Divina Frau-Meigs, *Media Matters in the Cultural Contradictions of the 'Information Society' – Towards a Human Rights-Based Governance*

Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2011, 390 pages

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REFERENCES

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1   Divina Frau-Meigs' *Media Matters in the Cultural Contradictions of the 'Information Society' – Towards a human rights-based governance* is one of a number of recent monographs to grapple with the changing nature of communication regulation, policy and legislation, at the national, regional and supranational levels. In doing so, Frau-Meigs does not just comment on emerging regimes of global communication governance, but rather attempts to reinsert a human element into a discourse that has become increasingly divorced from the populations it is meant to serve. Frau-Meigs argues for a more 'people-centered' model of global communication and information governance, which places this book in conversation with other recent manuscripts addressing what Raboy and Shtern have called

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'communication rights and the right to communicate.'[1] In making this case, this book not only addresses topics familiar to political economic critique, but also engages with emerging challenges that come with new Information Communication Technologies and networks : digital privacy, freedom of information, surveillance, the right to forget, data mining and consumer profiling, media education, and the many iterations of the digital divide. According to Frau-Meigs, each of these issues can be understood and challenged through the lens of human rights.

2   Such a wide scope should not come as a surprise to those familiar with Frau-Meigs' work. A Professor of media sociology at the Sorbonne Nouvelle University, Frau-Meigs has been involved with such organizations as WSIS, UNESCO, the UN, the Council of Europe and the European Commission. While the book uses primarily European cases, drawing particular examples from the European Convention on Human Rights, and various EU rulings (*e.g.* Television without Frontiers (1989) and the Audio Visual Media Services Directive (2007)), she also demonstrates her mastery of supranational legislative matters concerning the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, WSIS, GATT, WIPO, TRIPS, and UNESCO.

3   Frau-Meigs' thesis rests on the argument that we have left the era of consumption behind, and have now entered one of participation (what she terms the 'cyberist moment'). The result of such a transition is that individuals interact with ICTs at a much more personal level, necessitating laws and policies that better reflect this relationship between 'man and machine' (12), rather than the ongoing trend towards commercialization and industry-focused policy regimes. In this search for a more 'people-centered' model of global communication governance, three normative interventions stand at the forefront of her argument. First, an enhanced role for civil society groups, particularly through co-operative measures such as co-regulation and participation. Second, the need to transfer controls over online identities and personal

information from commercial enterprises to individuals. Third, the role of media education, particularly amongst young people, who, according to Frau-Meigs, 'are ill-informed about the potential impact personal data collection will have on their daily lives and their future' (184).

4   From these examples, one observes that the book achieves its goal of serving as a toolkit for policy intervention, as much as it is a critical examination of what Frau-Meigs calls in the title of her book the 'cultural contradictions of the information society.' Each chapter looks at a pressing issue in global media policy : Ethics, Dignity, Identity, Privacy, Diversity, Public Service, Gatekeeping, Risk, and Media Education. Each concludes with a discussion of how the particular issue relates back to human rights and how a more progressive platform can integrate human rights into policy discourse. The Foreword by Maud de Boer-Buquicchio is correct then to note that the chapters are 'action-oriented,' with clear interventions in mind that do not need to be read in a linear fashion (6). While certainly the case can be made that the chapters can be read individually, Frau-Meigs does an exceptional job at relating each issue back to her central thesis : That a 'cyberist' moment in the information society requires a new focus for media governance ; a focus which must include the integration of human rights into a multi-stakeholder process of media governance, regulation and legislation, both nationally and supranationally.

5   But what is this cyberist era ? Frau-Meigs proposes that we have left the modernist and postmodernist eras behind, and that,

> In this information paradigm shift from the postmodernist era to the cyberist era, the online behaviour of end-users, as they become contributors and producers of information, takes primacy over their offline activities and develops a tighter than ever co-evolution between man and machine. These cyberist features tend to displace the concerns of late modernity to the margins while other concerns come to the fore. (12)

6   This 'moment' suggests a more intimate connection between humans and the technological and communicatory interfaces we use to connect to the larger digital world. It is characterized by three primary cultural contradictions which relate back to this argument : (1) 'The double bind of the information economy' between consumption and participation ; (2) 'The termination of the postmodernist cultural paradigm' and ; (3) 'The contradictions in the ideological supremacy of capitalism' (13-14). The cyberist moment is thus defined by collective action, engagement and participation and Frau-Meigs argues for the reflection of this shift through a reinsertion of humans into the information society's regulatory structures, particularly through such strategies as co-regulation, co-presence, co-operation and consensus.

7   In addition to 'cyberism', Frau-Meigs introduces her reader to other models for the information society, such as 'media spectacles' and 'media services' which at their broadest, juxtapose culture-minded content (spectacles) with media as an industrial service. Not surprisingly then, Frau-Meigs suggests that the media sector can be read either through the lens of the 'information-provider model' which primarily reflects consumer and commercial interests, or an 'open-source model' which suggests greater participation and cultural pluralism. Despite the critical political economic and normative underpinnings of her writing, however, she is not one to eschew the commercial sector altogether, but rather seeks 'to keep the balance between spectacles and services, paid-for and public options' (53). In other words, we need a hybrid media system : a media system that draws not only from the commercialization potentialities

of the Internet but more importantly from co-operational methods such as open-source and participatory practices (48, 57).

8   To underscore the aforementioned attachment between 'man and machine' (which indeed evokes comparisons to a McCluhanesque media ecology) Frau-Meigs proposes the concept of 'social cognition' as a way to understand the information society. While a difficult concept to understand, social cognition

> ...explicitly connects media to the brain (knowledge) and to the environment (culture) with three main considerations... [1] We understand the media and representation with our interactions with the environment ; [2] Cognitive conflict and ethical dilemmas are the stimulus for using media and learning from them, and they determine the organization and nature of what is represented, learned and transmitted ; [3] Media spectacles and services evolve through the evaluation of the viability of individual and collective needs and functions. (35-36)

9   Social cognition understands the media as an extension of the brain, whereby the media are 'cognitive artefacts that ensure cultural transmission of values, beliefs and attitudes' (36).

10   In this ecological or even biological perspective, a social cognition of media suggests a connection between humans and media-as-cultural representations, whereby the media 'fulfill some "functions" and services according to "situations"' (35). Social cognition and human rights, aligned by a commitment to the physical and cognitive rights of the individual, form the backbone of the cyberist moment. However it is the human rights component within the information society that becomes the primary focus of the remainder of the book.

11   While the Introduction and first chapter introduce these many terms and central thesis, the next nine chapters discuss the various aforementioned people-centered challenges that exist within the information society, and include suggested interventions for aligning these concerns with a human rights-based approach. Five chapter examples will be used to illustrate this organizational framework. Chapter three for instance covers the 'compound' notion of dignity (95), and the more tangible challenges of freedom of expression and privacy, particularly when it comes to young people. Interestingly, Frau-Meigs proposes in this chapter that we should be transferring human rights to Internet objects created by humans such as avatars. While it is certainly true that the Internet has changed the boundaries of social networking and identity formation, thus requiring the need for protective measures to dissuade abuses, this is perhaps one of the least convincing suggestions in the toolkit of interventions. What legal parameters, for instance, would human rights-based protection for virtual identities entail ?

12   In Chapter Six, Frau-Meigs discusses cultural diversity, and argues for the ongoing role of the state in achieving pluralism and cultural diversity, since 'the means of representing a country's identity cannot be left to a third party,' (193). Alongside this argument is a discussion of the definition of diversity, and the commercial and cultural implications therein. In a particularly interesting deconstruction of the cultural production sector, she suggests that it can be understood as 'the cultural industries' - 'the production of cultural goods through public funding ; 'the content industries' (commercially driven) ; or 'the creative industries' - 'characterized by hybrid funding... and by production methods centred on creative individuals,' (191). This typology maps on to the previous discussion of media-as-spectacle or media-as-service, and the information provider/open source models of the communication sectors, and aligns

with a long line of political economy of communication scholars who have noted the dichotomy between the commercial and public interest iterations of media production.

13   Chapter Seven reasserts the more classic political economic argument of the role and value of *public service* networks, and particularly the relationship between the public and the private. Frau-Meigs acknowledges, 'if the public domain is to exist online, it is framed within a market economy, for better or worse, so legislation elaborated in multi-stakeholder platforms has to establish balance...' (260). Departing from some, she does not propose radical solutions that operate without the system, but rather interventions that can function within the system of global capitalism. Co-regulation and consensus can be read as two workable interventions. Chapter Nine, which concerns 'the protection of minors,' is perhaps the most user-friendly chapter in what is otherwise a book for the already well-informed reader on global information policy issues. Here, Frau-Meigs stresses the '3Ps' of protection, provision and participation when it comes to the policies concerning young people and the Internet (317). Media literacy is also prominent in this chapter, and segues into Chapter Ten, which focuses exclusively on media education. This penultimate chapter is the most 'action-oriented' in the book as Frau-Meigs argues for new pedagogical structures, believing that 'teacher-as-resource' has come to replace 'teacher-as-source' in educational environment. Within these chapters, Frau-Meigs convincingly demonstrates how human rights can feed into all facets of information policy making in the cyberist era.

14   To be sure, this is not an introductory text to global media governance and would likely be a challenge for the novice observer. Nonetheless, Frau-Meigs not only joins, but strengthens the ongoing global conversation of innovative ways of thinking about media and democracy. By aligning the familiar tropes of political economic critique with the emergent discourses in policy scholarship of communication rights and *human rights* more broadly, Frau-Meigs offers a fresh and in-depth perspective on the ways that global media governance could truly live up to the normative ideals of co-operation, co-regulation and participation amongst multistakeholders. In the end, one of the greatest strengths of this book is that Frau-Meigs offers an 'action oriented' interventionist approach (de Boer Buquicchio, 6) one that can be read as a guidebook not only for media reform and global ICT scholars, but also activists, reformers and progressive policymakers both within and outside the European Union.

ENDNOTES

1. Raboy, M., & Shtern, J. Introduction, In M. Raboy and J. Shtern (eds.), *Media Divides: Communication Rights and the Right to Communicate in Canada,* Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2010, p.15.

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