

INTERNET POLICY AND REGULATION THROUGH A SOCIO-CULTURAL LENS:

A DIALOGUE BETWEEN SOCIETY`S CULTURE AND DECISION-MAKERS?

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Abstract

This article argues that a dialogue of society and its culture with decision-making practices is taking place in the information society and with respect to phenomena such as digital divides. The article reports on focus group research conducted in Greece. This qualitative research concerns Internet policy and regulation in particular and examines the dialogue of policy and regulation with society's culture as reported by users and non-users of the Internet. The research finds that the perceived role of Internet policy and regulation passes through society's everyday culture, with significant implications for the implementation, efficiency and future course of Internet policy and regulation. These findings aim to fill in the relevant gap in the literature which often neglects the interlinkages between society's cultural traits and mindsets and the practices applied in the complex field of policy and regulation for the information society.

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The article poses the research question: *how are social culture and decision-making interrelated in the information society and with respect to phenomena such as digital divides?* To answer this question, the article reports on focus group research conducted in Greece and finds that the perceived role of decision-making in the information society passes through society's culture, with society's everyday culture in particular influencing critical areas of decision-making in the field.

In what follows, the article takes a sociological perspective on policy and regulation and highlights some aspects of the overlooked links of policy and regulation with social culture in the information society. It then presents the focus-group research that constituted part of a larger project and presents methodological and epistemological points for consideration. Through thematic and critical analysis, the article reports on focus group discourses and highlights the importance of ordinary people's (i.e. Internet users' and non-users') everyday culture in the evaluation and successfulness of policies and regulations in the field (i.e. Internet policies and regulations). The article concludes with policy recommendations, while highlighting the importance of undertaking further and large-scale qualitative and quantitative research in order to examine the two-way dialogue of decision-making with societies and their cultures. The latter recommendation is made because the article only accounts for such a dialogue from the perspective of ordinary people and does not tackle aspects of the dialogue with regard to how policies and regulations influence society's culture and in relation to new media technologies.

Policy and Regulation Through a Socio-cultural Lens

The argument of the social embeddedness of technology is quite prominent in the literature and illustrates the relevance of society's culture to the nature and significance of technology and technology-related phenomena in the information society such as digital divides. Socio-constructivist (Bijker et al. 1987; Bijker and Law 1992) and critical (Feenberg 1991; 1999) approaches to technology pay attention to the role of the ordinary user and its cultural identity in the shaping and development of technology. Thus, the literature often translates society's culture into ideas, values, dispositions, practices, processes and much more (Hofstede 1980; Cathelat 1993; Rogers 1995; Klammer et al. 2000; Thomas and Mante-Meijer 2001; Mante 2002; SevenOneMedia 2002) in order to make sense of the various ways in which culture influences the use, adoption and integration of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in particular socio-cultural milieus.

Although such socio-cultural accounts of technology challenge technocratic views of the information society, they have been restricted by the division appearing in the literature between politics and society. On one hand, the literature calls on decision-makers to tackle issues that relate to social engagement with technology (Selwyn 2004, 356), while confronting the deeper socio-cultural factors driving self-exclusion from technology and since "all technologies are imbued with cultural significance" (Wyatt et al. 2002, 39). On the other hand, particularly scant literature accounts for the multi-directional ways in which socio-cultural traits may influence decision-making in hidden or more obvious ways. This article argues for a sociological approach to policy and regulation and, in what follows, it highlights the relevant gap in the literature.

A Sociological Approach to Policy

Policy in the information society consists of initiatives that aim to promote new technology equipment, infrastructure and content through technology use, research and trade at all levels of social life.

Some literature suggests more open policy models, such as the layered model where the interfaces between four layers facilitate open and inter-networked communication. What is argued is that if communications policy is developed around four vertical layers – concerning content, applications services, logical and physical considerations – rather than around horizontal categories, the convergent and crosscutting nature of services and networks will be taken into account and more open-access use and development of new communication technologies will be supported (Werbach 2002, 39-40). Others bring up the insufficient social accountability of policy in the information society, arguing that policy is surrounded by a rhetoric that addresses economic interests and the vision of the digital economy (Mansell 2002, 417). Such views criticise the economy-centric character of current policies and call for society or user-driven, content-concerned and culture-sensitive policies (for a presentation of this proposal, see Servaes 2003, 19).

These critiques illustrate the importance of a sociological approach to policy-making and the need for society and its culture to lie at the core of the discussion of policy design, implementation and outcome. The exemplar of EU policy is indicative in this respect. The EU authorities have been criticised for over-emphasising market liberalisation in the information society, while overlooking other socially critical aspects of policy-making in this tough area (Jordana 2002, 8-11). EU communications policy seems to abandon the normative policy model (1945 until the 1980s/90s) which legitimised government intervention in communication markets for social purposes and the creation of public monopoly over radio and broadcasting (Cuilenburg and McQuail 2003, 191-5). This normative policy model is currently giving way to an emerging policy paradigm which is “driven by an economic and technological logic” (Cuilenburg and McQuail 2003, 198). The critical element is that normative and public interest parameters are increasingly weakened, whereas market criteria are ever more empowered in the EU policy process. Thus, some argue that, in the fragmented and liberalised market environment of Europe, socially sensitive policies to ensure a public universal service are insufficient (Pauwels and Burgelman 2003, 77). These voices bring up social interest as a policy aim and the medium through which successful policies are achieved, with culture being conceptualised as both the vehicle and goal of policy-making.

These critiques of EU policy in the information society have been further supported by empirical research in Europe. Such research illustrates the diversity of “users’ adoption of, engagement with and attitudes towards new ICTs in the sphere of everyday life in contemporary Europe” and argues about the ways in which policy can respond to people’s everyday needs and cultures appropriately (Preston 2005, 205-6). Thus, it has concluded the following socially-driven implications for policy-making in Europe: the importance of “downstream” applications in the digital context and communication services; the need for more demand-driven policies; attention to innovative modes of networking and the participation of civil society; and, greater attention to non-utilitarian applications of new ICT (Silverstone 2005).

Overall, critical voices of EU (and other) policies in the information society pose the question of whether policy-makers take societies and their cultures into account. However and regardless of the usefulness of this question, the extent to which societies and their cultures may directly or indirectly influence the shaping and successfulness of policy cultures, strategies and practices remains under-researched.

A Sociological Approach to Regulation

A gap in the literature is also evident when dealing with the more technical domain of regulation.

In general, the traditional Command and Control regulatory model is fading away (Black 2002, 2) and a “decentred” regulatory model is taking its place. The emerging decentred regulatory model, its components of privatisation and liberalisation and the implications of the retreat of the regulatory state for the public bring up in a relatively manifest way the need for a sociological account of regulation in the information society.

The Centre for Analysis of Risk and Regulation (CARR)¹ adopts a sociological view of regulation and points to the increasingly prominent non-state regulatory forces, such as the economy and civil society, and to their dialogue with traditional but today less prominent state regulation and governmental authorities (Hutter 2006). Of particular interest is what is called “civil regulation” (Tully 2004), which consists of partnerships between civil actors and market corporations, aiming to complement state regulation, to enforce market responsibility and to benefit the civil society and market operators. Although power struggles, efficiency issues and conflicts of interest may arise in this new regulatory landscape, “civil regulation” has arguably the potential to enable informed participatory mechanisms in the regulatory domain (Tully 2004, 12), thus pointing to the underlying links between decision-making and societal factors. In addition, other CARR research (Lodge et al. 2008) illustrates how cultural worldviews can be used as an analytical tool for understanding and explaining public policy and regulatory strategies: “a regulatory regime has to be understood as a temporary settlement that reflects the dominance of one worldview over others” (Lodge et al. 2008, 3).

Regarding media- and ICT-specific regulation, a sociological approach to regulation could find support in Silverstone’s argument that the media regulation-scape has close connections with society’s culture and media culture (2004). At the same time, Silverstone recognises that regulatory provisions in the field are “not sufficient as guarantors of humanity or culture” (2004, 440) and points to the market-oriented character of regulation and the undervaluation of the social aspects of media and ICT regulation. Such a concern is also raised by literature that examines EU regulation in the information society. The literature argues that the neglect of end-users and the over-appreciation of market and technical prospects by law-makers in the information society results in technological advancements that leave some social groups behind, raising questions about the accountability and efficiency of EU regulation today (Hedley 2003; King 2003; O’Brien and Ashford 2003; Russell 2003).

Such concerns are also confirmed by empirical research on media and ICT regulation in the UK (Livingstone et al. 2007). This research has shown that ordinary people’s interests are broadly defined by regulators through expanding the scope of the consumer instead of defining one against the other (Livingstone et

al. 2007, 78). The debate between “citizen” and “consumer” illustrates the market orientation of the regulatory provisions and resources allocated to the information society (Livingstone et al. 2007, 73-4). Citizens are consumers as well as human, social and political actors whose expectations go beyond market provisions. In this sense, the lack of a “positive definition of the citizen interest in relation to media and communications” (Livingstone et al. 2007, 85) does not guarantee a sufficient account of people’s interests in relevant regulatory practices.

However, I would add to the above critical arguments that cultural nuances and their unclear role in media regulation pose the question not only of whether regulation takes society’s culture into account but also of how society represents itself and influences regulation in a positive direction. The CARR research on “civil regulation” (Tully 2004) and the role of cultural worldviews as an analytical tool (Lodge et al. 2008) constitutes one of the few instances of work which points to the underlying role of cultural values in the strategies and practices applied in regulation. Nevertheless, even this work does not sufficiently examine the actual (i.e. active) role of society and its culture in regulation-making and does not shed light on the two-way interaction between society’s culture and regulation in the domain of media and communications, thus necessitating more work within the relevant field of research.

Society’s Culture and Decision-making in the Information Society: An Unexplored Bond?

The above discussion does not intend to reject any of the emerging regulatory or policy models in the field. It only aims to point out the gaps in the practice and research of policy and regulation in the information society, suggesting a socio-cultural lens of examination.

Sociologically inspired approaches to policy and regulation can contribute to the critical review of the role of ordinary people and their cultures in decision-making. On the one hand, the suggestion that cultural studies could be an analytical device for examining the influence of worldviews or cultures on policy and regulation practices (Lodge et al. 2008) can offer a useful analytical tool in related media and communications research. On the other hand, policy and regulation are not fully embedded in social culture and the complexity of the role of society’s culture as an active actor in decision-making must be explored further. There are more possibilities that media research needs to examine empirically. These are possibilities concerning largely disregarded arguments such as the argument that culture “regulates” by putting governments under the control of credit ratings (Hall et al. 1999, 5-7) or by setting implicit and/or explicit barriers to the implementation of policy and regulation. Such arguments invite research to conceptually and empirically bridge the gap between decision-making and socio-cultural traits in accounting for the present and future of the “multimedia revolution” and to explore the question: *how are social culture and decision-making interrelated in the information society and with respect to phenomena such as digital divides?*

In what follows, the article pursues this question and raises the multi-dimensional role of social culture in Internet policy and regulation by: first, examining discourses and critiques concerning the responsiveness of policy to societal needs, as well as the social accountability of regulatory schemes within and outside the

information society; second, accounting for the actual and potential role of society's culture in policy and regulatory practices and mindsets in the field. Although the broadness of the notion of culture can be seen as a challenge for the study reported here, I use "culture" in a relatively open way, mainly specifying the elements of society's culture on the basis of the insights obtained in the focus groups reported in the empirical section of the article. In addition, this study moves beyond a detailed account of the Greek case of society's culture per se since the aim here is primarily to show how society's culture can be brought up as a significant parameter to explore policy and regulation in the information society and secondarily only to account for the specific aspects of culture in the case of Greece.² Finally, the fact that this paper examines the relationship between Internet policy and regulation and society's culture from a bottom-up perspective, does not mean it adopts a one-way deterministic view of this relationship or that it dismisses the idea of reciprocal shaping. On the contrary, it takes a bottom-up perspective as ordinary people's everyday and broader culture and its role in common perceptions and the actual successfulness of Internet policy and regulation ask critical questions for the usually top-down approach to Internet policy and regulation and the way in which decision-making as a whole counters the phenomenon of digital divides.

Focus Groups: Methodological Reflections

Focus groups with Internet users and non-users were conducted in Greece for the purposes of a large, multi-stage empirical project. In general, they aimed to qualitatively research the part that society's culture, on one hand, and decision-making, on the other, play in ordinary people's decisions to adopt the Internet or not (i.e. digital divides).

In this article the emphasis is placed on discourses concerning the dialogue between ordinary people's culture and the evaluation and perceived successfulness of Internet policy and regulations, contextualising this in the broader framework of the adoption of Internet technologies. The case of Greece, where the focus groups were conducted, is provided as an example of the dialogue between society's culture and Internet policy and regulation; as a case-study which can constitute a model for research in other countries and contexts, while the interest in this article is not in tackling the case of Greece per se.

Eight focus groups were interviewed, with six individuals per group. The participants were recruited from a list of 350 people surveyed in an earlier phase of the larger project. At the end of the survey all respondents (1,000 individuals) had been asked whether they wished to participate in a focus group in a later phase of the research and 350 of them expressed their will to participate in the focus groups. I selected the final focus group sample out of these 350 people and on the basis of two criteria: first, "Internet usage," which was the condition of the sample selection and group configuration, with Internet users and non-users being allocated to different groups; second, the socio-demographic diversity of the sample in order to reflect, to some extent at least, the socio-demographic profile of the Greek population.³ The decision about the number of groups was based on the consideration that the study should be informed by more than one group of Internet users and non-users. The rule of thumb that "one should continue to run new groups until the last group has nothing new to add" (Lunt and Livingstone

1996, 7) was also taken into consideration. Thus, the data collection was split into two phases, with half of the focus groups conducted in the second phase and after the first four focus groups had been fully analysed and certain conclusions about the need for richer insights had been reached.

Two thematic guides were employed in the discussions, one for the user groups and another for the non-user groups. In this article the emphasis is on topics of discussion concerning the theme of Internet policy and regulation. All group members were asked to reflect on the character and efficiency of Internet policy and regulation, the need for more socially accountable and human-centred policies and regulations, and the linkages between society's culture and decision-making practices on the Internet. Particular stress is placed here on discourses concerning "life circumstances," "choice" and "priorities" and their role in how Internet users and non-users perceive, understand and evaluate Internet policy and regulation.

Thematic analysis was conducted on the first layer of data analysis and on the grounds of the thematic structure of the focus group discourses. On the second layer, the analysis disentangles the interactions between focus group discourses and relates text (i.e. discourses) to structures of the socio-political context by employing the following analytical terms:

- Reflectivity: thinking about what is said and the context of its production, including the socio-cultural (e.g. everyday culture) and policy context.
- Reflexivity: considering how one's position in society impacts upon what one does and how one interprets things (e.g. the impact of one's profession, lifestyle etc. on people's understanding of the Internet and its policy/regulation).
- Dialogue: the collaborative construction of understanding and evaluation was greatly facilitated in the focus groups. The emphasis is on contradictory, contrasting or converging arguments provoked by and articulated through dialogue.
- Comparison: comparing discourses on the same topic, with attention to similarities, differences and implications (e.g. how similarly or differently group members reflect on the same topic and what that means for their positioning in the broader socio-political context).

These analytical terms were employed to complement the first-layer thematic analysis. Hence, the analysis aimed overall to shed light on people's discourses on Internet policy and regulation on the grounds of the interaction between socio-cultural and political parameters.

Focus Groups: Internet Policy and Regulation through a Socio-cultural Lens

In what follows, the themes of Internet policy and regulation and the links to society's culture are discussed separately for Internet users and non-users.⁴

Users' Evaluation of Internet Policy and Regulation

The discussion with users revolved around issues of evaluation of and satisfaction with Internet policy and regulation.

Importance of Policy and Regulation for Internet Use. In general, users claimed that regulation is very important for the way they experience the Internet and other technologies in the information society. On one hand, young users such as Petros

(19 years, male, on military service) dismissed Internet regulation and its restrictive nature, arguing that tight Internet regulation does not fit in with the liberal and modern way they experience today's technological development. On the other hand, users aged between 30 and 50 years such as Agapi (35 years, female, decorator) are more cautious with new technological advancements and offered arguments in support of regulation and quite close to "media panic" discourses:

Petros: Don't take me wrong...I understand these things, but the Internet is meant to be a space of freedom and free expression. We don't need police on the Internet!

Agapi: Of course we need police...those who steal money, abuse children and commit crimes online...how can we feel safe with all these technological wonders that are so difficult to explore and understand?

One might assume that the above age-related differences⁵ illustrate how demographics can explain people's divergent attitudes to Internet regulation. The demographic of age is linked, however, to cultural gaps between focus group participants (i.e. different generations experiencing more or less different cultural conditions) and seems to somewhat influence the way people perceive the Internet in the context of their everyday lives as well as their evaluations of the importance of Internet regulation. Even though all focus group participants here were users, each user had a more or less unique experience of the Internet and a similarly unique sense of the role of the Internet and its regulation in everyday life. For instance, Fwtinh (59 years, female, secretary) only uses the Internet because her employer "forced" her to do so. As a result, she does not appreciate the Internet, nor is she aware of its regulation, as she considers this technological area of activity very distant from her daily routine. By contrast, Manos (38 years, male, CEO) is an active businessman who makes intensive use of the Internet for business and other purposes, thus considering the Internet an integral part of his life and its regulation a necessity:

Fwtinh: ...regulation...you know, I'm using the Internet with not much excitement...it was...my boss' decision...I really have no clue what Internet regulation is...to be honest, this never really bothered me (laughs).

Manos: (interrupts) ...yes, but this is not a good thing...you any way need to use the Internet...so you mustn't ignore the rules of it. If people do not know about regulation... about their rights and their safety online, how can they know all the great things they can do online?

Regarding Internet policy, most users argued that policy is important. The reasons for that differ though as they again drew on their daily experiences and the Internet's role in their individual lives to support their arguments. For instance, Pantelis (25 years, male, computer scientist) is very interested in Internet policy and especially in policy initiatives concerning the development of the science and commerce of Information Technology (IT) mainly because he works as a computer scientist and professional in the field. Also, due to his profession, he seems to be more aware of what is happening in the country and more, culturally speaking, extroverted in how he treats technology than the other group participants, something which also influences his attitude to the policies in the field:

As a professional...what are the policies to facilitate the provision of equipment, the establishment of infrastructure and the production of services...today there is literally no IT market in our country and we must compete with other countries to become economically and technological stronger.

Users' Satisfaction with Internet Policy and Regulation. Users' satisfaction with Internet regulation seems to depend on their daily culture and experiences. Users largely recognise that regulation cannot protect them perfectly, with those who are less positive regarding the Internet being more critical of regulation. For example, Agapi (35 years, female, decorator) is less in favour of the Internet and less happy with regulation as she considers that regulation is insufficient to protect her from the risks she is exposed on the Internet. On the other hand, Stefanos (32 years, male, investment analyst) defended regulation and argued that individuals can successfully address security and other Internet risks. Stefanos feels more confident as a user and enjoys a sense of psychological proximity to the Internet, something which makes him trust regulation while not being particularly dependent on it:

Stefanos: I don't think it's a matter of satisfaction... It's a matter of how much you accept possible risks and the measures you take to encounter them.

Agapi: Yes, but in my case there is no way to avoid offensive content posted on my website. I'm so vulnerable to verbal attack...it feels like a "dark space" in which I'm unprotected.

Thus, the argument that regulation cannot cover all areas is largely linked to users' daily life and culture and the way culture is reflected in Internet usage experience. For instance, certain aspects of regulation are not visible to ordinary people's everyday lives and, therefore, not much knowledge about and satisfaction with regulation is established:

Michalis (17 years, male, student): Lots of times I have felt uncomfortable with content and requests I come across online, especially those concerning personal info...but I usually avoid such sites. I haven't asked any authorities for help and haven't complained, as I don't really know which authority to consult.

Antonios (44 years, male, self-employed): ...this is a problem...how many of us know which authority is in charge of what regulation?

As regards policy, most users are dissatisfied with the country's Internet policy strategy and action. Practical concerns, such as a lack of Internet training, low awareness and the high cost of Internet services, unsatisfactory Internet infrastructure and a lack of public access to the Internet⁶ influence negatively users' evaluations of policies in the field. At the same time, users' dissatisfaction is rooted in culturally and historically inherited strong feelings of public mistrust in the state. A significant number of users, especially those who are advanced Internet users, argued that no one can really expect Greek authorities to take the right decisions regarding the Internet as they have always been bureaucratic, backward and socially non-accountable:

Theodora (27 years, female, researcher): It's sad that we have the most expensive and slowest Internet in Europe. There are no real experts to decide about technology in the country. Old-fashioned and ignorant politicians govern and nothing really moves on...it's this bureaucracy and lack of interest in people that make me want to escape... (laughs).

Also, users related their dissatisfaction with policy to Internet usage experiences, while usage experiences themselves depend on circumstances of life, individual needs and desires, as well as on the broader social culture and people's attitude to the state. Indicative is the example of two users who have different attitudes to technology and thus explain their dissatisfaction with Internet policy on completely dissimilar grounds:

Myros (35 years, male, actor): Unfortunately, when I was a student there were no computers, no equipment in schools ... now, everyone thinks it is too late for me to get state support in order to learn how to use the Internet. Imagine that I had to go and pay by myself to get some basic training before I started using the Internet.

Varvara (42 years, female, public servant): At least this is your choice. Do you know my supervisor in the Ministry where I work asked me to start using the Internet at this age? I'm really frustrated by the fact that I'm now obliged to use such technologies. When I was appointed, the state did not require such skills...now the state has changed its mind and I have to use all kinds of incomprehensible machinery...

Non-users' Evaluation of Internet Policy and Regulation

A similar set of questions explored the perceived role of policy and regulation in Internet non-usage and non-users' evaluation of Internet policy and regulation.

Role of Policy and Regulation in Non-usage. Non-users argued that Internet regulation has not affected their decision not to use the Internet:

Andreas (50 years, male, doctor): Ok, it's important to feel safe and to know what you can do online...but for me...no, regulation is not the reason for not using the Internet...

Interviewer: ...some of you mentioned before issues of online crimes, porn etc...

Dionysia (36 years, female, saleswoman): Yes, such issues would be important if I needed to use the Internet...

Instead, they said that other parameters, such as a lack of need and desire, influenced their decision not to use the Internet. Although the notion of "need" is purely subjective, it essentially relates to the needs and choices non-users have in life and to how policies and regulations influence such choices, or are influenced by them. Besides, one of the commonly acknowledged goals of policies and regulations in the information society is to inform citizens about the importance of technologies such as the Internet and to facilitate technology adoption towards individual development and collective growth:

Mpampis (52 years, male, waiter): Why should I use it? I have no reason to do so, nor an interest in it. You see, my job doesn't require computer or Internet skills. But if I had the chance to learn and also some financial or moral support and protection...a motivation let's say... I could learn...and this could have changed my life for the better...

More specifically about regulation, non-users considered regulation to be important for the user's online security but not directly associated with their own situation or the possibility of starting to use the Internet in the future. For instance, a male taxi driver, Marios (26 years), said that from whatever he has heard about the Internet he thinks that online regulation is very important for the user: "yes,

if all these that we watch on the news and read in the papers are true, then those who want to use the Internet must be safe and protected.”

In contrast to regulation, some non-users argued that Internet policy plays a role in their decision not to use the Internet. This was mostly argued by those intending to use the Internet in the future and feeling psychologically and culturally closer to it, such as Andreas (50, male, doctor), and those generally familiar with new technologies, such as Dimitrios (18 years, male, student):

Interviewer: ...do you think that policies may influence people's decision to use the Internet?

Andreas: ...yes, certainly...I'm thinking seriously about using the Internet in the future, but then issues such as equipment, training and much more make me quite reluctant.

Dimitrios: We're behind and policy is a reason...we need facilities, infrastructure, services, education...

Thus, some non-users argued for “better” Internet policy, but they understood and interpreted the word “better” on the basis of everyday needs as well as prominent values and principles about the role the Internet should play in everyday life:

Ioannis (25 years, male, civil servant): ...issues related to policy have not been the principal reason for not using the Internet... On the other hand, if I had been provided with better information and more chances to get familiar with the Internet, I could be a user...I could have appreciated the Internet and its benefits for my life more and learned how to use it without upsetting my daily rhythms and routine.

Where Policy and Regulation Are Needed. Although non-users appeared uncertain about what Internet regulation consists of and how it functions, they acknowledged that it is important for users, being in a way quite close to what many users themselves argued. Non-users framed and specified the notion of utility of regulation on the basis of their own daily concerns and everyday culture. For instance, Anna (38 years, female, teacher), a mother of two, is particularly worried as she claims to be aware of the risks her children might counter on the Internet. Thus, she declares the importance of regulation from a parental perspective, while her attitude reflects the family-oriented and over-protective character of Greek society that often drives people in the country away from the Internet:

Anna: ...thinking of my children...I would like to know how I can deal with adult content online or online chatting with strangers. I will definitely get informed about such regulations as, even if I never use the Internet myself, my children will probably have to start using it in the near future. So, I want to keep an eye on them and be able to ban inappropriate content or report those who may attempt to approach my children online.

Regarding policy, two non-users in group 3 identified areas where policy can be important and much needed, while associating such evaluations with their own everyday life circumstances. These same group participants acknowledged the role of policy in their decision not to use the Internet.

Andreas (50 years, male, doctor): I mentioned some of those I consider important...training, information, yeah, education... how can I start using the Internet without first being provided with the basic information?

Dimitrios (18 years, male, student): ...services, infrastructure...facilities, in general...I'm not offered any of these at my university right now.

Also, a significant number of non-users acknowledged the need for policy in a number of other areas, such as awareness of and access to the Internet, young people's protection and development, and so on. At the same time, however, they articulated relatively negative evaluations of the role that policy currently plays in people's lives. This contrast reveals some of the contradictions between the mission of policy and policy practices in effect, while it illustrates the (cultural) struggle of people with respect to the options they have to decide upon the adoption of new technologies and the way in which policies facilitate or halt such options.

Fanis (31 years, male, musician): Aren't we today free to decide whether to use the Internet or not?

Melina (37 years, female, waitress): Not sure at all...

Interviewer: What do you mean?

Melina: How do we have this freedom when in order to find a job today, any job, knowledge of computers is required...is this enabling or disabling?

.....

Evangelia (29 years, female, shop owner): Is policy something positive or negative? Is it politicians or the market that is pushing young people to have as many qualifications as possible to find a job?

Concluding Discussion: Internet Policy and Regulation and Links to Society's Culture

The article examined the dialogue of society and its culture with decision-making practices in the information society and explored the question: *how are social culture and decision-making interrelated in the information society and with respect to phenomena such as digital divides?* Looking at the case of Greece but arguing for the broader relevance of and lessons to be learned from this case, the article reports on the importance of ordinary people's (i.e. Internet users' and non-users') everyday culture in the evaluation and successfulness of policies and regulations in the field (i.e. Internet policies and regulations) and in relation to phenomena such as digital divides.

More specifically, the focus group discourses illustrated that everyday life and culture hold a prominent place in how users and non-users perceive and evaluate Internet policy and regulation. Many users accept the general importance of Internet policy and regulation. However, their experiences of Internet usage and the reasons they use the Internet in their everyday lives influence their attitudes not only to the Internet but also to the way it is governed and regulated, with less culturally familiar and advanced users being less supportive of Internet policies and regulations. By comparison, non-users hold contrasting views about the role of Internet policy and regulation in their decision not to use the Internet. They mostly talk about a lack of need to use the Internet, explicitly stating that their life style

and everyday culture is the reason for non-use. Thus, they declare a distance from regulation, only acknowledging the importance of regulation for “others,” namely those who use the Internet. Regarding policy, they argue for “better” policy, but they frame this argument in the context of everyday needs as well as prominent values and principles about the role the Internet should have in everyday life.

Concerning the level of satisfaction with Internet policy and regulation, the focus groups showed that users recognise that regulation cannot cover everything, while their attitudes to and experiences on the Internet determine their level of satisfaction (e.g. fervent supporters of new technologies such as the Internet are less critical of regulation). At the same time, users pointed to more tangible problems with policy, such as a lack of training and public access to the Internet, high cost and a lack of Internet infrastructure, and approached such problems in the context of their everyday needs and life circumstances and in association with a broader and culturally-rooted feeling of public mistrust in the state. Most non-users, on the other hand, did not consider Internet regulation to be relevant to their daily routines, while those who acknowledged the need for Internet regulation rested their assessments on the grounds of their own needs and life priorities if they were users. At the same time, non-users articulated diverse views with regard to where policy is needed and pointed to the (cultural) struggle between the need for better policies and the options people have to use new technologies or not, stressing that policies often disable such options and oblige people to adopt new technologies. This in turn shows that “inclusion” can be problematic for those who wish to remain “excluded” even if they acknowledge the need for better and more efficient policies in the field.

Thus, the conclusions of this article can be summarised as follows:

Two sets of socio-cultural factors seem to matter not only for how Internet policies and regulations are understood and evaluated but also for how they can and might develop in the future:

1. Cultural parameters related to the historical and civic sense of culture and the related mistrust of citizens in state policies and regulations lead to negative and relatively pessimistic evaluations of policies and regulations.

2. Everyday life parameters, such as people’s circumstances of life, individual needs, desires and choices in life, influence evaluations of the importance of policy and regulation, public awareness of policy and regulation, as well as people’s grasp of the effectiveness of policy and regulation.

These two sets of socio-cultural parameters also seem to go hand-in-hand with other matters lying in society and influencing Internet policy and regulation, like people’s safety concerns about Internet technologies. My focus groups referred to concerns about online safety, privacy and security, thus raising the importance of social accountability and visibility of policies and regulations in the field.

Policy and regulation in socio-cultural context is an argument concerning not only society’s evaluation of policy and regulation but also the actual policy and regulatory activities, their design and accountability, as well as their trajectory. It is an argument with significant implications for the ways in which Internet policies and regulations can become more accountable to society’s culture and simultaneously more visible to society and thus more flexible in their implementation. The shaping of policy and regulation in the information society passes through society

and its culture and creates a triangular relationship with technology, with technology penetration determined by society both directly and through the dialogue of society and its culture with policy and regulation.

This article attempted to illustrate these points and bridge the long-standing gap between society and politics in the literature through qualitative research and beyond country-specific particularities. It accounted for the dialogue between society's culture and Internet policy and regulation from the perspective of ordinary people, whereas it did not tackle this dialogue with regard to how policies and regulations influence in ideological and practical terms society's culture and associated engagement with new technologies. Thus and regardless of the importance of the insights provided in this study, further and comparative research must be conducted in order for these insights to be enriched.

Notes:

1. For more, see: <http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/CARR/research>.
2. If the elements of culture to look at had been strictly defined from a theoretical perspective, the focus groups would have been dictated by certain perceptions or analyses of culture, thus failing to offer genuine and reliable insights into the issue.
3. The socio-demographics of the focus group members are provided in brackets in the discussion of the group discourses. The only demographic not mentioned is that of "race" as there were no different racial backgrounds in my sample (i.e. all Greek citizens with origins in the country of Greece).
4. The findings are reported for regulation first and for policy after. This is because the flow of the focus group discussions began with the more concrete and technical domain of regulation – technical due to complex legislation and legal terminologies and the regulator's area of concern with technology software and hardware – and then moved on to the more general and overarching domain of policy.
5. Age appears as an important demographic in the focus groups. On the other hand, gender does not emerge as influencing people's views of Internet policies and regulations.
6. These are some of the most prominent areas of Internet policy.

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