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Research note: Decentralization: An elusive quest?

A response to Schrape

Hasberg, Kirsten Sophie

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Publication date:
2019

Document Version
Other version

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Citation for published version (APA):

Hasberg, K. S. (2019). *Research note: Decentralization: An elusive quest? A response to Schrape.*

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Research note:

Decentralization: An elusive quest? A response to Schrape

Bibliographical note: This research note was the basis for the initiation of a productive dialogue with Dr. Jan-Felix Schrape, University of Stuttgart. It is part of a forthcoming cover essay of my PhD thesis on information and energy systems in a power perspective - please cite the cover essay¹.

In his recent article titled “The Promise of Technological Decentralization. A Brief Reconstruction”, Schrape (2019) sketches out the elusive quest for peer production in information systems. By linking the history of the internet, the hippie movement and today’s blockchain hype, he shows how attempts for decentralization end in demise and show how we don’t learn from history. He sees this to be caused by the logic of “digital utopianism” that results in “patterns of complexity reduction” (Schrape 2019).

While I do agree with parts of his diagnosis, especially the problematization of techno-determinist belief systems where “technological infrastructures are conventionalized as a means of overcoming solidified social problems” (Schrape 2019), I argue that rather than inevitable centralization, history teaches us that the struggle between decentralization and centralization is an ongoing struggle.

Histories of the internet (Rosenzweig, 1998; Graves 2011; Treguer 2017) show that the movement towards centralization is not inevitable, or, to cite Rosenzweig 1998, “*the road toward monopolization and centralized control is not preordained*”, although today’s concentration in information systems would support such a view.

Although the quest for data democracy might seem elusive at times, there is no historical determinism that supports this inevitability. Rather, a closer look at power structures of infrastructures reveals why especially the information (and energy) sectors display structural inertia, path dependency and, in the case of the energy sector, carbon lock in. I argue that even in the information sector, power structures are an important determinant of decentralization-recentralization outcomes.

With this response, I thus attempt to give a broader view on decentralization – recentralization struggles in information systems.

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¹ See <https://vbn.aau.dk/en/persons/135747/projects/>

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