

Chapter 40

Role of Social Culture in Evaluation of Internet Policies: The Case of Everyday and Resistant Culture in Greece

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the role of social culture in the evaluation of ICT policies and specifically of Internet policies. It draws on the case of the Greek Information Society and on the exceptionally low levels of Internet adoption in the country, exploring the role of social culture in the ways in which Internet users and non-users in Greece evaluate Internet policies and the role of these policies in their decision to adopt the Internet or not. The chapter reports on the findings obtained from surveying 1,000 Greek users and non-users of the Internet in 2007. It finds that social culture and, more specifically, everyday culture and people's resistance to Internet technologies influence significantly their evaluation of Internet policies, explaining to a certain degree the picture of low Internet adoption in Greece. The first section introduces the scope and aim of the chapter, while background information on the main trends in the Greek Information Society is provided in the section that follows. In the third section, the chapter takes a decision-making perspective and discusses policies in the Information Society of the country, so as to understand better the context in which policy initiatives receive evaluations that derive from social culture. Then, the chapter reports on the main empirical findings obtained from a survey. The survey finds that a culture of resistance is dominant in Greece, with non-users uninterested and in no need to use the Internet. Non-users in particular seem to identify themselves with established traditions and settings of life, thinking that the Internet may put their work, personal and moral status at risk. On the other hand, the survey finds that Greek people are generally dissatisfied with national Internet policies. The modelling analysis shows that social culture and specifically people's values and culturally-driven perceptions of Internet technologies do influence the ways in which Internet users and non-users evaluate Internet policies. These findings can provide recommendations for policy-makers in the field as well as insights for researchers who aim to conduct comparative research or envisage looking at other countries' ICT policies and social cultures.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-61520-847-0.ch040

INTRODUCTION

The Greek Information Society made important progress in the early years of this decade, but stagnation appeared in the mid of the decade (GRNet, 2005) and relatively slow progress thereafter (EL.STAT, 2009). Greece is placed today at the bottom of the list of new technology penetration in Europe. Indicative example is that in 2008 the average EU-27 Internet access rate was 49%, with Greece having the lowest access rate together with Bulgaria (22%) (EC, 2008). These figures and other evidence discussed later lead us to question the development of the Greek Information Society as well as the relevant policies in the country.

This chapter does not explore directly the actual successfulness of policies in the Greek Information Society. Instead, it examines the ways in which people evaluate Internet policies, highlighting the role that social culture¹ plays in such evaluations. The chapter reports on a recent study that explored empirically the current state of the Greek Information Society from a socio-cultural and decision-making perspective. That study specifically looked at the dialogue of the everyday and resistant culture² of Greek society with decision-making practices in the field, explaining to a certain extent the trajectory and traits of the Greek Information Society as a whole. This chapter focuses, more specifically, on the importance of everyday and resistant culture for the ways that policies are evaluated in the Information Society of the country, and it reports on the findings from surveying 1,000 Greek users and non-users of the Internet in 2007. These findings support the argument that everyday cultures and particularly people's resistance to Internet technologies significantly influence their evaluation of Internet policies, explaining to a certain degree the picture of low Internet adoption in Greece.

A brief presentation of the main trends and figures of the Greek Information Society in the last decade is provided in the next section.

Although Greece had until recently one of the highest national development rates in the EU, it has one of the lowest Internet and new technology penetration rates in the region. In the national context, this section notes that research has shown that lack of interest in the Internet accounts for the decision of the majority of people in Greece not to adopt it. On the other hand, conventional access and cost indicators seem to be playing a decreasing role in Greek people's decision to adopt the Internet or not. Also, official statements paint a picture of public fear about new technologies and raise questions concerning the existence of 'cultural' rather than purely technological drivers of the Greek Information Society. As regards ICT policies, the third section discusses criticisms of national policy practices and arguments about the failure of policies in the country to handle the cultural distinctiveness of society and to fight against social resistance and ineffectiveness of the public sector.

This chapter attempts to engage in an empirical examination of the elements of social culture and policy-making in the domain of new technologies, as there is a complete absence of research that accounts for the role of social culture in the perceived and actual performance of policies in the Information Society. Thus, the fourth section reports the survey's findings concerning the ways in which ordinary people in Greece reflect on their culture to evaluate Internet policies and the role of the latter in their decision to adopt the Internet or not. The chapter concludes that everyday and resistant culture influence ordinary people's evaluation of Internet policies, providing some evidence of the dialogue between top-down policies and bottom-up social culture and of the importance of this dialogue for how the Information Society has developed. The case of Greece is of certain policy and research interest, whereas further analysis is needed for a more insightful account of the extent to which social culture and ICT policies intersect within the Information Society.

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