Report on ISA Workshop Digital Technologies in World Politics

The workshop took place the day before the ISA Convention on March 26th 2019. The rate of no-shows was very low. In fact, only two were unable to make it in the end: one person mixed up the dates and another ended up at the other side of the country. Apart from these two, everybody was present and the workshop could thus start with almost no changes to the program (see attached).

The basic idea of the workshop was twofold: on the one hand, it wanted to move away from the big data narrative of most IR contributions to 'the digital'. On the other hand, we also wanted 'bring into discussion' various evolving streams in IR. Therefore, we identified Blockchain, Artificial Intelligence and the Internet of Things as three distinct 'transformative dynamics'. Through a search of previous ISA programs, it was possible to see that while there are occasional references to either AI, BC or IoT, none brought them together. Given this background, the workshop participants formed an entirely new group that hardly new each other before. The workshop thus started with a more extensive introductory round and it was 'unfamiliarity' of the situation was felt for the first 30 minutes. We thus also decided to keep the discussant role more informal and put emphasis on mutual discussion rather than in-depth critique of the individual papers. That policy worked surprisingly well and after the first panel, we found ourselves in a mutual discussion that was quite inspirational and unforeseen.

If I try to summarise the result of the workshop in one line, then I'd say that digital technologies disrupt various well-known and well-established distinctions and categories. Digital technologies will inevitably redefine the boundary of the national and the international and therefore also reconfigure the international system. What seems also clear is that all participants sought new avenues and concepts to make sense of what is going on. Hence, a couple of key concepts emerged from discussions as possible 'attractors' for future debates: whether it is a redefined concept of 'critical infrastructures', whether a new concept of 'trust' (with the counter concept of uncertainty); or a fully new concept of 'ecology', several avenues are possible and the time between the ISA and the follow up workshop will be used to explore these avenues in some detail. How we settle the question will have a huge impact on the kind of publication we go for (and whether it makes sense to go for one major publication or several smaller ones that each focuses on one of these concepts).