

# Towards Knowledge Democracy Consequences for Science, Politics and Media

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## SUMMARY

The concept of knowledge democracy is meant to enable a new focus on the relationships between knowledge production and dissemination, the functioning of the media and our democratic institutions. The emerging concept of knowledge democracy moreover obliges us to realise that the institutional frameworks of today's societies may appear to be deficient as far as the above mentioned undercurrents, trends and other developments demand change. We may explore the directions for institutional change during the conference.

Democracy is without a doubt the most successful governance concept for societies during the two last centuries. It is a strong brand, even used by rulers who do not meet any democratic criterion. Representation gradually became the predominant mechanism by which the population at large, through elections, provides a body with a general authorisation to take decisions in all public domains for a certain period of time. Representative parliamentary democracy became the icon of advanced nation-states.

The recent decline of representative parliamentary democracy has been called upon by many authors. On the micro-level the earlier consistent individual position of an ideologically based consistent value pattern has disappeared. The values are there but the glue of a focal ideological principle is not any longer at stock. Fragmentation of values has led to individualisation, to uniqueness but thereby also to the impossibility of being represented in a general manner by a single actor such as a member of parliament.

More fundamentally media-politics destroy the original meaning of representation. On the meso-level the development of political parties to marketeers in the political realm destroys their capacity for designing consistent broad political strategies. Like willow trees they move with the winds of the supposed voters preferences. And on the macro-level media-politics dominate. More fundamentally media-politics destroy the original meaning of representation. Volatility therefore will probably increase.

The debate on the future of democracy in advanced national societies has not yet led to major innovations. Established political actors try to tackle populism with trusted resources: a combination of anti-populist rhetoric and adoption of the populist agenda. Some of the media have responded by attempting to become 'more populist than populists themselves', almost always at the expense of analytical depth.

Meanwhile, the worldwide web provides for a drastic change in the rules of the game. A better educated public has wide access to information, and selects itself in stead of by media filters. Moreover citizens themselves have become media. They may produce world famous YouTube pictures.

The crucial combination of a network society and media-politics provides new problems and tensions. The political agenda is filled with so-called wicked problems, characterised by the absence of consensus both on the relevant values and the necessary knowledge and information. Uncertainty and complexity prevail. Advanced societies are characterised by an increasing intensity and speed of reflexive mechanisms.

Reflexive mechanisms in a more or less lenient political environment cause overwhelming volatility of bodies of knowledge related to social systems. As all available knowledge is utilised to facilitate reflexive processes, the result of such processes might establish new relationships that undermine the existing knowledge. Social reality has then become unpredictable in principle.

The relationships between science and politics demand new designs in an environment of media-politics, wicked problems and reflexivity. The classical theory on boundary work in order to master the existing gaps between science and politics is nowadays widely accepted among experts. The underlying insight is that scientific knowledge by its very structure never directly relates to action, because it is fragmented, partial, conditional and immunised. This observation is valid for both mono- and multi- disciplinary knowledge. So translation activity is always necessary in order to utilise scientific knowledge for policy purposes.

The literature on transdisciplinary research is dominated by process directed normative studies. It appears clear to me that the core concept of transdisciplinarity is to be defined as the trajectory in a multi-actor environment from both sources: a political agenda and existing expertise, to a robust, plausible perspective for action.

The final part of our study is devoted to observations on quiet and turbulent democracies as very different typologies of potential evolutionary patterns of knowledge democracy, as well as a short comment on developments in our country.

### **The overwhelming success of democracy**

Democracy is doubtless the most successful governance concept for societies during the two last centuries. It is a strong brand, even used by rulers who do not meet any democratic criterion. Democracy according to Abraham Lincoln is a very broad concept: "government of the people, by the people and for the people". Some centuries later Schumpeter however defines it in a minimal manner: "...the democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote".

Since Plato until now the continuous debates on the relative merits of democracy versus aristocracy, of consensual versus majoritarian typologies of democracy, of unicentric versus pluricentric concepts of democracy enrich our thinking. In the course of the last two centuries a group of related types of representative, constitutional democracy became the predominant format of the nation-state. It enjoyed unheard popularity, and still does, all over the globe. All Western and most Southern political leaders preach democracy as an all healing recipe. Representation gradually became the predominant mechanism by which the population at large, through elections, provides a body with a general authorisation to take decisions in all public domains for a certain period of time. State, sovereignty, society and territory became intensely related with democracy: the formation of the nation-state was territory- oriented by nature, its violence monopoly became legitimated by representative democracy, the population to be represented was the stable population of that same territory, gradually evolving into a society with a degree of cohesion that justified sovereignty. Of course the dynamics of this development were far more complicated than indicated here so far.

## **The curse of success**

The cognitive and emotional investments into the present democratic institutions have been large. As a consequence the stability of these institutions is embraced. Exogenous as well as endogenous developments however threaten the continuation of success of representative parliamentary democracy.

The recent decline of representative parliamentary democracy has been called upon by many authors. Both Castells and Dahrendorf explicitly refer to the rise of media-politics as a threat to democracy. The reciprocal structural dependence of politicians and media becomes the focal determinant of political action then. Their explanations are related to the waning role of political parties and the migration of the political forum from parliaments to television studio's. As a result of the disappearance of compelling political ideologies, political parties have started to behave like economic actors striving to maximise the number of future voters. Following sole economic marketing theory as far as their position on the political spectre is concerned. In the absence of consistent ideologies, the main parties choose a position very close to their competitors, shrinking the programmatic space dramatically.

Three intertwining simultaneous developments have taken place on the macro-, meso- and micro-level of societies with important effects. On the micro-level the earlier consistent individual position of an ideologically based consistent value pattern has disappeared. Values are there but the glue of a focal ideological principle is not any longer at stock. Fragmentation of values has lead to individualisation, to uniqueness but thereby also to the impossibility of being represented in a general manner by a single actor such as a member of parliament. The preference for partial representation by an ngo per value domain therefore is no mistake but a logical evolution. On the meso-level the development of political parties to marketeers in the political realm destroys their capacity for designing consistent broad political strategies. Like willow trees they move with the winds of the supposed voters preferences. And on the macro-level media-politics dominate.

Personalities instead of programmes become the most important discriminating factor. In the attempt to maximise the number of voters, political parties are keen to use the media, as it is merely possible to actually "sell" personalities through mass media. This of course significantly increases the structural dependence of politicians on the mass media. Media and Politics, a relationship based on mutual interest as, equally, on the other hand media need politicians in order to produce news, one of their main products. So this dependence is reciprocal. The central position of the media – networks in them selves – , with their natural focus on the production of news, causes the political debate to become superficial and short term oriented. The classical function of democracy to protect the people against tyranny and random or arbitrary action by rulers is endangered by the stress on personalities in stead of programmes. More fundamentally media-politics destroy the original meaning of representation.

As Castells points out, "It is not improbable that people will utilise their vote at general elections to show disgust or disapproval, more than revealing their preference for the favourite representative". To his judgement representation does not any longer produce a sustainable mandate for the representative. It does merely register an instantaneous picture of disgust, at the moment of elections, timeless, without any meaning for future trust, and certainly not for a longer time span. Volatility therefore will probably increase.

The arguments in some attempts to gain insight in the consequences of the decline of democracy point at the under institutionalised global developments characterised by the increasing predominance of global economic conglomerates and accompanied by the rise of a new global elite. Other comments indicate that new communication technologies create virtual worlds and weaken the relevance of a physical stable territory. The notion of state, of territory, of society, of sovereignty and therefore of democracy appear to be endangered. ICT and mass

media are identified by the above-mentioned analysts as threats for the political realm with a specific negative influence on political representation as media-politics develop. All these trends appear to cause the gradual disappearance of checks and balances, among which adequate protection against arbitrary or random political action. We will digress upon these options later on. Another group of far more optimistic experts indicates that ICT enables new types of democracy that could prove to deliver adequate countervailing powers against the just listed threats. The debate on the future of democracy in advanced national societies has not yet led to major innovations. Established political actors try to tackle populism with trusted resources: a combination of anti-populist rhetoric and adoption of the populist agenda. Some of the media have responded by attempting to become 'more populist than populists themselves', almost always at the expense of analytical depth.

### **Wide access to information for everyone**

Meanwhile, the worldwide web provides for a drastic change in the rules of the game. Acts of harassment on weblogs become political facts; virtual allegations become unchecked urban myths and pressure groups design increasingly easier ways to find endorsement on the internet. Obama's campaign was trendsetting for the latter.

Internet, better education and other societal changes have made knowledge accessible to many more people than in the past. This leads to an abundance of knowledge that should be interpreted. It also leads to different types of knowledge: not only scientific knowledge but also citizens' knowledge. This is a huge challenge for policy makers, for scientists and for the media. Politics is not just about how knowledge can be selected for political decisions, but also about how democratic decision-making processes should change in order to incorporate the different types of knowledge adequately.

Moreover citizens themselves have become media: any citizen may produce a you tube production that is world famous in two days: icons in political turmoil with great political momentum may be created by amateurs, as the recent events in Iran showed us.

Inclusion and exclusion get new dimensions: as the official Dutch authorities promoted a campaign of vaccination in order to protect young girls against future cervical cancer in the official media, the target group itself communicated on msn with series of very negative rumours. As a consequence a considerable part of the target group refused vaccination. Like ships in the night the different streams of information passed each other.

### **From knowledge economy to knowledge democracy**

During the last decade, an influential debate on 'knowledge-based economy' was conducted. This concept even became the main policy objective of the European Union, the Lisbon Strategy. However, there are signs that the strength of the argument is weakening rapidly.

The current worldwide economic crisis leads to new, very challenging questions. These questions refer mainly to the institutional frameworks of today's societies. It is therefore time for a transition to a new concept that concentrates on institutional and functional innovation. As the industrial economy has been combined with mass democracy through universal suffrage and later on by the rise of mass media, one might suggest that the logical successor of knowledge economy is a new type of governance, to be called 'knowledge democracy'.

Which challenges and threats will we be facing? How will the respectable parliamentary and new direct forms of democracy mix, and which roles will knowledge play in the transition towards a knowledge democracy?

The crucial combination of a network society and media-politics provides new problems and tensions. During this conference we concentrate upon the roles of knowledge and information in today's democracies. We develop the concept of knowledge democracy in order to analyse whether we might be able to deal with these problems and tensions.

Today policy making in many instances is evidence- or knowledge- based, providing both legitimacy and effectiveness, according to the supporters. Effectiveness is assured as the knowledge concerns true statements as to the relations between the political interventions and their societal effects.

Legitimacy is furthered as the policies are based upon the "objective" truth. As Silvio Funtowicz has explained over and over again, this picture according to the Modern model is not adequate. We will elaborate upon this later.

The political agenda is filled with so called wicked problems, characterised by the absence of consensus both on the relevant values and the necessary knowledge and information.

Uncertainty and complexity prevail.

## **Reflexivity**

Advanced societies are characterised by an increasing intensity and speed of reflexive mechanisms. We define reflexive mechanisms as events and arrangements that bring about a redefinition of the action perspectives, the focal strategies of the groups and people involved, as a consequence of mindful or thoughtful considerations concerning the frames, identities, underlying structures of themselves as well as other relevant stakeholders. Defined in this manner reflexivity has to do with learning potential of a particular kind. Reflexive systems have the ability to reorientate themselves and adapt accordingly on the basis of available knowledge about itself. Reflexive mechanisms in a more or less lenient political environment cause overwhelming volatility of bodies of knowledge related to social systems. As all available knowledge is utilised to facilitate reflexive processes, the result of such processes might establish new relationships that undermine the existing knowledge. Social reality has become unpredictable in principle then. The efficacy of reflexive mechanisms is furthered by institutional arrangements that enable individual liberty and tolerance.

In a tyrannical environment the reflexive learning may take place but it is not transformed into a change in behaviour because that change probably is illegal, and severely punished. In so far as tyranny is negatively correlated with democracy, a democratic environment will prove to be apt for reflexivity.

It is necessary to develop this notion further because it is of utmost importance for the design of an advanced way of thinking on policy making: we should realise that a social theory of any kind may never be used to create policy measures without an earlier research effort on the specific issue whether it is probable or plausible that the theory is already undermined by reflexive reactions in or around the target group of the measure. This latter effort will never deliver results with an absolute truth claim. So uncertainty is overwhelmingly present there too. The policy dialogue will be characterised by different layers of uncertainty then, and so also by a discussion on the impact of the different layers of uncertainty.

Evidence-based policy making as a normative concept probably bears some relevance as the application of a physical, chemical or biological scientific theory is concerned. But it becomes a hazardous pretention if the decision support comes from a theory in the social sciences for the reasons just explained. In particular the claims of economics in important fields as education and health are sometimes preposterous. More modesty would fit once the complexity jump that results from reflexive systems is internalised by the expert.

Knowledge democracy could become an emerging concept with political, ideological and persuasive meaning. The analogy with the concept of knowledge economy is clear: the latter

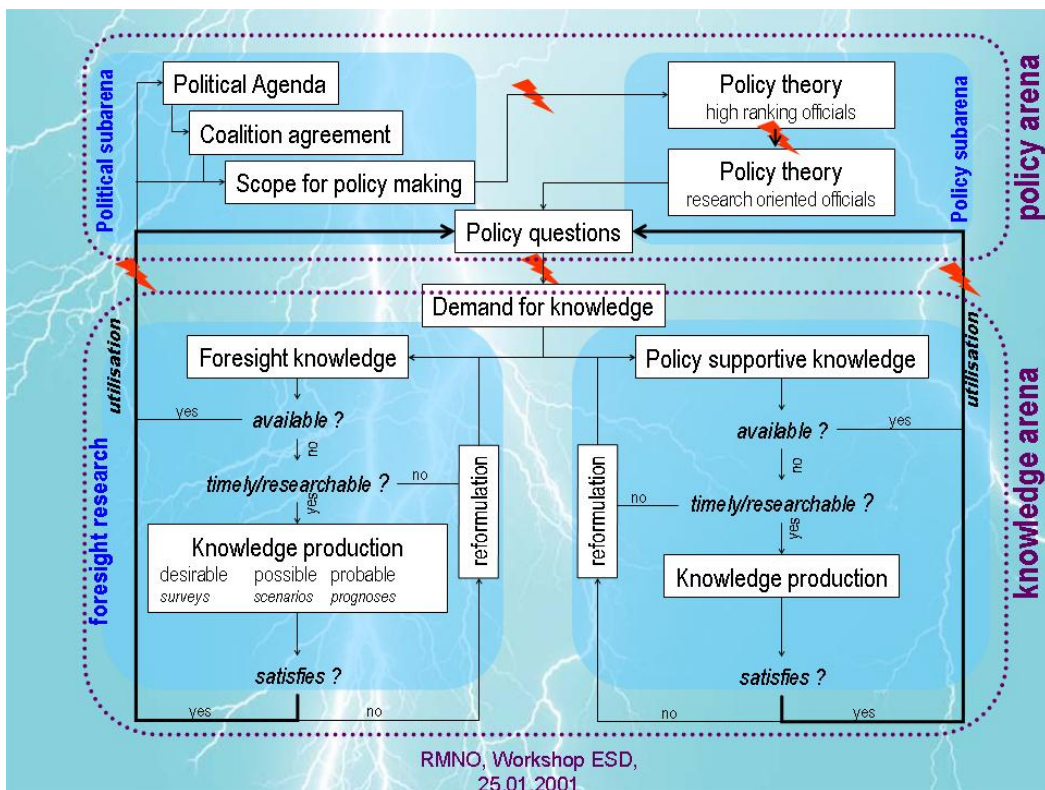
brought political attention for the economic meaning of research and development, a focus on the quality of education and political support for larger public budgets for the domains under consideration. The human capital theory- although deficient from a scientific point of view- became the predominating policy paradigm in educational policies.

The concept of knowledge economy has developed as a rather vague persuasive notion concerning the relationships between advanced research and education on one hand and economic prosperity on the other. The container character of the concept has not prohibited favourable effects. It has proven to cause a more conscious approach to the relationships between knowledge production and dissemination on one hand and economic innovation on the other.

The concept of knowledge democracy is meant to enable a new focus on the relationships between knowledge production and dissemination, the functioning of the media and our democratic institutions. The emerging concept of knowledge democracy moreover obliges us to realise that the institutional frameworks of today's societies may appear to be deficient as far as the above mentioned undercurrents, trends and other developments demand change. We may explore the directions for institutional change during the conference.

In the perspective of new relationships between politics, media and science also classical problems demand new solutions:

the concept of knowledge democracy concerns a problematique that relates to the intensification of knowledge in politics. We developed earlier a heuristic scheme in order to think properly about the bottlenecks that threaten optimal trajectories between the realm of politics, policymaking and useful research:



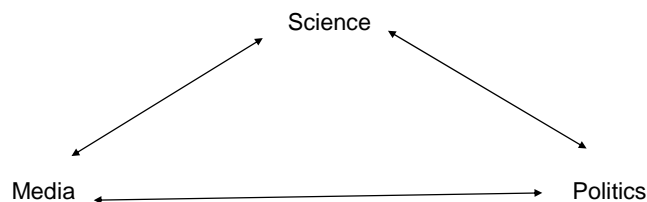
The thunderbolts in red show possible bottle necks in the processes of articulation of the demand for knowledge, as well as the utilisation of knowledge, for instance:

- The actual political agenda may not correspond with the existing policy theories that are either laid down in existing policies, legal systems budgeting rules etc. or/and are embraced by the top civil servants
- The translation of policy questions in knowledge demand may prove to be extremely difficult, for instance because the policy objectives bear a symbolic character, or because the policy questions are wicked in nature, lacking underlying consensus on values
- Inconvenient truth, newly produced knowledge that attacks the existing policy theories, will probably not be applied in policy-making
- Research will produce knowledge in the future but the need is urgent, and the political agenda is slightly volatile so there is a general problem of timeliness. In order to recognise the time lags just described on one hand and the legitimate demand for useful new knowledge on the other we should attempt to design the policy agenda in the near future in stead of only the present one, but that is a dangerous activity.

The just mentioned bottle necks can be reformulated as problems that demand a solution or at least improvements.

The trajectory between science and politics however is only one of the relevant relationships in the conference triangle:

## General interaction



The media are far from neutral or passive. The illusion that they are a neutral mirror of reality belongs to a forgotten past. We already shed light on the relationships between politics and media. Media create realities, they also produce knowledge, and moreover report on citizens knowledge. They are the reporters on scientific findings but also competitors of scientists. The

same goes for the relations between media and citizens. This increasing complexity demands efforts in order to gain insight. Other important questions are for instance:

- How do media deal with scientific knowledge, and in particular how do they select the new knowledge to be reported on from the vast supply of new knowledge?
- How can scientific knowledge and citizens' science both be utilized in processes within politics?
- How can conflicts between both types of knowledge be solved?
- How do supervisors and regulators deal with citizens' science?

A number of questions concerning the functioning of the democratic institutions themselves as far as application of knowledge is concerned is very relevant:

- How do parliaments deal with different types of knowledge?
- How do parliaments not only use knowledge but also produce knowledge?
- Is parliamentary research to be trusted as parliamentary research committees never lose their power orientation?
- How do parliaments deal with their dependence on information from ministries?

Which challenges and threats will we be facing? How will the respectable parliamentary and new direct forms of democracy mix, and which roles will knowledge play in the transition towards an enduring and sustainable knowledge democracy?

### **Transdisciplinarity**

Much valuable scientific work has been performed on the relationships between science and politics, in order to answer the question last put partially Jasanoff and others have argued that it would be wise to design an independent boundary function in order to foster the quality of the translation. The classical theory on boundary work in order to master the existing gaps between science and politics is nowadays widely accepted among experts. The underlying insight is that scientific knowledge by its very structure never directly relates to action, because it is fragmented, partial, conditional and immunised. This observation is valid for both mono- and multi- disciplinary knowledge. So translation activity always is necessary in order to utilise scientific knowledge for policy purposes. Pohl, Nowotny, Begeer and Bunders, and many others have explored this vast domain and developed the concept of transdisciplinarity in a number of variations.

The literature on transdisciplinary research is dominated by process directed normative studies. It appears clear to me that the core concept of transdisciplinarity is to be defined as the trajectory in a multi-actor environment from both sources: a political agenda and existing expertise, to a robust, plausible perspective for action. Funtowicz's three later models (beyond the modern model)- called by him the Precautionary, the Framing and the Demarcation model - contain both solutions and caveats on this thorny road.

### **Observations**

Observing both the available literature and the emerging practice of knowledge democracy in a number of European nation-states I was struck by the differences in the observable tensions between science, politics and media. We make a distinction between quiet and turbulent democracies.

In the quiet democracies the main characteristics to be observed are:

- In important domains there may be conflicts on the preferable substance or content of policies, as based on value differences and variations, but the knowledge base for those policies is not contested; therefore problems do not bear a wicked character. Moreover complicated two level conflicts, relating both to the substance of policies and the credibility of the different knowledge sources, remain absent or at least an exception;
- The mutual dependence of politics and media is not very strongly developed. Politicians have realised that the locus for political debate should be parliament, and therefore oppose actively the transfer of political dialogue to mass media orchestrated by journalists; media-politics are not predominant;
- Different types of knowledge – such as scientific knowledge, local knowledge and/or citizens knowledge- are integrated in participatory processes for policy preparation, aiming at socially robust and plausible perspectives for action;
- The societal attention for the maintenance of adequate checks and balances is considerable; not only the respect for the classical trias politica is cherished, but also the awareness on the desirability of free basic research and education –free in the meaning of: not influenced by either politics or media- is intense;

In the turbulent democracies we find the following phenomena:

- Many political problems are perceived as wicked: neither on the value aspect nor on the knowledge or information side consensus exists. Many two level conflicts complicate the political realm. In political environments with a strong meta-value that leads to a high degree of tolerance and mutual respect this situation will lead to the development of transdisciplinary trajectories with considerable participation. Populist politics on the contrary will aim at the decrease of this type of complexity by establishing a clear, simple and predominating view both on values and substance;
- The mutual dependence of politics and media is clearly visible; hypes prevail; the political agenda is mainly determined by media utterances, scandals and abuses give rise to political action. In extreme instances (Italy) the reigning political coalition also rules an important proportion of the media;
- Where media-politics dominate, the space for broad citizens participation in policy preparation appears to be limited because politicians and media wish to establish a collective monopoly on information gathering and dissemination; so the stronger the mutual dependence of politics and media manifests itself, the possibilities for unhampered – in the sense of not orchestrated by mass media- influential argumentation and communication seem to be very limited. But on the other hand we observed earlier in this paper that the existing technologies enable groups of citizens by internet application as you tube, msn, email and twitter to create their own mass media, to produce their own expressions of interests and views in a manner that cannot be controlled by commercialised or professionalised media;
- Populist politics disrespect checks and balances: the perceived necessity of transparency of authority demands hierarchy in the political realm; populist politicians will continuously criticise any disagreeable action of uncontrolled professionals, and will try to minimise their influence and to maximise their dependence. Moreover the internal structure of the public sector will be streamlined according to hierarchical principles as a consequence of which the discretion of agencies and other semi-autonomous bodies, but also of inspectorates and supervisors will be diminished.

The foregoing static comparison neglects of course the important and necessary analysis of dynamic developments. Castells in particular words his forecasts in terms of accumulative

developments, such as the fatal transition of media politics to populism, or worse. Our observations on the increasing importance of reflexive mechanisms however hamper us to formulate any deterministic forecasts, laws or regularities as to societal developments. Scenario's, simulations and explorations could serve as catalysers to enlarge our sensitivity for potential developments, but the fundamental character of the existing uncertainty and complexity prohibit us to consider them as building stones for direct action. The indirect use could be that we try to design action perspectives that are robust, e.g. do not have disastrous consequences in either of the feasible scenario's. It may be clear that the possibilities for such designs are more feasible in quiet than in turbulent democracies.

Finally some observations on the developments in this country:

Recently the attention for the issues that are related to knowledge democracy has increased. But paradoxically this has not led to innovations in accordance with the theoretical insights of the leading analysts. Boundary functions have disappeared as the ministries themselves claim to be competent to fulfil these functions themselves. This appears to create an unbalance in the relations between science and politics but the scientific world has remained completely silent. Parliament attempts to decrease its dependence on information from ministries by strengthening its own research activities, but so far the results are of varying quality, to put it mildly. The Netherlands seem to move in the direction of a more volatile turbulent democracy as described above with a strong orientation on hypes and some populist characteristics. On the other hand top civil servants are sincerely involved in efforts to strengthen the knowledge intensity of policy preparation. Disturbing reflexive phenomena complicate the picture further: ministries design strategic research agenda's, but actual research activities sometimes move in another direction. the number of cognitive experts at ministries diminishes at the cost of increases in public affairs officers and controllers. The cleansing operation in order to reduce the number of relatively independent advisory bodies in the public domain as well as the increasing hierarchy of the political realm support the hypothesis that the evolutionary pattern in our country could be characterised as the gradual decrease of that type of checks and balances that may be defined as shock absorbers. Of course reflexivity is also a source of hope and optimism.

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