Connectivity, Networking and Bureaucratic Control

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In his visionary writing on the nature of collective intelligence, Pierre Levy (1997) has proposed that we are witnessing a techno-cultural metamorphosis. The world of modernity (based on 'molar' processes and structures) is transforming itself into a world based on "self-organizing communities" of "molecular groups" (Levy, 1997: 41). Levy has argued that the age of transcendent structures is morphing into one where online connectivity and networking replace hierarchy, and ensure the most efficient and best use of knowledge and creative energy.

In separate attempts to explain the feasibility of connectivity and networking as social process, Rheingold (2002) and Clarke (2003) have recently introduced the terms 'smart mobbing' and 'global swarming' to explain the new mobilisation for collective action that is possible with mobile and wireless technologies. Such conceptualisation performs the useful task of developing by analogy a better understanding of this new realm of human-media action. At the same time, however, new questions arise concerning the nature and practice of political action and cultural participation in a "polycosmos". The 'swarming' and 'mobbing' activity that is a feature of connectivity and networking calls into question the survival of many of the institutions that emerged to manage the urbanized mass populations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. How confident should we be that ICTs will deliver better participation in political and social action adequate to the needs of complex urban societies.

It is not surprising that, faced with the spectre of 'disintermediation' (Evans and Wurster, 2000) linked to the use of ICTs, many molar institutions are in the process of recognising that the stable patterns of engagement established in the past to manage communications with audiences/publics, need to change; to develop strategic initiatives to manage the new expectations for participation by their constituents. This is the case in e-business (Evans and Wurster, 2000), e-democracy (Coleman and Goetze, 2000), and e-broadcasting. In each of these contexts, strategies are being developed to protect the 'core business' of the institution through closer engagement with consumers, constituents, and audiences. The emerging control strategies include the close management of customer relationships and the development of navigation devices linked to consumer activities; the fostering of online communities, online research and

online public engagement (Coleman and Goetze, op.cit.) by public authorities and governments; and enhanced TV or iTV developments that focus on the 'always on' viewer of online and mobile enhanced broadcasting.

This paper compares and contrasts these attempts to control the 'molecular' logic of the information age. It argues that emphasis on surveillance and privacy diverts attention from the responsibility of institutions and organisations to experiment with new ways of engaging their constituents in core business activity through the use of ICTs, and it licenses increasingly intrusive surveillance by them. The paper advocates increased attention to the strategies adopted for engagement and the price (in time, internet access charges, research activities) attached to online engagement by commercial organisations, governments and broadcasters as the basis for informed criticism of current developments.