

**Institutional Transformations and Digital Legitimacy:
Analyzing Security Institutions on the World Wide Web**

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Abstract:

This project analyzes the development of security institutions' use of the World Wide Web with a particular emphasis on how websites construct institutional, gendered and cultural identities and how these identities legitimize foreign policy. Drawing on security theory, media theory and feminist theory it develops a theory of the politics of visual and interactive communication which is applied to a wide variety of "security websites", including international institutions, recruitment campaigns, official state department websites for children, personal homepages of head of states and presidential candidates, and Western armed forces' response to the dissimulation of gendered imagery in the coverage of the war in Iraq.

With the advent of the Internet/World Wide Web a new media has been added to the global media sphere. Crucially from an international politics perspective it offers possibilities for transgressing a national public sphere by forming a regional or a global one and it has spread to such an extent that public and private institutions are expected to have a homepage, which is easy to maneuver, rich on information, aesthetically appealing, and, ideally, even entertaining. Security institutions have therefore had to adapt to the Internet; but they have also discovered that the Web provides new avenues through which information can be transmitted and legitimacy generated. Adopting a broad definition of security institutions, as ranging from formal international organizations, most prominently NATO, to Departments of Defense, and the armed forces, a route has opened for institutions to reach the public directly and through a radically different mode of communication.

The growth of the Internet over the past decade from a text based media into the user friendly graphic interface of the World Wide Web has coincided with a period of radical changes in Western security. Transformations have taken place at the level of strategic doctrine and military capabilities, but they have also involved deeply held understandings of identity and security. The end of the cold war brought a rethinking of the traditional realist conception of national and military security as wider conceptions of common, comprehensive, global and human security were advocated by scholars and international institutions. September 11 and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq appeared to bring national security back in, but the new enemy was still a radically different one from the communist threat of the cold war: terrorist and religious networks brought forth a subject whose identity was more network based than territorial and whose suicidal rationality eschewed a conventional balance of power logic.

Developing an understanding of how security institutions utilize and appropriate the Internet requires a multi-disciplinary framework. The Internet has so far attracted interest mostly from scholars within the field of communication studies, but political scientists and international relations scholars have more recently turned to the study of the World Wide Web. Only a few have, however, sought to integrate the study of security institutions with questions of information technology, and these studies have not yet, as is the ambition of *Institutional Transformation and Digital Legitimacy*, offered a theoretical and methodological framework that facilitates an understanding of the political and economic production of security institutions' websites, of these sites' location within a wider public debate, and the visual, interactive and aesthetic constructions of security and identity found on these sites.

Institutional Transformations and Digital Legitimacy is designed as a tripartite structure and the first part of the project draws upon political theory, International Relations theory and feminist theory in a discussion of institutional legitimacy, the public sphere, and the connection between politics and processes of subject formation. Turning to foreign and security politics it is argued that these policies require and instigate constructions of national and gendered identities and that they draw upon and reinforce structures of authority, knowledge and legitimacy. This part of the project takes my previous research on the conceptualization of identity and security, gender and security, and Western security politics and institutions as its starting point.

The second part of *Institutional Transformations and Digital Legitimacy* moves the questions of security and identity into the field of new media, in particular the World Wide Web. The first issue to be considered is the *institutional* location of the World Wide Web, and its development

and interaction with different media and political and military actors. Addressing this question requires an understanding of the Internet as part of a more fundamental destabilization of the nation-state as the privileged geopolitical domain of identity and political action. The World Wide Web challenges the national media sphere through networked real-time multi-media communication, but it also offers resourceful national institutions possibilities for reconstructing and strengthening their legitimacy and authority. The relationship between security institutions and new media is therefore best understood as a field of challenges and potential appropriations where each might be supported as well as reconfigured by the other. This part of the project will also bring attention to the political economy of security institutions' information campaigns and questions of political authority, control and decision-making.

The discussion then turns to a consideration of the new *forms* of communication made possible by the strengthening of visual and interactive genres such as photography, computer games and video. Here I offer a discussion of the most important genres centered on the relationship between visual representation and identity formation. While the official purpose of security institutions has been to inform about the rationale – and the enemies – behind policies of armament and defense it is my assumption that the World Wide Web accentuates the possibility of entertainment to an unprecedented extent. Security institutions have turned to entertainment, for example games, and my project wants to address how entertainment might transform the public sphere and our understanding of political communication and dissent.

The third part of *Institutional Transformations and Digital Legitimacy* is devoted to a series of carefully contextualized studies of security institutions, including NATO, recruitment campaigns by the American and Danish army, the use of personal homepages by top foreign policy actors, the construction of national identity on official websites for children, and the Western armed forces' response to the dissimulation of gendered imagery in the coverage of the war in Iraq. These case-studies are primarily extreme cases that illustrate the most advanced design or combinations of genres or which have a particular political pertinence, and they might also be part of a comparative analysis that holds a number of elements constant while showing variation on others. The studies in part three will analyze the institutional forces providing financial and creative resources for the establishment of a particular website; they will locate website development within an institution's larger media strategy; ask how much traffic it has generated; how it draws upon other genres of communication; which identities it constitutes; and discuss what the political consequences hereof might be. Temporally, the development of websites will be studied with a particular emphasis on investigating the impact of major political events. Politically, it is important to contextualize websites as situated within larger political debates on concepts of security, national identity and foreign policy. Methodologically, *Institutional Transformations and Digital Legitimacy* will develop and pursue a three tiered strategy for analyzing particular websites: one strategy centers on how to "read" the aesthetic, interactive and visual composition of sites; a second strategy is devoted to semi-structured interviews with web-designers as well as with political staff connected to institutions' communications' policy; and the third strategy consists of a series of reception studies.