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**Social Capital & Trust,
mobilization and demobilization in modern democracies**

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Network Administration and the Meaning of Responsibility (2010)

This paper explores the changing nature of political responsibility on the basis of extensive field work done in the Barcelona City Council and in the European Commission. Its premise is that the social and cultural diffusion of information and communication technologies (ICTs) is facilitating the transformation of power in political institutions. The dispersion and diffusion of hierarchical power structures along more efficient networked forms goes hand in hand with the alteration of responsibility structures. These changes restrict the effectiveness of traditional “objective” and linear mechanisms of accountability, while structuring new cultural codes (identification, loyalty, conscience) within the nodes of the network that do not necessarily have a democratic tone. As I will argue in my talk, there is a new emerging tension between the network administration and the lack of proper democratic mechanisms and innovations to hold it into account.

Departing from an ideal typical notion of “network”, I will conceptualize of this tension in five analytical points: 1) Ideal type networks do not have a center. Among other things, this changes the relation between the politician and bureaucrat in fundamental ways. 2) Networks and hierarchies do not share the same temporal structure. Networks need to be “programmed”: cultural codes are established when the network is set up, and they cannot be easily changed afterwards. This means that the exercise of reflexive power takes place at the beginning of a political mandate, which is precisely when traditional accountability mechanisms are more relaxed. 3) New actors acquire an increasing amount of power within networked structures. “Switchers” are actor-networks that connect the cultural codes of two types of networks. 4) Networks involve a spatial transformation in the exercise of power. Traditional accountability mechanisms are spatially circumscribed. 5) Network administrations are more “emotional” in the sense that they demand a personal involvement of its members. This raises the unsolved problem of its permeability to clienteles, but it also opens up the possibility to request from public officers not only to behave according to the law and the organizational chart, but also to experience solidarity and trust with the values of the wider community.

The meaning of responsibility in network administrations is ideally conceived as a set of social, cultural and political mechanisms that ideally resolve these five issues, injecting a democratic ideology into the network structure. Its study is divided in 3 parts: 1) accountability of nodes 2) accountability of the network, and 3) network accountability. Through the analysis of these three accountability forms, the article argues that the most successful democratic experiments involving ICTs are those that revolve around the project of making publically transparent some segments of the communication infrastructure through the government websites, thus synchronizing the internal and the external, the instrumental and the ideological, in real time. The technological backbone of the network administration can be opened to the civil sphere for both utilitarian (collaboration) and democratic (trust) reasons.