

# On the re-materialization of the virtual

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Received: 15 September 2011 / Accepted: 12 May 2012 / Published online: 31 May 2012  
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**Abstract** The so-called new economy based on the global network of digitalized communication was welcomed as a platform of innovations and as a vehicle of advancement of democracy. The concept of virtuality captures the essence of the new economy: efficiency and free access. In practice, the new economy has developed into an heterogenic entity dominated by practices such as propagation of trust and commitment to standards and standard-like technological solutions; entrenchment of locally strategic subsystems; surveillance of unwanted behavior. Five empirical cases within the present field of opposing forces serve as fuel for reflection: football hooliganism, sand-boxing, digital vulnerability of nuclear technology, sensitivity of studio projects, and streamlining academic computing. The main argument of the article is that a historic re-materialization is taking place within the new economy. This means cognitive as well as material divisions. Incommensurability in science is comparable with product incompatibility from the point of view of their implications to the users of knowledge and computers. Hype and banal attached to the new media are related to two ways of assessing social capital: as a means of peaceful functionality or a condition for cultural conflicts. The paper ends in proposing that there is a re-materialization of the virtual now taking place especially on the meta-level of the system.

**Keywords** Re-materialization · Virtual · New economy · Democracy · Commodification

## 1 Introduction

Visionaries of the so-called new economy painted an enthusiastic picture of a global computerized network of communication based on the new digital information and communication technologies, a networked intelligence, in principle, and in the final count, inclusive of all mankind. (c.f. Negroponte 1995; Tapscott 1996). Such a digital economy would boost innovation and economic growth in an unforeseen pace. Substantially, the new economy was thus based on the idea of equal access to the Internet. In practice, however, entrance to the new economy took the form of commercialization of the Internet. The main obstacle on the way of the coming of new digital economy, as it was understood, was the so-called digital divide, that is, the prevailing fact that not everybody did have access to the Internet (Tapscott 1996). This obstacle was to be removed gradually by resolutely building the infrastructure of the new economy. This was soon understood as an increasing presence of ubiquitous networks and pervasive computing. Besides, under the rubric of knowledge society or information society, to mitigate the digital divide, curricula at all levels of education was and at the moment still is enriched with instruction of computer skills and related topics.

While a significant number of the world population does not yet have access to the Net, the number of those who have been included is growing steadily. Also other kinds of divisions have emerged within the digital economy. It is these divisions that the present article deals with. Already at the eve of Internet's going commercial, it was felt that "there is a growing conflict of contrasting computing architectures, competing standards, legacy systems versus the new technology paradigm." (Tapscott 1996, 71). In the beginning of the new economy, the idea of equal access

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