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**Book review: Rebecca MacKinnon, *Consent of the Networked: The Struggle for Internet Freedom***

Mary Joyce

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is gradually, relentlessly and seamlessly embedded into the machinal (both the discourse and the artifact).

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Rebecca MacKinnon,

*Consent of the Networked: The Struggle for Internet Freedom*, Basic Books: New York, 2012; 283 pp.: ISBN 9780465024421, US\$17.81

**Reviewed by** Mary Joyce, *University of Washington, USA*

### Keywords

Communication, consent, electronic democracy, Internet freedom

*Consent of the Networked*, the first book by journalist and blogger Rebecca MacKinnon, is part of a growing body of analysis and polemic on the political implications of the collision of civic spaces in the digital and the physical world. The intersection of the physical world of hierarchical governance and commercial production and the digital world of decentralized peers and near-free production and reproduction could not help but create conflict, and intellectuals have sought to understand this conflict and propose solutions for how the two worlds should interact.

In the early days of the web, some hoped that these two worlds would simply stay apart. In 1996, civil libertarian John Perry Barlow wrote 'A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace', which demanded that the governments of the physical world not impinge on the freedom of the digital one. Yet governments and corporations did impinge, with laws, law suits, and censorship. Books by Lawrence Lessig, Shanthi Kalathil and Taylor Boas, Ronald Deibert, and Jonathan Zittrain described how the Internet was regulated, legislated, divided, and monitored. Soon the freedom of the Internet was no longer a fact, but a fragile quality.

Almost 15 years later, in 2010, Secretary of State Clinton gave a speech, which proposed that the US government should promote a free Internet because it had the power to democratize societies by freeing their citizens to publicly dissent and organize. In 2011, journalist Evgeny Morozov made a big splash with his book *The Net Delusion*, which directly challenged this argument. Morozov counter-argued that the Internet does not particularly empower citizens, and perhaps even empowers repressive governments more through surveillance, propaganda, and censorship.

A year later Rebecca MacKinnon has again shifted the discourse: yes, the Internet does have the capacity to empower citizens and thus increase and improve democracy, but that civic power is under existential threat. In less than 20 years, government and corporations have not only impinged on the freedom of cyberspace, but threaten to

extinguish the very characteristics of freedom of expression and assembly that made it politically important in the first place. MacKinnon also breaks new ground by highlighting the tremendous importance of private firms in determining the political nature of the Internet. Google, Facebook, and their peers have been kind enough to have 'created a new, globally networked public sphere', she notes, but that supposedly public sphere is 'largely shaped, built, owned, and operated by the private sector' (p. 9). This fact poses a political threat as 'Internet and telecommunication companies have gained far too much power over citizens' lives, in ways that are insufficiently transparent or accountable to public interest' (p. 10).

One of her most interesting ideas is that of 'networked authoritarianism', the observation that a society's citizens can be connected to one another and yet remain unfree. China, on which she is an expert, is surely the most skilled practitioner of this new form of governance. 'Herein lies the paradox of the Chinese Internet', she writes. 'Public debate and even some forms of activism are expanding' while 'state controls and manipulation tactics have prevented democracy movements from gaining meaningful traction' (p. 42).

MacKinnon also pays close attention to the worrying effects of collaboration between private firms and repressive governments, particularly in the arena of censorship software. US companies like WebSense, Blue Coat, Palo Alto Networks, Intel's McAfee, SmartFilter, and Canada's Netsweeper were originally created to help parents and school districts shield children from the lewder side of the Internet and to help companies prevent their employees from spending all day on social media sites. 'But these software products are also popular with authoritarian governments seeking to block social, religious, and political content' (p. 60), particularly in the Middle East. She cites a 2011 report by the Open Net Initiative that censorship software developed and sold by North American firms was being used to block social and political content from Bahrain to Yemen.

This is not only a problem of repressive states. 'Today's battles over freedom and control are raging across democracies *and* dictatorships', she writes. 'All governments ... are learning quickly how to use technology to defend their interests' (p. 5). Citizens of the US have reason to fear as well. Under the administrations of both Bush and Obama 'standards of oversight, due process, and accountability have been eroded in ways that have made it easier for government agencies to abuse power and more difficult for citizens to hold abusers accountable' (p. 76).

Though most educated readers are familiar with the Patriot Act of 2001, they may not be aware of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act of 1978 (FISA), which gives US companies immunity from customer lawsuits 'when they comply with blatantly illegal government surveillance requests directed at those customers' (p. 76). And, when a democracy like the US skirts its citizens' rights online, that makes it easier for the Chinese government to claim, as did its Foreign Ministry spokesperson Jiang Yu in 2011, that its 'legal management of the Internet is in line with international practice' (p. 101).

MacKinnon addresses a number of other important topics in the book, including net neutrality, intermediate liability, the international system of Internet governance, proposals for a foreign policy of the Internet, and netizen collective bargaining with corporations. If I have one criticism of the book, it is that it is too wide-ranging and attempts to cover

too many topics. What it gains in information it loses in flow and focus. It is clear that MacKinnon has been thinking and writing about these topics for many years, was aware of the importance of all these topics, and did not want to leave any out. Perhaps it would thus be inevitable that her first book would be so densely packed.

MacKinnon wishes to insert her book within the canon of the literature of freedom, and quotes from the works of de Tocqueville and from the Magna Carta. The mechanizations of the elite and the greed for power would be recognizable to the writers of these venerable documents, even though the digital milieu is entirely new. 'Amid all our excitement over new technologies', she warns, 'our default assumption as citizens must be that governments, powerful corporations' and others 'will use digital networks to obtain and maintain power' (p. 14). We must not allow the new context to make us forget old principles: 'As with power in the physical world', she writes, 'power in the digital world must be constrained, balanced, and held accountable' (p. xxiv). That, she says, is the essence of democracy.

**Mary Joyce** is an expert on the international phenomenon of digital activism. She is the editor of *Digital Activism Decoded: The New Mechanics of Change* and was New Media Operations Manager for President Obama's 2008 campaign. She is currently a graduate student in Communication at the University of Washington in Seattle and blogs at [www.meta-activism.org](http://www.meta-activism.org). Address: Department of Communication, University of Washington, Box: 353740, Seattle, WA 98195, USA. Email: [mjoyce@uw.edu](mailto:mjoyce@uw.edu).

John Urry,

*Climate Change and Society*, Polity Press: Cambridge, 2011; 217 pp.: ISBN: 9780745650364, US\$69.95 (hbk), 9780745650371, US\$22.95 (pbk)

**Reviewed by** Jeremiah Bohr, *University of Illinois, USA*

### Keywords

Carbon, climate change, environmental sociology

As the latest contribution to the growing topic of climate change and society, John Urry's book is a welcome addition laying out an admirably ambitious project – to discipline sociology toward acknowledging the centrality of carbon in social systems of practice. Not only will such a disciplining benefit sociology by aligning it more closely with imminent collective problems faced in the near future, but will also make sociology more relevant to public debates over social responses to climate change, which Urry sees as too dominated by natural scientists and economists. In this regard, his work constitutes a forwarding of the general mission of environmental sociology, to better understand how social problems and practices are enmeshed in natural entities and processes.

Urry begins *Climate Change and Society* by noting a depressingly catastrophic imagined future – a coming epoch of resource depletion and climate change consequence that sociology should engage on a wider scale. The first chapter culminates in a clarion call for the discipline to make a 'resource-turn'. Here Urry suggests that the notion of post-carbonism could trump post-modernism as a grand theme organizing the experiences to