World Bank. The Web served as one of the prime stages for the debates and scandals that made up this controversy – which of course is not surprising for an « ICT » issue.<sup>37</sup> By way of introduction, the Development Gateway is conversely, « an interactive portal for information and knowledge sharing on sustainable development and poverty reduction»,<sup>38</sup> or « a vast new web initiative, which aims to be a supersite on all development issues », <sup>39</sup> depending where you get your information, on the Gateway's Web site itself, or on the site of an organisation monitoring the initiative, the Bretton Woods Project. As to the organisational history of the project, the Gateway site presents the portal as « one of the key programs of the Development Gateway Foundation, a not-for profit organization based in Washington, DC. » But, according to an origin myth circulating among NGO's, the Gateway is the offspring of a conversation between James Wolfensohn, President of the World Bank, and Bill Gates, CEO of Microsoft, which took place on the backseat of a taxi, during the WTO meeting in Seattle in 1999.<sup>40</sup> The myth has it that, while outside masses of protestors chanted against neo-liberal globalisation in the streets of Seattle, Gates offered Wolfensohn « a portal ». As we shall see, it was precisely the institutional history and organisational status of the Gateway that were at stake in the controversy it gave rise to, so it seems best to say no more about it now.

Taking to the Web to trace the issue, and ideally, its evolution, I had the luck of having immediate access to two actors who had been actively involved in the controversy. As we all participated in the workshop in which much of the research presented here was done,<sup>41</sup> I was in the fortunate circumstance to be sitting next to one of these actors as she went through the list returned by the search engine Google, for « Development Gateway ». Guiding me through the engine return list, she effortlessly identified the crucial sites that the dispute had

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<sup>37</sup> On the Internet as a stage for political controversy, see S. Sassen, «Electronic Space and Power,» *Globalization and its Discontents*, New Press, New York, 1998, pp. 177 - 194

<sup>38</sup> According to the « About us » section on the Development Gateway Web site. <http://www.developmentgateway.org/node/190911/>

<sup>39</sup> A. Wilks, « A Tower of Babel on the internet? The World Bank's Development Gateway, » Bretton Woods Project, April 2001, [http://www.brettonwoodsproject.org/topic/knowledgebank/k2301\\_babel.html](http://www.brettonwoodsproject.org/topic/knowledgebank/k2301_babel.html)

<sup>40</sup> Personal communication, Anriette Esterhuysen.

<sup>41</sup> « Social Life of Issues 6, The Network Effects of Civil Society (Politics), » C3, Budapest, May 15 – 21, 2002, a workshop organised by govcom.org, and supported by the Open Society Institute. <http://www.govcom.org>

called at, taking me to the initial report that the World Bank Institute had commissioned from the Costa Rican Fundación Acceso, released in March 2000, which recommended that the Bank consult with civil society on the project of building the Gateway.<sup>42</sup> From there on, she took me to the site that hosted the consultation on the Gateway with civil society, a discussion list maintained by the Canadian NGO Bellanet.<sup>43</sup> We finally ended up at the definitive report on the consultation process published by the EDC (the Education Development Center) in February 2001.<sup>44</sup> With the aid of the search engine return list, this actor thus traced a series of displacements among sites, from Acceso in Costa Rica, to Bellanet in Canada, to EDC in Washington D.C., which each at one point in time had been central to the debate on the Development Gateway. However, while this actor could point out the virtual locations that at some point had been central to the controversy, we as yet had no picture of the actors involved in it, nor of the shifts in the definition of the issue. We therefore proceeded to map the networks that have configured around the Development Gateway on the Web.

### Is the Gateway the Bank ?

On the Web, we find, a network has configured around the Development Gateway. With the aid of a piece of software, IssueCrawler, we locate a set of interlinked Web sites that refer to, introduce or discuss the Development Gateway. This network consists mainly of NGO Web sites that comment critically on the Gateway, and on the initiator of the project, the World Bank.<sup>45</sup> The center of the network, however, is occupied by the World Bank, with the Gateway site to be found more towards the margins of the network. Visiting the sites in the network, it quickly becomes obvious that we are dealing here with an « issue-network », The notion of issue-network serves to distinguish a network on the Web which is geared towards the articulation of an issue, as opposed to a network which is constituted principally by social relations among actors, which for the purposes of this article may be called an actor-network.<sup>46</sup> Thus, in the case of the first Gateway-network we found on the Web, the Web sites that constitute it, in many cases cannot easily be reduced to « actor positions. » For example,

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<sup>42</sup> The report was entitled “Global Development Gateway Needs Assessment Report for Civil Society Organizations.” <http://www.acceso.or.cr>

<sup>43</sup> The discussion was conducted under the title GDG principles (GDG for Global Development Gateway, as the project was called at its inception), and involved a significant number of NGO’s, including the two organisations in which my fellow issue-ethnographers work.

<sup>44</sup> « Final Report : Global Knowledge for Development, Forum on the Global Development Gateway, » submitted by the Education Development Center, Inc., February 2001. <http://www.edc.org/GLG/GDGreport/final.htm>

<sup>45</sup> The IssueCrawler is a piece of software that locates networks on the Web through co-link analysis, i.e., who’s linked to whom. For a site to be part of the network, it must be sufficiently linked by sites in the even broader network treating the issue on the Web. The IssueCrawler was developed by govcom.org and OneWorld International. <http://www.govcom.org>

<sup>46</sup> Bruno Latour refers to the sad fate that the notion of network has befallen in the age of « double click ». In the context of the Internet, he observes, the notion of a network is flattened, to become synonymous with « the transport of information without deformation ». We can add that, when it comes to the notion of the network as applied to politics in the context of the Internet, it often becomes associated with a rather narrow definition of social interaction, that of « connecting people » or « connecting institutions ». We hope to be excused to use the term actor-networking in this article for this type of all too « social » notions of the network. See B. Latour, « On Recalling ANT », *Actor-Network Theory and After*, J. Law and J. Hassard, Blackwell Publishers/The Sociological Review, 1999.

we find World Bankboycott.org, an anti-Bank campaign site, and whirledbank.org, an imposturer of the World Bank site. With some effort, these sites can be traced back to organisations behind it, more precisely, to the site of the US Network for Global Economic Justice and that of The Institute of Equity, Ecology, Humor and Art, based in San Francisco. But it is not these organisations, as organisations, but the campaign and the spoof that made it into the network. Secondly, the issue-network can not be said to consist of social relations, in the narrow sense of the word, of relations between actors. The network contains many *deep links*, pointing to specific documents related to the Gateway and the Bank. This network thus presents us with a configuration of organisations, articles, discussions, reports et cetera, which all in one way or other represent the Bank or the Gateway, rather than with a purely social configuration. Thirdly, we find documents circulating in this network : they appear on multiple pages in the network. For example, many of the sites offer critical reviews of the Gateway by Alex Wilks, from the Bretton Woods Project, the organisation mentioned above that monitors the World Bank and the IMF. As these files make the rounds of the network, we tentatively conclude that the cohesion of the network derives also from the passage across sites of these documents, not just from the actor-relations that are likely to sustain it too.

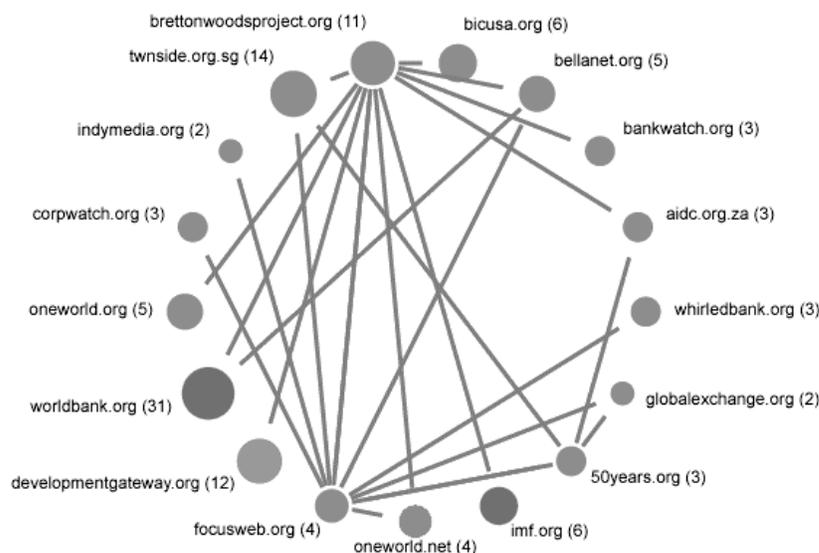
If we now pose the question, what is at stake in the controversy around the Gateway, we find a first clue when we disentangle the network of the critics of the project from the network of its affiliates. We take as our points of departure two different sets of starting points, one consisting of sites that are critical of the Gateway, the other of sites that present themselves as partners of the Gateway. In this way, we arrive at two networks which are almost completely distinct (see figure 2 and 3). The network of critics of the Gateway is made up mainly of NGO's satelliting around the Bank, while the affiliate network consists of Gateway partner organisations, principally intergovernmental institutes, *but not* the World Bank. That is to say, the World Bank takes up the center of the critics' network, while it is entirely absent from the network of the Gateway's affiliates. (This absence, it should be noted, is *collectively* produced by the affiliates : it is on the basis of the hyperlinks going out from a *set* of partner sites, that IssueCrawler has located this network.) The juxtaposition of the critics' and the affiliates' network thus yields a critical question which seems likely to have played a part in the controversy : is the Gateway the World Bank ? But before we move on to see how this question arose over the course of the controversy, two other disparities between the critics and the affiliate network can be observed, that may provide some indications as to the forms of politics that emerge from these networks on the Web. The first is that the affiliate network *does* present us with an actor-network, while the critics disclose an issue-network. That is to say, the affiliate network is made up entirely of homepages of organisations, and contains no deep links. As a network on the Web, the collective of affiliates thus does little to specify the issue. We can add that this actor-network contains only links of alliances, and no critical links, which, unsurprisingly, can be found a plenty in the critics' network. The second asymmetry between the critics and the affiliates is that the critics network engages a number of actors that must be counted among the Gateway's partners — the IMF, and the Bank, while the reverse is not really the case. No civil society

representatives can be found in the affiliate network, with the possible exception of Bellanet, the Canadian NGO, which organised the consultations on the Gateway for the Bank, which was mentioned before. The critics thus openly engage with some of the affiliates of the Gateway, but not the other way around.

### critics of the gateway (2)

**Author:** Noortje Marres  
**Email:** marres@dds.nl

Crawl start: 2002-05-17 14:12:02+01  
 Crawl end: 2002-05-17 14:12:38+01  
 Depth: 1  
 Iterations: 1  
 Analysis mode: page  
 Authority: 2



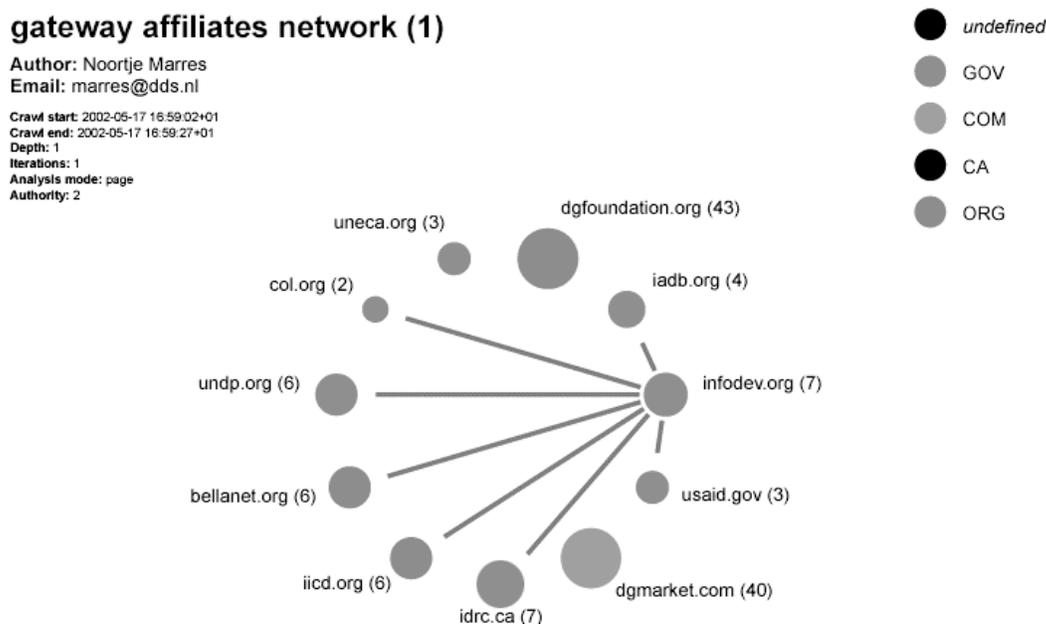
**Figure 2 :** Hyperlink-network on the Web, disclosed by the critics of the Development Gateway.

### Did the Gateway become the Gateway ?

Taking up the question of the disputed identity of the Gateway, we move back in time to get into view the Gateway as it was presented before it became the subject of controversy on the Web.<sup>47</sup> The critical or even scandalizing reviews of the Gateway that circulate in the critics network, were all published after March 2001, and as the actors that were present in the lab where this research was done were quick to note, they were published *after* the release of the EDC report in February 2001. This report, according to them, significantly failed to integrate the recommendations made by civil society organisations during the discussions hosted by Bellanet and EDC. We tentatively put down the publication of the EDC report as the turning

<sup>47</sup> There are a number of places on the Web where one can visit the Web's past, notably, the Internet Archive, and its searchable data-base, the Waybackmachine. <http://www.archive.org/>. Unfortunately, however, the IssueCrawler in its current layout is not equipped to locate networks preserved in the Internet archive. The crawler is build to record only external links, and the links within the archive would appear to it as internal ones, that is, as referring *within* the same domain space.

point of the controversy. Around this point, the controversy may have transformed from a « debate » between the Bank and civil society organisations, into a dispute between the camp of critics of the Bank and a camp of partners of the Gateway. In principle, we could now move on to trace the shifts in the location of the issue : probably from discussion fora, to the publication-oriented Web sites of the critical NGO's, such as Bankwatch and the Bretton Woods project, on the one hand, and, the « promotion » sites of the Development Gateway



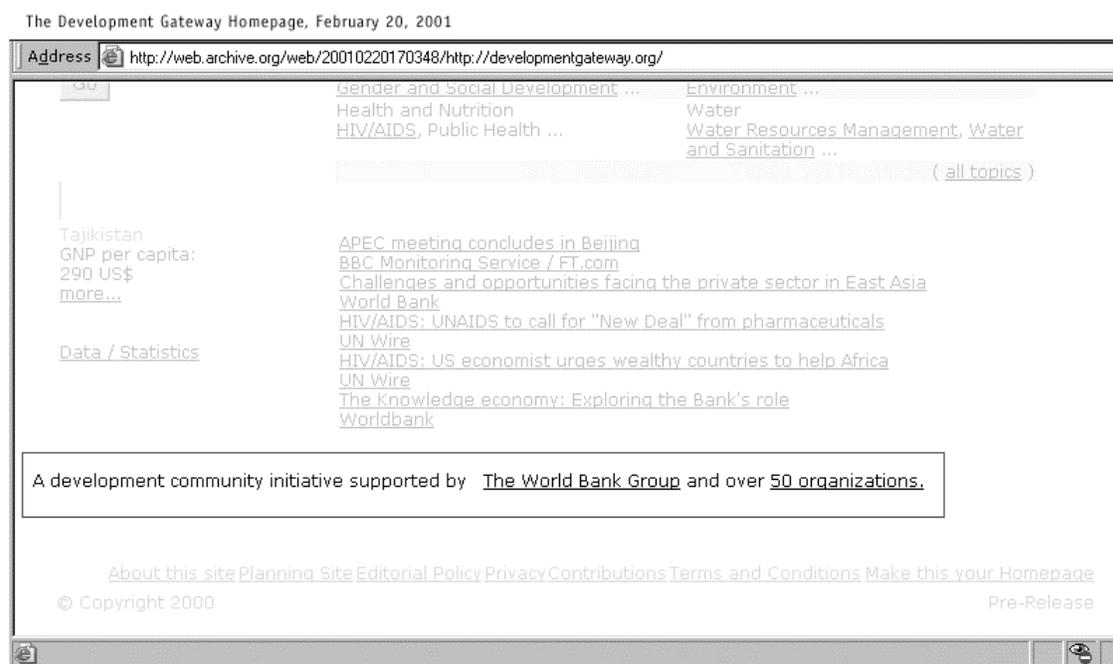
**Figure 3** : Hyperlink-network on the Web, disclosed by the partners of the Development Gateway.

partners, on other. In this way, we could begin to document the likely transformation of the issue, progressing from a « debate » to a « scandal » (raised by the critics' network), and a product (advertised by the partners network). We know from previous research that debate-networks, scandal-networks and product-networks may show distinct types of configurations — debates often exhibit wide-ranged cross-organisational networking ; scandals tend to display a small circle of protagonists, with media sites hooking into this core network ; products are often represented on the Web by producers, disclosed by various distributors of the product.<sup>48</sup> But, because we arrived *too late* at this controversy, we must contend ourselves

<sup>48</sup> N. Marres en R. Rogers, «Depluralising the Web and Repluralising Public Debate: The Case of the GM Food Debate on the Web,» *Preferred Placement: Knowledge Politics on the Web*, R. Rogers (red.), Jan van Eyck Akademie Editions, Maastricht, 2000, pp. 113 – 135. N. Marres, "May the true victim of defacement stand up! On reading the network configurations of scandal on the Web," in B. Latour and P. Weibel, eds., *Iconoclasm, Image-making in Science, Religion and Art*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 2002.

in this case to map the contours of the affiliate network as it had configured on the Web before the turning point.<sup>49</sup> In this way, we may at least find out whether the polarization between critics and affiliates is as recent as we hypothesized.

As it turns out, the World Bank was still firmly entrenched in this past network of affiliates. Most partners that now make up the affiliate network, still linked to the Bank before February 2001. The affiliate network thus has quite drastically reconfigured over the course of the controversy. Moreover, calling up the Gateway's homepages of the World Bank and the Gateway site as they first appeared on the Web in the Internet archive, we find references



**Figure 4** : the homepage of the Development Gateway Web site, January 2001. The Internet Archive.

to the World Bank on both pages (see figure 4). If we now return to the current homepage of the Gateway, and notice the absence of all reference to the Bank on this page, at least one shift this issue has passed through comes clearly into view. While the World Bank once served as the principal actor in the Gateway network, the affiliate network now presents the Gateway as an initiative of the Gateway foundation. The World Bank has left the network. From an intergovernmental project, the Gateway has turned into something that almost looks like a civil society initiative, governed by a non-profit organisation.<sup>50</sup> Thus we fill in : the

<sup>49</sup> see note 45

<sup>50</sup> Another much more speculative indication of this can be found if one types the words « civil society » into the search engine Google. The single sponsored link returned for this query is that of the Gateway.

Gateway is the Gateway, and no longer the Bank, or at least this is how the initiative is presented by the affiliate network.

### The Gateway is the Bank.

Various interpretations of the reconfiguration of the affiliate network, and its juxtaposition with the critics network, are of course possible. One could very well argue that the Gateway initiative simply has reached maturity, and that the ties with the institution that initially nurtured the project, are broken accordingly. Or one could speculate that the composite actor Gateway/World Bank has simply responded to its critics by severing the critical link between the portal and the mega-institution, after all it was the World Bank's involvement in the Gateway for which it was most heavily criticized. According to this interpretation, the critics network on the Web would be put down as a « remnant of the past », together with so many other Web projects. The allegation it produces — the Gateway is the Bank — might have been valid a year ago, but not anymore. (The Gateway Foundation, we read on its site, was established in August 2001.) This interpretation would also provide an explanation for the affiliates' failure to engage the critics in the Gateway network : the latter's claim is simply no longer relevant. Indeed, most of the documents circulating in the critics network were released before the beginning of 2002. We would then conclude that the controversy has long since shifted away from the critics' network, even if this network is still in place. In fact, there is no longer any controversy at all : the issue has been settled. But the course of events led us to give precedence to a third interpretation.

A few days after we had run the crawls of the affiliates' and critics' networks, we received an email from the Worldbank that our crawler clogged the Gateway Web site. As was mentioned in the introduction, this message allowed us to settle some of our questions. The letter was signed by the Senior Information Officer of The Development Gateway, *The World Bank* (see figure 1). We tentatively concluded that the severing of the relation between the Gateway and the Bank, as it appears from the evolution of the issue- and actor-networks we traced, can be understood as a public relations move only. (This has been already suggested before, by one of the actors present. As she surfed the Gateway Foundations « About Us » section, she pointed out the number of listed members of the Gateway's Board of Directors with a World Bank affiliation, either working or having worked there previously. She also pointed out the absence of civil society representatives on this board.) In this context, the persistence of the critics' Gateway-network on the Web turns out to be more than a testimony to a debate long extinguished. It may serve as a critical reminder of the ties between the Gateway and the Bank, which have effectively been « airbrushed » out of the picture of the Gateway as it emerges from the network of its affiliates, as well as on the Gateway and World Bank Web sites. As the critics network points at the Bank, the Foundation and the IMF as actors caught up in the Gateway, it thereby invites a critical examination of the apparent independence of the initiative. From the Gateway-networks located on the Web, we thus derive the following narrative : after the criticisms of the Gateway had been published on the Web (and elsewhere ?), the affiliates of the Gateway

attempted to restore its credibility by putting in place a public image of independence for the Gateway. The critics network, however, continues to bear witness to the critical link between Gateway and Bank. This network in this way makes clear what is demanded from the Gateway and the Bank, before the initiative can effectively be attributed credibility by civil society : it requires not just a public image, but a governance structure that assures its independence.

#### **4. Conclusion : from issue-politics as merely « cosmetic », to an inquiry into its make-up.**

Our small case study of the controversy around the Development Gateway on the Web, provides only small glimpses of an issue trajectory. Hyperlink configurations served as our main indicators of the respective states and shapes of the issue, and a much more extensive study of the development of these configurations over time, as well as a more precise account of the « mise-en-forme » of the issue, in the organisation of material on individual Web sites, and in the wider issue- en actor-networks, would be needed to capture the political process of the articulation of the issue. Nevertheless a few tentative conclusions can be drawn from this case study. These conclusions displace some of the reservations that issue-politics has encountered, as concerns its alleged « superficiality » as a way of doing politics. They equally provide suggestions as to alternative requirements on effective democratic politics, as they come to the fore on the Web, which deviate from more conventional proposals in the area of ICT and democracy. Our case study on the controversy around the Development Gateway presented us with a failed democratic process, which would be likely to have appeared as a successful democratic process, if we had respected the usual two-track approach to democracy, separating the questions of institutional and extra-institutional forms of politics. As such, our case study provides indications as to what is demanded from both institutional actors and their extra-institutional critics for their encounter to be successful, on the Web, and perhaps also beyond.

Firstly, the sequence of events that makes up the controversy around the Development Gateway, as it came to the fore in our study, unsettles the opposition between the effectivity of intervention on the institutional level versus the superficiality of mobilization around single issues. After all, in our study, it became clear that the charge of « superficiality » applied most forcefully to the institutional (quasi-)solutions implemented by the World Bank. The report about the civil society consultation on the Gateway by the EDC, was criticized on the count that it only symbolically and not effectively incorporated « the voices of civil society » into its recommendations. The modification of the Gateway's governance structure, which should have assured its independence, was equally exposed as a mere public relations manoeuvre, which left the actual practice of governance largely untouched. Of course it would be ridiculous to simply shift the charge of cosmetic action to the opposite side in the controversy, and put the institutional approach to political innovation in the dock of the accused. Ostensibly, the politics of issues pursued by the critics of the Gateway, cannot be freed from the charge of ineffectivity either : their project of assuring an independent

Gateway equally failed. But the notion that recourse must be taken to the « institutional level » in order to assure an effective re-invention of politics does come out of this small study weakened. The « procedural solution » implemented by the Bank (the consultation hosted by Bellanet), and the « institutional solution » it subsequently came up with (the establishment of the Gateway foundation), were exposed as mere « symbolic » forms of action. The Bank's formal engagement in consultations with NGO's, and the modification of the Gateways formal institutional status, must be put down as cosmetic interventions, as they acknowledged the demands from critical NGO's and social movements only in name.

Secondly, our case study of the Gateway controversy brought into view a democratic, or rather, a non-democratic process, which would have been far more likely to have escaped our attention if we had respected the strict separation between institutional democracy on the one hand, and civil society or the public sphere on the other. When considered in isolation, the Bank's project to run consultation procedures, as well as its « response » to civil society actors' demands for an independent Gateway, may appear as fairly democratic gestures. Taking into account the broader trajectory of the issue, however, it turned out that these democratic gestures have to be regarded as inconsequential. They must be put down as merely superficial. Similarly, if we had considered in isolation the activities that social movements and NGO's deploy on the Web, we might have been tempted to draw the conclusion that civil society, or perhaps more generally, the public sphere, is thriving on the Web. After all, these extra-institutional actors can be seen to be building plenty of alliances and sharing plenty of information on the Web. However, if we take into account whether the demands formulated by civil society organisations about the re-organisation of the Development Gateway were in fact taken up in the decisions that were subsequently made on the governance structure of the Gateway, we get a very different picture. To put it briefly, civil society organisations were networking and sharing like mad, but it didn't get them very far, at least in the case of the Gateway. From the vantage point of our small case study, two often heard descriptions of democratic use of the Internet, the implementation of consultation procedures on the Internet, and network building and information sharing among civil actors, come to the fore as insufficient requirements on democratic action. However, our exploratory findings also provide indications as to alternative requirements.

The case study of the Gateway controversy unsettles the assumption that the democratic potential of the Internet for civil society resides in the opportunities it offers for the building of alliances among actors. Much of the literature on the Internet and civil society focuses precisely on the opportunities that the Internet offers for actor-networking. But from the vantage point of our case study, the distinguishing characteristic of civil society mobilization on the Net is the formation of issue-networks. The Gateway case study brings into view a mode of association, particular to critical NGO's and social movements, in which not the establishment of partnerships, but the articulation of an issue comes to the fore as an important organising or mobilizing principle. The NGO's that criticize and scandalize the Gateway on the Web, disclose an issue-network in which this project is made controversial. Through the association of actors that are critical of the Bank, through the linkage and

circulation of critical documents, and the identification of the actors to be held accountable, the Development Gateway is turned into an issue. The specific techniques for the « formatting » of issues these agents develop in the process, as well as the process itself, must still be accounted for in detail. But our exploratory study does suggest that actor-networking, the mode of association facilitated by the Web where organisations link to other organisations homepages, in some cases may represent the *failure* to act politically. The network of affiliates of the Worldbank disclosed a network of alliances among institutions, and as such, it offered little to nothing in disclosing what the controversy of the Gateway *is about*. To the degree that practices of « partnership building » substitute for specific engagement with particular issues online, they may indicate a « democratic deficit ». Thus, in as far as the significance of the Internet for civil society is understood in terms of « connecting the actors », it misjudges the conditions of politization in the virtual domain. Not actor-networking in itself, but issue-networking signals politization.

In a similar vein, from our case study on the Development Gateway the implementation of consultation procedures on the Web, in itself, comes to the fore as an insufficiently rigorous form of democracy. As was the case with Gateway, such an event is located within a larger trajectory of the articulation of an issue. The absence of continuities between on the one hand, the event of consultation and the definitions of the issue that emerge from it, and on the other hand, subsequent events and the issue-definitions they provide, equally point to a democratic deficit. More generally, our case study on the Gateway points to an alternative approach to the organisation of such democratic events. In the literature on online consultations, a model of democratic procedures is often imported from political theory, eg the theory of deliberative democracy, which, it is then proposed, are to be implemented on the Internet.<sup>51</sup> However, following the trajectories of issues, we shift attention, with regard to this question, from the implementation of procedures, to the visualisation and framing of emergent political processes already underway on the Web. If the point is to put the Web in service of democracy, the first question here becomes what distributed efforts at issue formation are already being undertaken in the medium. In its capacity of live archive, the Web offers great opportunities to frame, capture and visualize political processes already set in motion by institutional and extra-institutional actors themselves. Online events of democracy could accordingly be conceptualised as extensions of such previous involvements with and articulations of issues. In doing so, a « bottom up » approach to online democracy would come to replace the « top-down » approach that is implicitly embraced when « ready-made » procedures of democracy are imported from elsewhere.

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<sup>51</sup> S. Coleman, "Strong Representation, engaging with citizens in a digital age." unpublished ms., December 2000. S. Ward, R. Gibson (eds.), *Reinvigorating Democracy? British Politics and the Internet*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2000

A web-based ethnography of issue-politics may allow us to grasp the « shifting of the stagings » of distributed politics.<sup>52</sup> In the case study of the Gateway controversy, we tentatively identified the moment in which the issue transformed from a debate into a scandal and a product — which looking back, might have been one of the decisive moments of politicization of the Gateway. Neither the debate on the Gateway, nor the scandal it was turned into by NGO's and social movements, nor the product that the partners of the Gateway presented on the Web, could be located on any one site in particular on the Web. The forms of the political, just as the shifts between them, as they can be traced on the Web, emerge from distributed practices. Theorists of global civil society have pointed out that the politics of non-governmental organisations is essentially one of mediation. As Craig Warkentin puts it, the politics of civil society consists essentially of indirect action, as social actors are « forced to work through mediators in their efforts to realize institutional objectives.»<sup>53</sup> I doubt whether the objectives of NGO's, let alone those of social movements, in all cases are really all that institutional. But judging from our small study of the controversy surrounding the Development Gateway, Warkentin's observation must be extended to the politics pursued by political institutions, in their encounter with NGO's and social movements. The modest example of a web-based ethnography of issue-politics presented here, begins to unsettle the asymmetry between the politics of extra-institutional and institutional actors that is often assumed, when it comes to their « mediatedness ». As it becomes clear that « institutional politics », the « other » of media-based politics, cannot provide a definitive escape from the messy, mediated, encounters of issue-politics, we must return to the scene of these messy encounters if we want to grasp the political. Whether the mediated politics that issue-politics inevitably comes down to, might indeed count as « real politics », remains to be seen. But it

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<sup>52</sup> To single out the Web as a crucial site of issue-politics, inevitably brings along risks and dangers. Firstly, a web-based ethnography of issue-politics risks to get fixated on the « PR version of things », while the real issues are actually being settled elsewhere, off the Web. However, this pitfall only appears as unavoidable when offline politics are considered to be irrevocably inaccessible via the Web. However, issue-politics can be said to come down precisely to the daily labour of forcing leakages between the semi-public domain of the Web and elsewhere, and whatever closed worlds lay beyond. Secondly, to single out the Web as a crucial site of (issue-) politics poses the risk of reification. In a web-based ethnography, the situated practices that sustain the issue-politics pursued there, to a degree disappear from view. As a consequence, the abstractions (issues) that only exist by virtue of being grounded in these practices, might easily be mistaken for self-sustaining realities. This danger is now so widely recognized among social theorists of information technology that it might almost be said that a moratorium on the definition of the Internet as a space onto itself, is now effectively in place (see Woolgar 2002) But the taboo on reification brings along its own risks and dangers. When the reification of media is too readily dismissed, the practices of reification for which the Internet provide a platform, equally risk to disappear from view. Especially when it comes to the politics pursued on the Net, reification is precisely one of the important tasks to be fulfilled. The collective work of providing the informational entities called issues with a stronger claim to existence than they currently have, this is exactly what is demanded from a politics of issues. In this light, the failure to appreciate reification, is the failure to appreciate the politics of virtuality, as it is pursued in the context of the Internet. Of course, there can be no question of confining an issue to its online existence, this must obviously be counted as a failure of issue-politics too : it means that the work of issue-making remains without effects beyond the media. While indeed a Web-based ethnography of issues might at some point have to follow the issues through all the way into the actually situated practices that sustain them, at the same time it can conceive of informational practices as producing political events in the virtual domain, precisely because it keeps into view the emergence of virtual objects from these distributed practices.

<sup>53</sup> C. Warkentin, *Reshaping World Politics. NGOs, the Internet, and Global Civil Society*, Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham, 2001, p. 21

is clear that an answer to this question not only has consequences for the politics of NGO's and social movements. The success of the *encounter* between political institutions and their critics, depends on it.

A different version of this paper was presented at the Third International Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers, 3.0: Net/Work/Theory, Department of Infonomics & Maastricht School of Management, University of Maastricht, Maastricht, the Netherlands, 14-16 October 2002. The author would like to thank Jodi Dean, Emilie Gomart, Bruno Latour, Richard Rogers, Gerard de Vries and the participants of the graduate seminar at the Centre de Sociologie de l'Innovation, Ecole des Mines, Paris, for their criticisms and kind comments.