Searching for Democratic Accountability in International Practices

Application for PhD scholarship at Copenhagen School of Social Sciences

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1. Introduction

We face an increasingly complex array of global challenges, e.g. climate changes, nuclear technology, genetically modified organisms, and Internet regulation. Global solutions to these challenges are needed and justified in light of reflexive modernization (hereafter re-modernization\(^1\)). Re-modernization involves continued technological, economic, political, and cultural developments that shatter boundaries and allow for (side-) effects of potential solutions to be felt over great distances. This challenges the nation state and empowers an ever more diverse array of global actors, e.g. individuals, NGO’s etc.\(^2\). The presence of new actors entails dispersion of authority and responsibility (Beck et al., 2003 & Giddens, 1990)\(^3\).

The argument in this project description is that the dynamics of re-modernization complicate relations of international democratic accountability. This might ultimately prohibit solutions to global problems. Therefore, a renewed focus on the notion of international democratic accountability is justified. This Ph.D.-project strives to answer a number of important questions. Who can hold and be held accountable, why, and how? And what role does technological development play in shaping the international practice of democratic accountable governance?

2. Problem & Purpose

This project is guided by the following question: *How can we understand and refine the notion of democratic accountability in the light of re-modernization and current international practices so as to provide orientation for future (democratic) action?*  

In investigating and refining the existing notion of international democratic accountability, two case studies of technological regulation (starting from the organizations of ICANN and IAEA respectively\(^4\)) are conducted. These will inform the theoretical discussion by allowing for exploration, analyses, and evaluation of existing forms of accountability. Several working questions can be asked in the light of international re-modernization:

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\(^1\) This notion is formulated by Latour, 2003 as a reformulation of Becks notion reflexive modernity. The notion has the same meaning, but is simply less “tongue twisting”.


\(^3\) There is general agreement on this, though some insist on the incessant primacy of the nation state (e.g. Drezner, 2007 & Keohane, 2002).

\(^4\) ICANN is short for Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, while IAEA is short for International Atomic Energy Agency. For more information on the cases see section 4.
- What are the standards for democratic accountable governance and when are they reasonably and coherently applied to international practice?
- How should we define the actors in a democratic accountability relation? Who should be involved and why?
- What mechanisms are available for holding actors democratically accountable?
- What role does technology play in shaping the notion of and practice of democratic accountable governance?

The project as defined by these questions is indeed very broad in its scope. While the explorative empirical part of the study might direct it in a particular direction, the main focus will be to understand and refine the whole notion of democratic accountability, including different modes of accountability. I believe that there is an increased need for such comprehensive understanding which is often missing in the existing political science literature5.

The specificity of this project lies not only in its comprehensive nature but also in the approach to the subject matter. The notion of accountability will be refined based on the study of existing theoretical contributions as well as, importantly, the study of actual practices, the ideas and normative claims to accountability inherent in these, and their justifications. The need for such empirically grounded theoretical understanding is considerable. One of the major problems of contemporary political theory is that it is too decoupled from empirical practice and therefore impractical and ignorant of current developments6. Only a firmly rooted concept allows for normative critique, and the provision of an orientation for future (democratic) action. Re-modernization entails an increase in the need for such orientation, since the future opens up global possibilities and “requires a social science appropriate to the task” (Beck et al., 2003: 13). Unfortunately, existing literature is often void of empirically grounded normative considerations and points of orientation7. This project strives to make up for this, by providing the necessary background for the practical application of the notion of democratic accountability.

5 Existing literature is often focused on particular accountability relations that is for instance accountability relations within the EU (e.g. Schmitter, 2006 & Neuhold, 2006), between private actors and the state (e.g. Wolf, 2006), or in international organizations (e.g. Risse, 2006). This is of cause warranted, but it prohibits a more comprehensive understanding of the notion of accountability and its normative justifications.
6 This means that though I agree with the statement by Beck et al. (2003) below, I disagree with their assumption that this necessitates the study of “cosmopolitization”. See also Beck, 2002 & Beck, 2003. It is not certain whether global challenges by necessity foster cosmopolitan arrangements. The Copenhagen School of security suggests the somehow opposite in relation to securitization, which they believe might facilitate an anti-democratic decisionism (Buzan et al, 1998). As a consequence we need to study actual practice.
7 Bovens (2007, 2010) and Held (1991, 2004) have provided some of the best and most comprehensive normative contributions, however, they are to a large extent decoupled from actual practice.
As a result of this approach, the project also provides concrete empirical contributions to the field of study. New forms of regulation remain understudied despite recent contributions (e.g. Flyverbom, 2011, Archibugi, Koenig-Archibugi & Marchetti, 2012). By applying a monistic, reflexive perspective (cf. Jackson, 2011) on international practices this project provides a more inclusive and complex understanding of these.

Finally, the project contributes to a greater understanding of political and democratic consequences of technology in international politics. This indeed is a secondary but nevertheless important element in the project. Though Science and Technology studies, philosophy, and sociology have to some extent discussed the effects of technology, these have received very little attention within political science and political theory. In other words, the political effects of technology remain understudied. This project engages in existing scholarly work on technology and adds an explicit political dimension.

3. Theoretical background

3.1 Re-modernization

The notion of re-modernization forms the background for this project. Re-modernization is amongst other things characterized by globalization (cf. section 1)8 and involves a fundamental reorganization of modernity and therefore entails functional crises and crises of legitimacy. These in turn create a need for redefining institutions, actors, and decision-making procedures (Lash, 1999: 11, Giddens, 1990: 18 & Robertson, 1995). It is in this light that a focus on international democratic accountability is deemed relevant, necessary, and constructive9.

Aside from framing the background of the project, re-modernization as a concept also captures the political effects of technological developments. Technological developments are said to produce risks which create needs for regulation, politicize new issues, and empower new actors (Beck, 1999: 139 & Giddens: 1990. 124ff). This is likely to have great consequences in a democratic perspective.

This overall perspective on technology can fruitfully, be supplemented by elements from within the field of Science and Technology (STS). Only focusing on the risk-aspects as discussed by Beck, Giddens etc. and therefore operating somehow on a macro-level will likely leave out important questions of for instance interconnections, negotiations, and informal arrangements (cf. Wynne, 2002: 465 & Lash, 1994: 200). Here,

8 Globalization has several meanings (see Scholte, 2000: 15-16). It is here defined loosely as a process that changes the ontology of time and space, challenges boundaries and actors.

the Actor-network theory in particular might be of relevance in investigating the notion of democratic accountability\(^\text{10}\), because it challenges taken-for-granted categories and distinctions by calling for analyses of the practical ways in which human and non-human elements become linked and stabilized (cf. Flyverbom, 2011: 5, Nahuis & van Lente, 2008: 576 & Latour, 2003). Furthermore, it allows for technology to be both instrumental and performative (Flyverbom, 2011: 11, quoting Callon, 1986, Czarniawska, 2006: 1554 & Latour & Venn, 2002). In other words, it prioritizes concrete, explorative empirical studies as a means of advancing theoretical notions. Also, it directs our attention to the potential diverse character of agency resulting from technological developments and the use of technology in for instance enforcing democratic accountability. It is to the notion of democratic accountability that we now turn.

3.2 Democratic accountability

Accountability as a concept was originally closely related to economics and economic compensations for potential misfortunes. Therefore, it has certain economic connotations. However, the economic understanding of accountability seems too simple and might lead to a denunciation of responsibility (Colonomos, 2008: 184). We have to somehow leave these connotations in the background and embrace the concept anew. Accountability need not involve a denunciation of responsibility by virtue of cheap monetary compensation. It is essentially founded upon the notion of responsibility and can be closely related to the concept of democracy. However, responsibility is a normative concept referring to certain obligations whereas accountability by necessity involves a relation (Jordan & Tuijl, 2000: 2053). Hence, accountability can be defined as “a relationship between an actor and a forum, in which the actor has an obligation to explain and to justify his or her conduct, the forum can pose questions and pass judgment, and the actor may face consequences” (Bovens, 2007: 450)\(^\text{11}\). This definition to some extent resembles a principal-agent relation (Keohane, 2004 in Risse, 2006: 184). Yet, accountability relations can also be informal or external (Jenkins, 2006 & Risse, 2006).

Accountability relations need not be democratic, though it is the focus here\(^\text{12}\). Also, the definition of accountability as democratic is ultimately dependent on the understanding of democracy. Democracy is typi-

\(^{10}\) Other STS perspectives might be of relevance as well, including the intentionalist and proceduralist perspectives. Both are highly normative in their approach to technology and democracy, advocating particular democratic ideals in containing risks and unintended consequences resulting from technology (cf. Nahuis & van Lente, 2008, see for instance Sclove, 1995: chap. 2). These ideals might be relevant in discussing the notion of democracy.

\(^{11}\) See also Papadopoulos, 2007, Keohane, 2002, Keohane & Grant, 2005, Jenkins, 2006 and Nortrup & Thorson, 2002. These definitions more or less resemble the one advocated here. Please note that the definition outlined above states that the actor may face consequences. This opens up for more procedural, less “economic” understandings.

\(^{12}\) The project will by necessity touch upon alternative notions of accountability. For examples of such see Papadopoulos, 2007, Bovens, 2007, Mestdagh & Rijgersberg, 2007, Mörth, 2007, Cerutti, 2011, Rosanvallon, 2011, and not least
cally defined as a kind of circular relationship between decision-makers and the citizenry (Benz & Papadopoulos, 2006) or as collective decision-making involving some kind of equality (Christiano, 2008). However, democracy can take a number of ideal forms. Traditional democratic ideals have been formulated in pluralist, liberal, social democratic, and deliberative terms (Morawcsik, 2004 & Habermas, 1994). Moreover, new democratic ideals includes for instance associational democracy (Carter, 2002), civil society democracy (He, 2002), and transnational democracy (McGrew, 2002). Ideals that are defined in broader and more procedural terms are likely to be more relevant today. Rostbøll (2008) has elaborated on the notion of deliberative democracy, which both Beck and Sclove conclude to be extremely relevant in the light of re-modernization (Beck, 1992 & Sclove, 1995: 27). This indeed seems a likely conclusion. Nevertheless, the notion of democracy must be studied as a part of this project.

The character of relevant actors in an accountability relation does also demand for investigation. Actors have traditionally been located on the basis of authority and the notion of impact (cf. Koppell, 2005 & Held, 2004). The notion of impact was proposed by Held as an alternative to the notion of authority, which is increasingly difficult to apply in a re-modernized world primarily because of the involvement of diverse actors (Keohane & Grant, 2005: 31 & Held, 2004). However, the notion of impact seems at least as difficult to apply, because (in-)action in one area seems to have trans-boundary effects. Also, the notion of impact focuses exclusively on the consequences of a given action, not on the underlying intentions and choices and the potential relevance of these in establishing accountability. Moreover, democratic accountability has typically been substantiated with arguments regarding delegation (Bovens, 2007, Keohane, 2002 & Keohane & Grant, 2005). Yet, also international delegation is increasingly unclear. Bovens (2007) and Wolf (2006) have discussed these issues superficially, but there is an immediate need for refinement of the criteria for accountability based on more careful empirical and theoretical studies. As already indicated, the extent to which claims to accountability are convincing might be evaluated in the light of both the consequences of a given action, the intentions, and the character of the decision-makers’ choices (Colonomos, 2008: 172 & Miller, 2001). Philosophical contributions are likely to be relevant in judging claims to accountability for instance Erskine, 2003 and especially, Miller, 2001. Both discuss the prospects of holding a given actor accountable based on arguments founded in ideas of moral obligation, capacity, communal relations etc. Finally, the notion of political obligation might be of value in substantiating arguments on democratic accountability (cf. Dagger, 2010). Answers to these questions will also involve a discussion of the character of agency more generally e.g. intentional vs. unintentional agency and collective vs. individual agency (cf. Scharpf, 1999. This also highlights the fact that accountability is slightly different from legitimacy, which refers to a particular quality of a relationship (Risse, 2006: 1985 & Bovens, 2010). For an understanding of the notion of deliberative democracy, see also Habermas, 1994 and Rostbøll, 2001. By the criteria I mean, who should hold and be held accountable and why.
Bovens, 2007, Keohane & Grant, 2005). Particularly, the former has increased relevance in the light of technological developments\textsuperscript{15}.

Finally, the question of how actors can be held democratically accountable must be examined. Typically, the following means or mechanisms are referred to: transparency, representation, discourse, fairness, effectiveness, (direct) participation (made possible by technology\textsuperscript{16}), complaints and response handling, electoral mechanisms, etc. (Bovens, 2010, Papadopoulos, 2003 & Koppell, 2005). Some of these mechanisms are likely to be more relevant and realistic in the light of re-modernization and technological developments. Also, different democratic notions might lead to the use of different mechanisms. Electoral mechanisms can for instance be replaced by the naming and shaming of actors, critical discussion and examination with a resulting sense of obligation. Such mechanisms are already seen in practice and might foster an increased focus on assuming responsibility proactively as opposed to buying “absolution” (Colonomos, 2008: 178).

4. Methodology and design
The prime objective of this project is analytical. I seek to refine the notion of democratic accountability. The above theoretical considerations as well as two explorative case-studies serve as a basis for doing this.

The foundation for this design is monistic and reflexive, concretized in the notion of practices. Practices are actions endowed with meaning and ultimately founded on background knowledge\textsuperscript{17}. The practice approach is relevant because it holds the potential for closing the divide between ideas and matter, structure and agency, and recognizes the need to explore relations as shaped, re-shaped, negotiated, and challenged (Jackson, 2011: 37, Nicolini, 2009: 1400-140 & Adler & Pouliot, 2011b: 13-15\textsuperscript{18}). Such approach is important in refining accountability as a normative concept, because material elements as well as ideas and their justifications are likely to matter in this regard. The study of practices will take the form of case-studies. By studying cases we will gain insights into involved actors and their ideas of accountability, best and worse practices etc. This will inform the notion of democratic accountability.

\textsuperscript{15} Though the perspective of re-modernization takes every given to be the result of an active choice (Beck et al, 2003: 16), many has argued that technological decisions are often apolitical in not invoking such choice (cf. Higott, 2000 & Bislev, 2004).

\textsuperscript{16} Sclove has a particularly interesting section on such mechanisms cf. Sclove, 1995: part III and page 30ff.

\textsuperscript{17} This background knowledge often resembles skills, but can also be norms and ideas related to a certain action (Bourdieu in Adler & Pouliot, 2011a).

\textsuperscript{18} The concept of practices has recently been formulated explicitly by Adler and Pouliot as the “gluon” in IR (2011b: 10 & 2011a). Though Adler and Pouliot claim otherwise, the concept seems of particular relevance for a monistic and reflexive perspective as advocated here. For a definition of practices see 2011b: 7-8.
The cases concern regulation of the Internet and nuclear technology, starting from the organizations ICANN and IAEA. I focus on these issues as opposed to other global challenges because they seem to hold a particularly great and pertinent potential in relation to democratic accountability.

The Internet is a fundamental feature in almost all current (international) practices. It represents a wave of new technology that has far-reaching (political) consequences. It is instrumental within political practice, yet also likely to be performative. The idea that the regulation of the Internet is essentially a political activity has initiated a debate on regulation and not least accountability (cf. Fromkin, 2011). ICANN has been central in this debate because it is one of the most important actors regulating the Internet’s Domain Name System (DNS). ICANN is fundamentally an independent, private organization however with historical connections to the American government that are still relevant. The debate has centered on the questions of whether ICANN can be held accountable and should be solely responsible for the regulation of the Internet. Both questions have been debated a lot, yet less focus has been given to the potential performative effects of technology and recent initiatives to improve democratic accountability. ICANN, being a “hybrid-forum” (Flyverbom, 2011), has worked with new ways to establish and promote democratic accountability and has by virtue hereof engaged the traditional notion of accountability\(^\text{19}\). Studies examining how these new accountability relations are actually established and to what extent they are coherently and reasonably justified are needed as to inform a refined notion of democratic accountability\(^\text{20}\).

The case of nuclear technology is radically different from the one above. However, nuclear technology also stands out as one of the interventions of the 20\(^{th}\) century that has had the most far-reaching consequences. As opposed to the case of the Internet, nuclear technology has been regulated by the establishment of a traditional international organization composed of nation-states. This case, though situated in a re-modernized context, is therefore seemingly uncontroversial in terms of who to hold and be held accountable\(^\text{21}\). The question seems to be, whether these democratic accountability relations really are appropriately justified and useful and consequently effectively able to support a refined understanding of accountability. For one thing, the international, re-modernized context and the character of nuclear technology itself seem to challenge the mechanisms for holding relevant actors accountable\(^\text{22}\). The problem of actually holding someone accountable, has given rise to new actors questioning existing, traditional accountability relations.

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\(^\text{19}\) This engagement was deemed relevant in the light of the challenges posed by the internet to the traditional notion of democratic accountability. E.g. authority is relatively decentralized, delegation unclear, impact widely dispersed etc.

\(^\text{20}\) Also, the question of regulation of the Internet is of highly contemporary relevance. Negotiations on how to regulate the Internet will be taking place in Dubai by the end of 2012 (Gross, 2012).

\(^\text{21}\) (Most of) The states making up IAEA partake in traditional democratic accountability relations by way of their national affiliations.

\(^\text{22}\) The often highly securitized character of the technology internationally and the need for expert knowledge prohibits transparency, openness, and participation (e.g. Schlove, 1995: 22).
Studying this case, starting from the organization of IAEA is therefore likely to provide insight into not only relevant mechanisms for holding actors accountable internationally but also the schism between the traditional actors involved in accountability relations and new actors demanding that, in this case, nation-states are held accountable for the consequences of nuclear technology. Can these actors convincingly raise claims for accountability, how, and why? And how can they potentially be accommodated?

As already indicated, the choice of cases is motivated primarily by theoretical considerations. More specifically, cases are chosen as to be crucial (Gerring, 2007: 89-90) in terms of involving technology. This makes possible a study of the likely political character of (the regulation of) technology as related to forms of (democratic) accountability. In addition, the cases are chosen due to their diversity (Gerring, 2007: 89-90) within three main aspects:

1) *Organization structure*. Whereas the IAEA General Conference is composed of all member states\(^{23}\) the highest decision making body of ICANN is composed of primarily private actors\(^ {24}\).

2) *Different aspects of the regulation process*. Whereas ICANN is to be held accountable on their decisions by other parties, IAEA is the body holding accountable. However, both are involved in a complex set of relationships.

3) *High versus low politics*. The issue of nuclear proliferation is highly political whereas the issue of regulation of the Internet is often considered less political (e.g. Mestdagh & Rijgersberg, 2007).

Despite the modest number of cases, this diversity will likely allow for a great variety of representations, e.g. different types of actors, agency, and mechanisms. In-depth understanding of these varied representations will make up a broad and interesting basis for the theoretical discussion\(^ {25}\). Though I highlight these two organizations as the starting points of the empirical explorations, I will try to precede open minded and allow for the study of other relevant elements\(^ {26}\).

The actual case-study will take its point of departure in text-material that provides insight on international practices of accountability. The actual decision-making processes as well as informal (public/civil) practices related to these will be studied. The latter is expected to direct our attention to actors who are informally involved or could/should be involved in accountability relations. Furthermore, public debates will be studied by engaging in studies of, for instance, online forums and newspapers. The cases will be limited in time


\(^{24}\) [http://www.icann.org/en/groups/chart](http://www.icann.org/en/groups/chart), accessed 3-30-2012, 11.35.

\(^{25}\) Alternatively, more case-studies could have been conducted and compared systematically, however this would compromise in-depth understanding.

\(^{26}\) In general, the explorative character of the project means that the elements sketched out here are preliminary.
to recent years, for ICANN more specifically the years following its reorganization in 2009 (cf. Froomkin, 2011).

Finally, interviews with relevant actors will be conducted on the condition that I can gain access to these actors. Such will allow for insights into different actors’ ideas about practices of accountability as well as the practices themselves (cf. Dahler-Larsen, 2003). This means that both accountability relations as explored through actual practices (including the study of involved actors, negotiations, and power struggles) and the actors’ ideas about accountability inherent to these practices are of interest. Actors’ ideas about accountability can contribute to the refinement of the notion of accountability, to the extent that they are coherently and reasonably justified. Justifications are likely to rest on explicit or implicit background knowledge. In order to understand the justifications and judge them we must understand the processes that shape them, the actors’ values, etc. Also, we must discuss the reasons underpinning the justifications and the use of accountability and debate the utility of potential alternative constructs (cf. Rorty, 1999: 86 & Colonomos, 2008: 220). It is necessary to explore ideas and justifications in judging the value of existing accountability relations and their value in informing a refined notion of accountability.

5. Critical considerations

This project’s empirical part is likely to be criticized in the light of scientific ideals invoking falsifiable predictions, generalizations, and assignment of causal powers. However, these criteria are not relevant with regard to this project, though analytical generalizations might be possible (cf. Yin, 2003). The goal here is rather to study and learn from empirical cases in order to provide a refined notion of democratic accountability (cf. Stake, 2000: 447). In relation hereto, the foremost criteria for validity are the pragmatic and heuristic criteria but also the criterion for craftsmanship (Dahler-Larsen, 2002 & Agersnap et al., 2001). Only these criteria make sense within a reflexive perspective.

Finally, the focus is primarily on the notion of democratic accountability acknowledging that we live in a democratic era (cf. Keohane, 2002: 3, Bovens, 2007: 464)27. Yet we must recognize along with Beck, that not only the whole notion of re-modernization but especially the notion of democratic accountability is western in origin (cf. Beck et al, 2003: 7). The project is therefore situated in a particular social and historical context (Beck et al., 2003).

27 By focusing on democratic accountability, I go further than actor-network theory which chooses not to recognize democracy as an ideal but as an empirical phenomenon to study (Nahuis & van Lente, 2008: 573)
6. Relevancy for the Department

This project is situated within the subject field of “power and democracy” by virtue of its focus on democracy in the 21st century and political decision-making within a broader international perspective. Three more specific elements make the project considerably relevant for the Department of Political Science.

First of all, this project will strengthen the department’s profile on international political theory by actively engaging the notion of democratic accountability. As of now there are relatively few people at the department engaging in international political theory directly. Synergies are likely to emerge between this project and the work on democratic theory by Associate Professor Christian F. Rostbøll28.

Secondly, the project will strengthen the department’s methodological profile by engaging a monistic, reflexive perspective on international practices. This perspective is increasingly relevant due to global developments. Professor Lene Hansen has applied the practice approach to the study of international relations (Hansen, 2011) and will therefore be able to contribute with valuable insights in this regard while also benefiting from synergies between this project and her own work regarding for instance the Internet.

Thirdly, based on this project I can develop a course on democratic accountability that will likely have a broad appeal to students of both political theory and international relations. Also, I will be able to contribute to the teaching of political theory.

28 Moreover, synergies might emerge between this project and the work on governance and democracy in a local context performed by e.g. Associate Professor Anders Esmark and Associate Professor Henrik Bang as well as the work by Professor Ole Wæver on securitization.
7. Bibliography


Nortrup & Thorson (2002) "The Web of Governance and Democratic Accountability" in Proceedings of teh 36th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences, Syracuse Univ., NY, USA


