

# DIGITAL FUTURES BETWEEN DOMINATION AND PARTICIPATION

**Edited by** Markus S. Schulz and Isabel da Costa

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**VOLUME 28**

DIGITAL FUTURES BETWEEN  
DOMINATION AND PARTICIPATION

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STUDIES IN MEDIA AND  
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# **DIGITAL FUTURES BETWEEN DOMINATION AND PARTICIPATION**

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION: DIGITAL FUTURES BETWEEN DOMINATION AND PARTICIPATION

Markus S. Schulz

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Digital technologies from the Internet and social media to artificial intelligence and robotics are reshaping the world. They offer joy, participation, and higher productivity, but they have also brought disruption, alienation, control, and new inequalities. This volume explores this transformation and its social implications between domination and participation. Outcomes at any given time are not taken as predetermined but as results of the decisions by a range of diverse social actors who compete, cooperate, or combat with one another and who can draw on differential access to resources within shifting political–legal frameworks and structural contexts. Scholars of communication, media studies, sociology, political ecology, industrial relations, and labor studies come together to examine the social shaping of digital futures across different world regions and domains. Contributing to these fields, the volume highlights the merits of interdisciplinary research and transnational perspectives to enhance our understanding of these new dynamics that profoundly reconfigure livelihoods worldwide through pertinent case studies. At the same time, it underscores also the social stakes and the need for broadening the horizon for imagining better alternatives.

The volume starts with a general overview of the theme in Markus S. Schulz’s contribution entitled “Participatory Visions and Dominating Realities: Beyond the History of Digital Futures.” Schulz examines the recent history of digital formations as it oscillates between domination and participation. He does not take the actual outcomes of historical processes for granted but views them as

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contingent moments that could have turned out differently and that bear the potential of turning direction. By viewing conflict, competition, and cooperation as the three basic modes of creating a future society, he explores how these have shaped the new global mediascape and digital futures in different ways during distinct phases. Schulz argues that participatory visions have always been present in the history of communication and media, whether as companions, critics, or motivating drivers, yet the realities of domination were just as much a constant, often sidelining participatory visions, even to the extent that the history of digital futures can appear as a history of *déjà vu*. Although he regards corporate interests to be typically better equipped with resources and access to lawmakers and international treaty negotiators, he emphasizes that users and civil society initiatives can enlarge their leverage through their creative imagination and strategic innovation to make otherwise implicit value decisions part of the political debate. His discussion of the contrast between alternative trajectories points to the stakes and values choices available to social actors in the – more or less contentious – shaping of digital formations.

The series continues with Stefan Lücking's contribution entitled "Beyond the Black Box: Negotiating Artificial Intelligence at the Workplace." Lücking tackles in two steps what is often operating merely in the background, blurred by marketing discourse, and experienced as a black box. First, he provides an overview of three major forms of artificial intelligence (AI): algorithmic management, automated decision-making, and generative AI. In the second part, he delves into how AI is being negotiated at specific workplace settings within the legal–political framework of Germany's Works Constitution Act (*Betriebsverfassungsgesetz*, abbreviated *BetrVG*), which establishes works councils and the right of workers to be part of decision-making processes and hence also to be part of the implementation of new technologies. Lücking's study reveals how AI does not have to be a quasi-natural force destined to restructure labor relations by pre-destined fate but that it can be opened up in a social dialogue and hence examined for its implications from multiple angles. His study identifies various possibilities for shaping how AI enters and operates at the workplace in alternative and socially more equitable ways. Lücking shows how the involvement of trade unions and other employee representatives can contribute to innovations that are better for both workers and firms.

The next chapter brings us from the workplace of larger-scale firms to freelancers and their platforms and from Germany to China. In the contribution entitled "Struggling for Power over Time: Freelance Writers in China's Cultural and Creative Industries," Cong Peng discusses how formally autonomous creative freelance workers cope with platform pressures in a struggle to maintain control over their time. Peng's qualitative approach used participant observation, in-depth interviews, and background interviews with editors to gain nuanced insights into the everyday practices on the platforms and into how the freelance writers experience their creative work, subjectivity, autonomy, and control over time. Her study shows how the lure of autonomous work collides with the harsher necessities to work long and often inconvenient hours in order to generate sufficient income and maintain a reputation of dependability. Peng points to these

freelancers' general lack of social security and suggests policy changes to improve conditions for this type of platform workers in the cultural and creative industries in China.

The cultural and creative industries are also the terrain of the following chapter by Tin-Yuet Ting, entitled "Two Tales of Digital Self-Entrepreneurship." Ting's focus is on video bloggers (vloggers), the relationship between social class and platform work, and how class origin shapes content production, aspirations, and careers. Paralleling Peng's observation, the freelance work of vlogging has great allure, even appearing as the young generation's top career choice, yet it also comes with uncertain prospects and exposure to precarity. Ting's qualitative study design, which included in-depth interviews, allows deep insights into the everyday experiences and practices of young people from a diverse range of socioeconomic and family backgrounds as they pursue their dreams of a career as vloggers. Drawing on and extending Bourdieu, Ting provides a nuanced analysis of how professional YouTubers in Hong Kong acquire their divergent digital habitus within the broader context of social inequality and a neoliberal legal and political framework. Ting discusses how differences in material constraints and opportunity costs shape professional attitudes, future aspirations, and creative orientations according to their class positions. Whether one can start out from a middle-/upper-class or working-/lower-class position yields quite contrasting stories of digital self-entrepreneurship. Ting's study thus deepens sociological understandings of how social inequality is reproduced in the domain of digital creative work.

The subsequent chapter by Rima Žilinskaitė, entitled "Digitalization, Participation, and Science: Citizen Science as Type(s) of Prosumption," explores knowledge production and dissemination in the domain of science, how ordinary citizens can get involved in it and how digital technologies can play a role in facilitating this involvement by affording new opportunities and expanded scales. Žilinskaitė presents a cluster analysis of European citizen science projects that assesses the varieties of participation fostered by digital technologies. For Žilinskaitė, the concept of citizen science is incomplete because it does not encompass all manners of participation. She suggests, therefore, the notion of prosumption in order to capture the blending of production and consumption. This brings into focus the productive practices of users and their motivations for involvement.

The next chapter by Attila Márton is entitled "A Digital Future of Resilience: What Can We Learn from Ecological Thinking?" Márton embarks on the observation of digital technologies' ability to connect "everything with everything." He sees such connectivity as not just as beneficial but also carrying uncontrollable risks, even potentially catastrophic risks. He counts political discourses polarized by social media and neighborhoods made unaffordable for locals by tourist platforms as instances of what already went wrong. This prompted him to employ ecological thinking not only for critical analyses of negative effects, precarity, and crisis but also to develop better alternative visions. Crucial for him is thus the notion of resilience. Drawing on Biggs et al. (2012), he proposes broadly participatory, diversity-including, non-rushed, holistic systems thinking in order to envision more equitable, resilient, and digital futures.

In the final chapter to this volume, Isabel da Costa ties these themes together and addresses the “invisible elephant in the room,” that is, the question of regulation. How does global civil society, the people of the world, want their technological infrastructure to be designed? For whose benefit? For what purposes? How can the power be generated by people acting in concert? How can such be channeled to effect concrete designs? Costa lays out questions for further research related to the State and state entities as key actor(s) and arena for the social shaping of digital futures.

To conclude, the international contributions illuminate the intricate complexity in which digital formations are shaped by and are shaping social relations of power between dominances and participation in different countries and domains. The findings contribute rich interdisciplinary and multi-angled perspectives on the more or less collaborative, competitive, or conflictual making of digital futures. The authors provide critical case studies that make timely progress toward narrowing theoretical gaps and broadening the horizon for imaging better alternatives. In doing so, the volume contributes insights into the dynamics of digital technologies, knowledge, and power across disciplines and settings that have normative implications and practical relevance.

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## CHAPTER 2

# PARTICIPATORY VISIONS AND DOMINATING REALITIES: BEYOND THE HISTORY OF DIGITAL FUTURES

Markus S. Schulz

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter examines the recent history of digital formations as it oscillates between domination and participation. It does not take the actual outcomes of historical processes for granted, but regards them as contingent moments that could have turned out differently and that bear potential for turning direction. Considering conflict, competition, and cooperation as the three basic modes of creating a future society, it explores how these have shaped the new global mediascape and digital futures in different ways during distinct phases. It argues that participatory visions have always been present in the history of communication and media, whether as companions, critics, or motivating drivers. Yet, the realities of domination are just as much a constant, often sidelining participatory visions, even to the extent that the history of digital futures can appear as a history of déjà vu. Although corporate interests are typically better equipped with resources and access to lawmakers and international treaty negotiators, the users and civil society initiatives can enlarge their leverage through their creative imagination and strategic innovation to make otherwise implicit value decisions part of the political debate. The contrast between alternative trajectories and their social consequences indicates the stakes and values choices*

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*available to social actors in the (more or less contentious) shaping of digital formations.*

**Keywords:** Communication; cooperation; domination; future; Internet; media; participation; social shaping of technology

## INTRODUCTION

Participatory visions have always been present in the history of communication and media. They were constant companions, critics, or motivating drivers. Yet, the specter of domination is just as much a constant. Dominating realities often sideline the participating visions. The history of digital futures appears as a history of déjà vu. Hope does not appear to die, though it can get postponed and renewed. Hype does not seem to die, but it gets recycled. This chapter explores the recent history of digital formations as they oscillate between domination and participation. It does not take the actual outcomes of historical processes for granted, but views them as contingent moments that could have turned out differently and that bear potential for turning direction.

Is technology neutral? Yes and no. In abstract theoretical terms, the answer is yes. But technology is always shaped in specific contexts that render it everything but neutral (Ellul, 1964; Feenberg, 1999; Marcuse, 1964). It can serve as a weapon of liberation that transports words of enlightenment, the spirit of liberty, and the connecting love of solidarity. Yet, it can also serve to wage war, commit genocide, change the global climate, and contaminate nature. Technology can be shaped through cooperative, competitive, or conflictual dynamics, just as it can embody the values of cooperation, competition, or conflict.

This chapter<sup>1</sup> will examine the rise of the digital formations from a global and comparative perspective, paying particular attention to the role of key social actors and the changing modes of their interplay. While the term “New Information and Communication Technologies” (NICT) was most appropriate for research that considered the rise of the Internet within longer historical trajectories of analog media (Herzog et al., 2002), the notion of the “digital” supports the analytical strategy to consider the diverse developments in the latest communication and computer technologies, Artificial Intelligence (AI), and robotics as interconnected parts of a broader trend. The concept of “digital formations” follows Latham and Sassen’s (2005) definition and approach to view “technologies fundamentally in social rather than technical terms” without losing sight of the technical specificities. This approach is further developed by distinguishing conflict, competition, and cooperation as the three basic modes of creating future society (Schulz, 2009). The chapter will explore how these have shaped the new global mediascape and digital futures in different ways during distinct phases. The goal is hereby not to provide an exhaustive account of the creation of digital futures but to contribute to the orientation of questions for empirical research with normative relevance. This will be illustrated by discussing the social consequences of current trends and by pointing to the stakes of future development.

## FUTURES AFTER DETERMINISM

The field of futures research owes as much to 19th and early 20th century traditions of thought as any other area within the social sciences. This is especially true when tracing the origins of how the principles of competition, conflict, and cooperation entered the field. Charles Darwin's evolution-theoretical concept of the "survival of the fittest" and Adam Smith's notion of the "invisible hand" of the market that could be entrusted with distributive and regulatory order functions came to inform the model of competition. Karl Marx's notion of inevitable class struggle was taken up and further developed by different strands of conflict theory. Emile Durkheim's notion of a modern society held together by organic integration and the collaboration of complementarily specialized social sectors lacked attention to conflict, but it raised important questions about the conditions of possibility for social order and cooperation.

Future research, which began its boom in the 1960s and 1970s, shared its technological enthusiasm with the theorists of early industrialization. The wave of futures studies published in the 1960s was characterized by a strong belief in technology as a savior. Books about the future in the year 2000 had become widely discussed bestsellers (e.g., Bell, 1968; Jungk & Galtung, 1969; Kahn & Wiener, 1967). Most of these displayed an outspoken optimism based on technological progress and focused on the benefits of space-age technologies and mass consumer goods (see the overview in Bell, 1997a). This optimism was given credence by experiences in daily life. Technological breakthroughs, such as the landing of an Apollo rocket and the first steps of a man on the moon, were televised to a global audience. Mass-produced technology, including automobiles and an increasing plethora of household electronics, had become affordable to ever wider circles throughout the wealthier countries. It was hoped that the Green Revolution would feed the Third World, and technology was believed to trickle down to all people on the planet.

Soon enough, however, this technological optimism was to give way to a more pessimistic perspective. A variety of heterogeneous factors led to this shift. The oil crisis of the early 1970s led to a world-wide recession. The consequences of this abrupt stoppage of growth were felt not only by motorists but by consumers world-wide. The welfare-states of the First World ran into a crisis of legitimacy. The historical compromise between capital and labor was put to a test as the cake for redistribution had slowed down its growth or even had stopped growing (Offe, 1987). The Report to the Club of Rome by Dennis Meadows and his collaborators expressed a strong warning about the *Limits of Growth* (Meadows et al., 1972) and became famous as it touched a chord of concern. An environmental movement began to emerge in an increasing number of industrialized countries criticizing the abuse of planetary resources. Other critics warned about the specter of a Third World War. The growing arsenals of nuclear weapons had resulted in thousand-fold overkill capacities. Technology became seen as an imminent threat by the Cold War's peace movement. The Third World developed the Dependency School (Amin, 1977; Cardoso & Faletto, 1979; Frank, 1967), which argued that modernization theories and trickle-down assumptions of development were naïve

and that Third World was positioned in a system of unequal terms of trade that did not allow any betterment for systemic reasons.

The subsequent decline of futures studies during the later 1970s and 1980s was followed by a renaissance with yet more sophisticated methodologies, sharper methods, and a consciousness of time characterized by a fundamental contingency that is open to the horizon of the possible and the politically shapeable (Bell, 1997a, 1997b; Boulding & Boulding, 1995). Contemporary social theory expressed this in its emphasis on the “creativity of action” (Joas, 1996) and in the explicit inclusion of the factor “human agency” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998).

To provide a broad overview across work undertaken in the field of futures research over the last few decades, one can distinguish four major approaches: (1) forecasts, especially those based on Delphi-Interviews with leading experts in research and development (e.g., Beck et al., 2000); (2) studies that employ scenario building techniques about possible and probable futures (e.g., Schulz, 1999, 2001d); (3) empirical research on the futures of the past or present, that is, the images of futures prevalent during past moments of time (Bell, 1997a); the processes by which such past images of the future were constructed (Mannheim, 1936); and the efficacy of these visions for social change – this is what can be called the sociology of the imaginary (Castoriadis, 1991); and (4) normative or norm-analytical theorizing about preferable futures (Bell, 1997b), including theorizing on the relationship of values and futures, as will be attempted here.

The principles of competition, conflict, and cooperation play a role in all four of these approaches. Futuristic forecasts that draw on the expertise of scientists, engineers, economists, and other specialists implicitly accept their assumptions about how more or less smooth current trends are expected to continue. Alternative scenarios might be constructed according to assumptions of successful cooperation between decisive actors, their conflictual breakdown, or some intermediate path. This has been done, for example, in an interdisciplinary study of the impact of the climate change on the Lower Weser region in Germany, in which indicators of social conflict, economic competition, and global cooperation were integrated into a regional econometric model for the generation of path-specific long-term future scenarios (Schulz, 1999, 2001d). The study of the futures of the past shows how certain expectations can, depending on context, serve as self-fulfilling prophecies or bring about just the opposite of the expected (cf. Bell, 1997a). Warnings about the cost of conflict can help to persuade the relevant actors to cooperate. Predictions about rising values in the stock market tend to contribute to increases in the stock’s value. Most recent normative theorizing tends to postulate cooperation as a necessary mechanism for the making of preferable futures (Bell, 1997b; Masini, 1999). The major exceptions are free market advocates, for whom competition is the only conceivable engine of innovation, growth, and progress. Yet, no matter how strongly market advocates embrace the notion of competition, it can function only on assumptions of cooperation with regard to market rules and institutional structures enforcing these rules.

Of course, a more detailed discussion of the role that the principles of competition, conflict, and cooperation play in each of the highly diverse strands of futures research would be beyond the scope of this chapter. Therefore, I will focus