

The Medieval Internet

Power, politics and participation
in the digital age

Jakob Linnaa Jensen



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Praise for The Medieval Internet

“Jakob Linaa Jensen provides a timely reminder that there’s nothing like a detour through history to dispel the facile promise that the Internet will empower the people and revitalize democracy. The Medieval Internet is a sweeping and provocative account of the affinities between our datafied, “post-industrial” era and the brutality of feudal-era exploitation. However, his nuanced approach to the Medieval Era also unearths resources for hope -- but not without a struggle. This is a fascinating and invaluable book that sheds new light on our current predicament.”

Mark Andrejevic,
Monash University

“This most important book concerns nothing less than whether or not our best norms and practices of democracy, liberal humanism, and rights of individual freedom and privacy can survive in the face of authoritarian threats. These are not just in the obvious forms of political repression and physical violence; as Jakob Linaa Jensen demonstrates in several key ways, the threats derive even more centrally from our own ostensibly free complicity with the tech giants and platform economies that render us ever more into digitized versions of medieval peasants, subject to the all but absolute control of multiple hierarchies.

While drawing aptly on the insights and wisdom of others, the book carves out its own distinctive approach – one that leads to a wonderful array of important and compelling insights. Anticipating the current “tech lash” (i.e., our increasing recognition of the many profoundly negative aspects of our entanglements in social media, the platform ecologies of Apple, Google, Microsoft, Facebook, et al.) by over a decade, Jensen compellingly demonstrates how these engagements constitute a “Medieval feudalism.” This is not simply a striking and provocative turn of phrase. It accurately describes specific analogies Jensen convincingly demonstrates between Medieval power structures, norms, and practices, and those established through contemporary regimes of algorithms, Big Data, and largely unregulated platform and surveillance capitalism. These regimes further include specific Medieval-like features of our digital lifeworlds such as total surveillance (“the Internet omnopticon”) and online communities complete with “digital pillories,” public shaming, and online witch hunts.

Jensen draws from his extensive scholarship and backgrounds in political science, journalism, and media studies to bring together much of the best of contemporary and relevant research and scholarship in political economy and theory, philosophy, media and communication studies into a comprehensive and coherent series of analyses. He starts by doing justice to the complexities of medieval life – both with regard to its many repressive elements as well as to its usually less-heralded cultural flourishing and contributions to what we otherwise mistakenly assume are uniquely modern inventions, institutions, norms, and so on. Jensen then demonstrates in fine-grained detail the close analogies between contemporary digital lives and the Medieval world – specifically in terms of power hierarchies and economic regimes, norms, notions of community, lack of privacy and

surveillance. At the same time, Jensen thereby breaks important new ground as he makes still more articulate and clear what he characterizes as the “break, invisible but vast, with modernity and liberal humanism and democracy” and the Medieval feudalism carefully portrayed here.

In my view, the book thus adds essential substance to and dramatically raises the stakes in current debates and concerns swirling around the threats to democracy and privacy presented by surveillance capitalism, algorithms, AI, Big Data, surveillance via social media, and so on – debates that become increasingly urgent as these technologies are deployed and diffused ever more fully in our lives through the emerging Internet of Things, for example. Jensen’s analogies between these contemporary regimes of power and the Middle Ages makes the threats against modern institutions and norms still clearer and sharper.

Most importantly, these analyses do not foreclose all hope. Rather, Jensen’s analyses also foreground the many conditions and possibilities of modern democracy, including “discontent and conflicts” as “a fundamental condition.” His rich surveys of how internet-facilitated communication can still foster possibilities of dissent and resistance to power are crucial insights and inspiration into how human freedoms, rights, and democracy may survive.

Scholars and researchers in the multiple disciplines intersected here and who are concerned – as we all must be – with sustaining and enhancing democratic rights, norms, and processes against these ever increasing arrays of threats will profit enormously from this book. At the same time, it is written in a clear and accessible style that makes it appropriate and compelling as a textbook. Indeed, anyone interested in better understanding the complex problems of protecting basic citizens’ rights and freedoms in democratic regimes vis-à-vis the ever growing temptations to trade these away in the name of consumerism and convenience will find it an invaluable guide and overview.”

Charles M. Ess,
*Professor in Media Studies, Department of Media and Communication,
University of Oslo*

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About the Author

Jakob Linaa Jensen, Ph.D., M.A. in Politics, is a Research Director of Social Media at the Danish School of Media and Journalism. Before that he was an Associate Professor of Media Studies at Aarhus University. He has researched social media for 15 years and headed an EU COST task force on social media methods. He has published five monographs, three edited volumes and more than 30 international journal articles. His main research focus is on political and democratic uses of social media and on testing and developing new methods for social media research. His research interests also include political communication, the public sphere, social media, Internet politics and sociology of the Internet and cognitive affordances of new media.

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Acknowledgements

This is a book I have wanted to write for a long time. As grown up in a political science tradition with a strong focus on empirical analysis, I have always been theoretically interested too. My advisor on my master thesis and co-advisor on my dissertation, Jens Peter Frølund Thomsen, already many years ago urged me to make a coherent sociological analysis of the Internet, based on my research as well as my theoretical interests. I have worked on such a book, on and off, for years. I have read many good books on Internet sociology and Internet theory but felt that I myself needed an overall perspective, a story to tell. The idea came when I co-taught with professor Charles Ess, a brilliant mind and really nice person whom I consider a mentor. We discussed online surveillance and I proposed that the Internet was like a medieval village that I described as an omniopticon. In stimulating discussions with Charles and many others, the idea was born. In a busy position, the idea was left as a side kick, something I wrote on when I (not very often) had time. Finally, in 2018 Emerald Publishing approached me and asked for ideas for books. I wrote the draft of this book on a flight between Copenhagen and Montreal, going to the annual Internet Researchers' conference. I presented the idea for Emerald, and I was very pleased about their enthusiasm and quick acceptance of the idea. You are reading the result. I would like to thank Emerald Publishing, not at least Carys Morley, Jen McCall and Katy Mathers for a collaborative and friendly approach and for patience, as writing books always takes longer than you expect! I also extend my thanks to Roger Gathman, who not only assisted me in proof-reading the book but also suggested improvement of points and content, based on almost encyclopedical knowledge.

The book also represents and reflects my own personal and academic transformation over 20 years. Academically, I started as a profound optimist, believing that the Internet could transform democracy and society for the better. That it could be used to liberate, inform and educate. That it could re-vitalise democracy and enhance participation and mobilise the disenfranchised. Through my dissertation and much later work on political culture and debates online, I became increasingly sceptical. Online debates seemed only respectful when the usual suspects, the educated and informed debated. When the rest sporadically entered the debates, they came to resemble the dimmest, smokey taverns, and they came to include the worst human beings can present in terms of intolerance, personal assaults and hate speech. In pure social terms, the Internet fared better, connecting people and creating new friendships and alliances. But this book is more pessimist, more critical, than if I had written it when I first got the idea about 10 years ago.

The annual conferences of the Association of Internet Researchers have been a great source of inspiration throughout my career. I have discussed topics presented in this book, along with almost everything else, with (I believe) the greatest media and communication scholars on this planet. Among the many brilliant minds, I would especially like to thank Annette Markham, Nancy Baym, Steve Jones, Nick Couldry, Jennifer Stromer-Galley, Wilfred Wang, Tarleton Gillespie, Andrew Illiadis, Alison Powell, Karine Nahon and Dylan Wittkower for discussing ideas found in this book. I excuse in advance for all the other great minds whose company I have enjoyed but space does not allow me to mention here. Going to AoIR conferences is like a family reunion and to quote Axel Bruns: It is my Alma Mater, my intellectual home.

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I have not been able to mention all who deserves to be thanked for the discussions and inspiration leading to this book. I am sure that many of you will recognise bits of our conversations in the book. I have done a profound effort to quote everywhere I am building on written material and I really do hope I have succeeded. Despite all the written and oral inspiration, the responsibility for the text as you read it is exclusively mine. Happy reading!

Aarhus, Denmark, February 2020.