

## W(h)ither the State? in the Internet Age

Everard, Jerry. *Virtual States: The Internet and the Boundaries of the Nation - State*. London and New York: Routledge. 2000, pp. 174.

The rapid popularization of the internet has given rise to a vast array of scholarship concentrating on the possible effects of this global technology on the state. The internet, with its seemingly global proportions, has been hard to define and access its possible impact. On the internet, borders and time zones seem meaningless and the connected world doesn't seem as big or as distinct as it once did. In fact, the emergence of the internet has prompted some commentators to ask: w(h)ither the state? These concerns are especially visible in issues such as internet censorship. However, Jerry Everard argues in his recent work, *Virtual States*, that these doomsayers are mistaken and that the state will not disappear or wither, just change.

In *Virtual States* Everard argues that the boundaries between real states are not only physical boundaries but also those of identity. These boundaries of identity are just as virtual and socially constructed as those on the internet. While these boundaries are physically permeable, they will not fade away. The traditional security role so important to philosopher Thomas Hobbes also remains a reason for the necessity of the state as well as the maintenance of identity boundaries. In fact, according to Everard, in exercising power over content in the internet, states will further enforce their boundaries of identity.

*Virtual States* consists of four parts. Part one gives a historical account of the emergence of the internet and examines the nature of states. Part two challenges the notion that the internet is a global form of communication by examining the unwired and the possible consequences of persons remaining unwired in a wired economy. Part three elaborates on the actions of states concerning the internet and part four addresses specific issues arising from the internet's new place within society. Everard uses a variety of lenses with which to examine the subject. Drawing from continental and analytic philosophy as well as contemporary cultural critics, Edwards weaves a diverse, though, sometimes inconsistent and varying framework.

Part one offers an interesting history of the development of the internet. However, in chapter one, Everard defines a state, drawing on Foucault's work, as a "discourse formation."

This definition of a state, given his larger project in the book, requires a more detailed defense and will leave analytic philosophers cold. Nevertheless this section's theme, that the state is more than its physical boundaries and is also constituted by borders of identity, is interesting and plausible. These identity borders are often seen in rituals such as saying a pledge to a flag or in national pride. These distinct boundaries exist even if the physical boundaries of states are blurred.

Also in the first section is the startling assertion that "despite huge growths in the number of hosts, or nodes, the demography of the internet remains primarily (75 percent) American, young, Anglo-Saxon and male" (p. 1). This leads into part two which focuses on the unwired. Despite claims from many commentators that the internet is a global medium, Everard makes a convincing argument that it is not, at least not yet. He claims in this section that 80% of the world's population has never made a phone call let alone surfed the internet. It is also argued that countries are showing ambivalence in becoming wired due to the fear that the internet may contain subversive material that could infuse their culture with western ideals. According to Everard, the main reason that some countries refuse to go "online" is because they perceive the internet to be a threat for national security and identity.

The latter part of the section focuses on the problems of getting wired and the consequences of remaining unwired. From pointing out simple facts including that communication on the internet is done primarily in English, to arguing that the telephone lines into south Africa are a form of colonization, Edwards offers many interesting insights. However, the latter part of the section with titles such as "The Deluzian State going with the flow" and "culture and the Other on the internet" represents an ode to postmodernity which is not argued for and from which the analytic viewpoint is conspicuously missing.

Part three also overuses postmodern lenses to look at the relationship between states and the internet, including a chapter detailing information war. While the material is interesting, it relies heavily on an undefended conceptual base. This could be corrected by Everard ceasing to try to be a philosopher and letting the facts stand alone in these sections. In short, this section, although quite repetitive in parts, is filled with interesting material being viewed through foggy lenses.

Part four tackles specific problems that states face universally due to the internet's emergence. Everard examines virtual reality, the possible mind-numbing effects of the internet to citizens and the relationship between virtual and "real" identities and communities, as well as internet censorship.

Chapter 10, included in this section, is a particularly bright spot in the work. This chapter, which focuses on internet censorship, outlines attempts made to keep material of certain kinds away from citizens for whom it is considered to be unsuitable. Everard gives a detailed analysis of efforts in the United States, Europe and Australia to impose censorship laws. Everard includes many of the main issues in internet censorship in this chapter. From the difficult question of who is qualified to speak for a community, to the technical difficulties of censoring a global space, Everard presents a thoughtful analysis. Bringing together this chapter with earlier comments in the work, it becomes apparent just how much what a state wishes to censor reveals about that state. While many Americans are aware of the prominence of arguments to censor the internet to protect minors, Everard points to the fact that much censorship in other countries is done in order to protect the state. In many cases, such as Singapore, this protection is not so much from democratic ideals but from the attractions of modern consumerism. Also, the pure diversity of tactics employed and reasons given for censorship is astounding. Everard also expands upon how some countries have enacted multiple policies which conflict in ludicrous ways and are technically unfeasible.

While the work is definitely ambitious and a much needed contribution in this fascinating area, I believe that Everard has tried to do too much. For example, In his attempt to make the book accessible, he has added detailed chapter summaries which consist of long lists of bulleted points previously made in the text. As a scholar reading this text, I found the summaries repetitive and, quite frankly, a waste of paper. A more effective strategy might have been to offer a paragraph or two summarizing major points. Everard is also fond of bulleted lists in the text which, while being easy to underline for students, contains points not argued and proves distracting. In addition, Everard also tries to make the work appealing to philosophers. From this comes my major criticism of the work: its use of philosophical material without arguing for the conceptual framework in which it is used and misapplication of many philosophical theories. Edwards spouts names of philosophers and cultural theorists such as: Foucault, Plato, Descartes, Lyotard, Hobbes, Deleuze, Guattari, Sartre, Lacan, Kristeva, Haraway, Aristotle, and Weber throughout the text without noting that they often

present directly contradictory views. In addition, he often employs philosophical concepts without arguing for their validity. Everard's poor attempt to do philosophy is most apparent in chapter 11 titled, "alt.cyberspace.binaries.philosophy." In this section he flirts with the relationship between the internet and personal identity construction without solid definitions or formulation of a conceptual basis of what personal identity is. This is a ominous question which has troubled philosophers for ages, however, in order to access how the internet affects personal identity, one must take a stand on what constitutes a person as a particular person with a continuous identity.

In summery, while *Virtual States* is interesting and provides much in the way of thought provoking material, it is not the philosophical work it sometimes pretends to be. Chapter 10 on internet censorship is particularly intriguing and thoughtful. However, in general Everard attempts a philosophical analysis which contains little analytic substance.

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