

# “A digital age requires digital Machiavellians”

“If cloud society isn’t optional, then we have a responsibility to ask very tough questions of this society”

The transformative impact of digital technologies leaves both businesses and governments at a crossroads. As what he terms the “cloud society” comes to life, the strategist and thinker **Philipp Mueller** argues that the only way to seize back the initiative is by throwing out the rule book and adapting Machiavellian philosophies to this new era.

► **What are the characteristics of a digital Machiavellian – and why do we need such people?**

As digital technologies permeate deeper into our lives, the ways in which we organize ourselves and get things done are changing dramatically. Back in the sixteenth century, the political philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli was exposed to transformation on a similar scale, thanks to the emergence of radical technologies such as the printing press and unprecedented challenges to the power base of the Catholic Church. What I love about Machiavelli is that he was able to see the alternative logic that was developing and to understand very clearly just what the rules of this new game would be.

I believe that today’s world, which can increasingly be described in terms of the internet and mobility – or even more accurately, in terms of cloud technologies that allow us to create completely different value chains – requires the same approach. Our societies and businesses urgently need people who accept the responsibility of leadership and, as digital Machiavellians, can understand and organize these new value chains for the benefit of everybody.

► **Machiavelli is a very polarizing thinker. Isn’t your call for digital Machiavellians potentially problematic?**

He can be read in different ways – you can even explain Machiavelli’s work as a satire of the whole concept of absolute monarchy, which consequently makes him into a very ethical figure. But my interpretation follows that of the German-American thinker Hannah Arendt, who distinguishes between Machiavelli’s actual

writings and the later popular construction of Machiavellianism as the idea of using power to get whatever you want. I prefer to look at Machiavelli as somebody who really understood a new emerging world before anybody else and who distinguished moral questions from strategic questions – not because moral questions are irrelevant, but because we need to have a clear sense of the landscape we inhabit before we start asking how we should behave in that landscape.

We’re moving into a new societal logic, and we need people who really understand that logic and are prepared to use it strategically to get things done. Now these things might be good or bad – of course, I personally think they should be good – but whatever your intentions, you still need to understand the cloud society logic in order to make them happen.

► **Let’s talk more about this logic. What are the principles of the cloud society?**

There are three core ideas – data, networking and non-territoriality. The first idea refers to the enormous volumes of information that we now generate as societies, and the possibility of analyzing and correlating this material in different ways. The second idea covers a wide range of phenomena from partnering to crowdsourcing, as well as the new value chains that are created as a result. And the third idea follows from the first two – if data and networking are what really matter, then things become less integrated with physical spaces. The theorist Manuel Castells says the world is becoming a space of flows rather than a place of space, and I think that formulation captures the concept very well.



This is the type of logic that strategists today need to learn about and use to make a difference – even if most companies and governments still have not yet left the confines of territorial thinking.

► **These ideas are descriptive, rather than moral. So what are the ethical foundations of the cloud society? Could one of them be the concept of transparency, for example?**

This is an absolutely fundamental question. As we discussed, Machiavelli says there's no room for thinking about morality if we want to understand the logic of a particular society – at least not at first. But at some point we can – and indeed should – plug morality in. For example, there are many good reasons why the Western definition of democracy has a 3,000-year history behind it, and we have to find a way to translate these principles, along with their corollary values, into the cloud society.

We also need to ask if there exist certain moral biases in the very logic of a cloud society, and I agree that transparency stakes a strong claim to be one of these. The logic of a cloud society is based on application interfaces that allow networked devices shared access to data pools. Structured openness is at the very basis of this logic, and trust in the governance of the cloud architecture stems from its transparency. However, we need to be very careful about jumping from that to the idea of radical transparency or universal “nakedness.”

► **So what is the right type of transparency?**

I firmly believe that the concept of radical transparency, which says everything should be open at all times, is both unsustainable and undesirable. We have an inalienable right to private lives and private data, and even the most committed proponents of increased transparency, such as Julian Assange and the Pirate Party in Germany, accept this principle in some form.

Openness should instead be something strategic, and this is where our friend Machiavelli reappears. We have to design smart technological and social systems that are always open to new ideas and to people who add value, but that

protect privacy and remain closed to hackers or anyone who is interested in disruption for disruption's sake. It is crucial to the success of a cloud society that we ensure – both on a policy and technological level – that we do not end up in a Panopticon world in which everybody is under constant observation. We need to design secure architectures and processes and foster a culture that reflects the sensitivities we developed in the twentieth century and ensures each individual has access to spaces where nobody is watching.

This kind of design work is what strategists and leaders in the cloud society should aspire to, and as digital Machiavellians, we need to ask both where we should open our value chains and where we should close them off. The writer Kurt Tucholsky has a great aphorism – “anybody who is open on all sides is not leakproof.” It sounds nicer in the original German, but he makes a very important point.

► **Is the cloud society totalizing – in other words, is it one form of social organization among many, or is it the only one?**

My sense is that cloud society probably is all-encompassing. Even the most physical products are becoming digital – the hard-boiled egg you eat for breakfast on a Sunday morning depends on a digital process to bring it to your table as much as it needs a chicken to lay it in the first place. It's clear that there are enormous benefits to digitizing things in this way, and that is the main reason I expect cloud society to dominate. And it's also worth noting that there is definitely room for different forms of organization within this society – you only have to look at the variety of models in the open-source development community, where Debian has adopted something that resembles republicanism, while the Linux people have what they half-jokingly refer to as the benevolent dictatorship of Linus Torvalds, and so on, even if they all subscribe to the two common open-source principles of rough consensus and running code.

But if cloud society isn't optional, then we have an even greater responsibility to ask very tough questions of this society. It must deliver

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## Background Check

► **PHILIPP S. MUELLER** teaches strategy and leadership at the University of Salzburg, Austria, and at Sciences Po in Paris, France, and is Director of Public Affairs for Central & Eastern Europe at CSC, the ICT services and solutions provider. He is a renowned public speaker and the author of three books and many

influential articles on the interplay of ICT, strategy and organization theory. Mueller has been a research fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School and studied at Georgetown University, both in the US. He received his PhD from Ludwig-Maximilians-University, Munich, Germany. You can reach out to him via Twitter at @philippmueller.



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what we expect in terms of democracy, privacy and distribution of resources, and we have to hardwire these expectations into every digital process and institution. As civil societies, we have fought hard to build our constitutions and our juridical systems of checks and balances, and we should not throw these out just because somebody happened to invent the internet. But the ongoing debates around the role of the National Security Agency in the US or the data sovereignty issue in Germany, to give just two examples, show just how complicated these discussions can be.

The totalizing effect of cloud society means the American professor and activist Lawrence Lessig's adage that "code is law" has never been more relevant. Policy makers need to recognize that technology architects are fast becoming as important as lawyers in defining how we structure our societies. I think it's good that this responsibility is now shared between more people, but it means everybody has to raise their game and ensure that the change is a positive one.

► **The problem is that policy and regulation are often seen as the enemy of digital innovation. How can policy makers respond?**

In my opinion, policy makers need to show more interest in what the ICT industry does,

and the ICT industry has to explain itself better to policy makers. We need to meet each other halfway, and based on my personal experience of working in Berlin, this is going to take some time to achieve. In particular, ICT stakeholders must spend more time communicating their vision around five key areas – big data, mobility, cloud, cybersecurity and enterprise modernization – and right now, these conversations are not taking place. Part of the problem is that the media is not yet well-versed in these issues, and consequently lacks the capabilities to hold either the industry or the political system properly accountable. But the fact is that we've made a series of huge transitions from a mainframe world to a client-server world, and we're now heading into a cloud society, and at every step things have been explained poorly, or in many cases not at all.

► **In other words, we need more digital Machiavellians.**

Yes, exactly! ●

INTERVIEW BY NICHOLAS SMITH



► **PRINCE OF POLITICIANS**

Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527) was a politician and philosopher active in Renaissance-era Florence. In his most famous work, *Il Principe* (The Prince), Machiavelli discusses strategies by which a ruler may increase his power and influence. Machiavelli's insistence that there is no moral basis on which to judge the difference between legitimate and illegitimate uses of power brought him into conflict with the Catholic Church, and forms the basis of his popular reputation as an advocate of political amorality. His thought has had a lasting influence on Western culture and qualifies Machiavelli as one of the first modern political scientists.