

DEMOCRACY IN THE AGE OF THE INTERNET

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INTRODUCTION

As access to the Internet and the World Wide Web expanded in the early 1990s there was considerable optimism that an age of low-cost information production and egalitarian public conversations in cyberspace would transform and deepen democracy. The hope was that technological advances and improved access to the means of producing, distributing and receiving information would allow ordinary citizens and organic civil society groups to become broadcasters and publishers capable of sidelining the once powerful barons of the mass media. The unidirectional broadcast model of mass communication would give way to more interactive and democratic forms of public communication. Citizens would have access to a greater diversity of information and opinion as new voices found expression in a more vibrant and inclusive virtual public sphere – indeed, the term *netizen* was coined to conjure up notions of politically engaged Internet citizens coming together online to identify and deliberate upon the issues of the day. Governance would also be transformed as communications technology improved access to information and enhanced the state's capacity to engage in formal dialogue and deliberation on matters of public policy. In short, the new media would invigorate democracy by creating new egalitarian public spaces, empowering ordinary people with better means of communicating and organizing, and allowing governments to pursue more open, transparent and consultative relations with citizens.

Today this optimistic assessment of the Internet's potential to transform the public sphere and deepen democracy seems profoundly naïve. While some dimensions of democratic life have benefited from popular access to the Internet, this has not been true for other dimensions of democracy. In assessing democracy in the age of the Internet it is evident that the Internet has had different consequences for the electoral, deliberative and monitorial dimensions of democracy.¹ Moreover, to understand the complexity of the relationship between the Internet and these three distinct dimensions of democracy, we must recognize that the democratic potential of any communication technology will always be limited by the character of existing social, political and economic power relations, as well as by the attitudes, orientations and activities of governments, citizens and corporations. For example,

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¹ Roger Hurwitz, "Who Needs Politics? Who Needs People? The Ironies of Democracy in Cyberspace" (1999) 28:6 *Contemporary Sociology* 655.

in recent years, governments have been unceasingly cautious when embracing potentially democratic technologies, citizens appear to be increasingly caught up in the consumer identities of market society rather than being meaningfully engaged in politics, and powerful corporate enterprises with significant Internet-based commercial interests have been engaged in efforts to control the social, legal and technological architecture of cyberspace. The Internet's impact on the character and quality of democracy is tempered by these basic social, political and economic realities.

The discussion to follow is organized around separate assessments of the electoral, deliberative and monitorial dimensions of democracy. We contend that because our governments and political parties have been cautious, even reluctant, to embrace the Internet as anything more than a tool to supplement existing methods and techniques of political communication, the Internet has altered the practice of electoral democracy but has not transformed the character or quality of this dimension of democracy. With regard to the deliberative dimension of democracy, the aspect of democracy for which hopes were highest, the corporate colonization of the Internet has hampered the potential to facilitate a democratic transformation of the public sphere, thus undermining the democratic contribution of critical communication. In the realm of monitorial democracy – that is, of citizens taking action in response to political events or policy developments – the Internet has truly enhanced democracy, transforming social movement networks and empowering grassroots movements with new tools, allowing interested publics to mobilize and monitor policy-makers. The enhancement of monitorial democracy is an important development, but its significance is lessened by the limited, and sometimes negative, impact of the Internet on the other dimensions of democracy.

Electoral Democracy and the Internet

The electoral dimension of democracy includes an array of formal liberal democratic institutions and process associated with political parties, elections and our elected governments. The Internet and digital technologies related to websites, listservs and electronic data records have had a considerable impact in this area. However, while the political and business practices of parties and governments have been modified quite significantly, there has not been a commensurate transformation in the character and quality of electoral democracy. Canadian governments have embraced the Internet as a tool for bypassing the mass media when delivering information and publicizing government initiatives and accomplishments. There has also been a trend toward online delivery of services like passport applications.² However, the information being made available is mostly standard program information, and the services provided online are related to programs that are organized for citizens as *consumers* of government services. What is far less common are efforts to utilize the

² Graham Longford, "Rethinking the Virtual State: A Critical Perspective on E-Government" in Marita Moll & Leslie Regan Shade, eds., *Seeking Convergence in Policy and Practice: Communications in the Public Interest Volume II* (Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2004) at 109-40.

Internet to allow citizens to interrogate, evaluate and contest the information, programs and services that are available online. Citizens are served, but not empowered.

Anna Malina has made the useful distinction between e-government and e-governance.³ Whereas the more *status quo* oriented e-government is top down, involves governments communicating to citizens, and is primarily about administration and service delivery, e-governance is horizontal, aims at fostering civic communication, and facilitating citizen input in government policy-making. In Canada and elsewhere, government websites tend to be organized for the delivery of e-government – they are not set up to empower citizens as active contributors in the political process. A comprehensive study of 270 municipal websites in California found very few sites containing e-governance features that might effect meaningful change in local governance. Indeed, even the most innovative sites were “more entrepreneurial than participatory.”⁴ In other words, e-government looks like little more than another example of administrative reform inspired by the market-oriented efficiency principles of the “new public management”. Although governments have experimented with innovations that could provide more democratic and participatory forms of policy deliberation, such as online consultations, there is no more than a limited commitment to developing these vehicles of e-governance, and their ultimate impact on democratization has been uneven at best.⁵

Political parties and candidates have embraced the Internet and digital technologies with at least as much enthusiasm as governments. All the major parties and most candidates for elected office have websites. However, these sites are little more than virtual campaign brochures providing a technologically advanced means of distributing the candidate’s biography, photographs, speeches and policy statements. To the extent that campaign websites are interactive, they serve as tools for gathering data on supporters, recruiting volunteers and soliciting financial contributions. They are not places of democratic dialogue and deliberation.⁶ But these campaign websites are only the visible surface of digital technologies altering political techniques and practices. Modern election campaigns are sophisticated efforts in social control through agenda setting and issues management. The Internet and other information and communication technologies (ICTs) are transforming the political news cycle, forcing political parties to alter their approach to making, following and responding to political news. No longer is it sufficient to stage daily

³ Anna Malina, “e-Transforming Democracy in the UK: Considerations of Developments and Suggestions for Empirical Research” (2003) 28:2 *Communications: The European Journal of Communication Research* 135.

⁴ John W. Cavanaugh, “E-Democracy: Thinking About the Impact of Technology on Civic Life” (2000) 89:3 *National Civic Review* 229 at 231.

⁵ Christie Hurrell & Graham Longford, “Online Citizen Consultation and Engagement in Canada” in Ari-Veikko Anttiroiko & Matti Malkia, eds., *Encyclopedia of Digital Government* (Hershey PA: Idea Group, 2006).

⁶ Hurwitz, *supra* note 1.

events in order to make the evening news. At the core of modern campaigns are teams of spin doctors responding to breaking news and reacting to the activities and pronouncements of their competitors. The goal isn't simply favourable news coverage, but to shape the rewriting of news that is now delivered 24/7.

Very few voters would be familiar with the term "data mining", but electronic data records are an increasingly important aspect of electoral democracy. Political parties have been collecting data on voters since advertising and public relations consultants joined campaign teams in the 1950s. Modern political campaigns are increasingly reliant on large and sophisticated database technologies that enable strategists to monitor the mood of voters, track party supporters, identify swing voters, and customize political messages that can be delivered to target audiences electronically. In the United States, where data mining is more advanced, political campaigns combine public data, such as voters lists, with a range of commercially available data that is obtained through public opinion and marketing surveys, Internet spyware and subscription lists, amongst other means. In fact, given that the vast majority of U.S. legislators have relied on data mining, Philip Howard estimates that 4 in 10 American voters have been profiled in exhaustive detail.⁷ These databases are allowing political campaigns to customize and target their political messages to a degree previously unimaginable. Thus, while these electronic data records are merely supplementary to existing political practice in the realm of electoral democracy, the consequences are significant. Voters are put in a position of relative informational disadvantage when they are targeted by cleverly tailored political messages. Moreover, to the extent that these highly focused, almost private, messages shape the political conversation, we are at risk of losing the "shared text" that allows for the sort of collective public conversation that is essential to the deliberative dimension of democracy.⁸

Deliberative Democracy and the Internet

Deliberative democracy, in its narrow sense, is about rational, open-minded debate leading to collective decision making on matters of public policy.⁹ For most strong democrats, however, deliberative democracy means more than a commitment to democratic dialogue and public policy deliberation. It requires a rich and politically lively public sphere to act as a buffer between the state, the economy and the private realm, while also serving as home for public conversations that allow a broad range of citizens to realize their capacity to influence the norms and values that dominate civic and political life. It is not surprising, therefore, that the issue of the Internet's

⁷ Philip N. Howard, "Deep Democracy, Thin Citizenship: The Impact of Digital Media in Political Campaign Strategy." (2005) 597 *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 153.

⁸ R. Kenneth Carty, William Cross & Lisa Young, "Canadian Party Politics in the New Century" (2001) 35:4 *Journal of Canadian Studies* 28.

⁹ Steve Patten, "Democratizing the Institutions of Policy-making: Democratic Consultation and Participatory Administration" (2001) 35:4 *Journal of Canadian Studies* 221.

capacity to enliven deliberative democracy is often framed in terms of its potential to transform the public sphere. The public sphere is understood as a “constellation of communicative spaces” in which information and ideas circulate, possible collective futures are debated, and political wills are expressed.¹⁰ To the extent that cyberspace is a forum for social communication; the Internet has an obvious and tremendous capacity to transform the character of the public sphere.

Prior to the Internet, the communicative spaces of the public sphere included public squares, community halls and social meeting places (such as pubs and coffee houses), as well as the associational life of social and community groups and information and opinion dissemination via the mass communication news media and smaller scale alternative media. The Internet transforms the public sphere by expanding the number and reach of communicative spaces. Unlike pre-Internet communicative spaces, communication in cyberspace via websites, listservs, blogs and other means, has the capacity to transcend physical space and time. It is far more interactive than the mass media, and reasonably egalitarian as a result of the cost of entry being much lower than with mass communications media – a fact that has allowed alternative news sources and critical media to flourish. Perhaps most significant for the public sphere, however, has been the potential for the Internet to contribute to the “pluralizing of the public”.¹¹ The notion that the public has been pluralized by Internet-based communication follows from the observation that there are numerous new opportunities for groups of citizens interacting in cyberspace to reflexively define themselves as “counterpublics” who articulate political discourses and identities that exist as alternatives to the homogenizing influence of the dominant discourse and identity of “the public”.¹²

Taken in combination, the proliferation of communicative spaces in cyberspace, the related increase in the magnitude of shared political information, the proliferation of alternative media and the emergence of reflexive counterpublics, could produce a democratic dynamic capable of generating the sort of vigorous and diverse political life that should be associated with deliberative democracy in heterogeneous societies. Unfortunately, while the volume of information available on the World Wide Web has exploded and there has been staggering growth in the availability of alternative, Internet-based media, ordinary people are not significantly more politically engaged or better informed. Nor has the public sphere been politically enlivened in the way optimists predicted. Reflecting what Pippi Norris has called the “reinforcement effect”, citizens who were already politically engaged now use the Internet to seek out additional information and connect with others who are equally politicized, while

¹⁰ Peter Dahlgren, “The Internet, Public Spheres, and Political Communication: Dispersion and Deliberation” (2005) 22:2 *Political Communication* 147 at 148.

¹¹ Samuel A. Chambers, “Democracy and (the) Public(s): Spatializing Politics in the Internet Age” (2005) 33 *Political Theory* 125.

¹² Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002).

the politically disengaged majority remain disengaged.¹³ As Peter Dahlgren explains:

The use of the Net for political purposes is clearly minor compared with other purposes to which it is put. The kinds of interaction taking place can only to a small degree be considered manifestations of the public sphere; democratic deliberation is completely overshadowed by consumerism, entertainment, non-political networking and chat, and so forth. Further, the communicative character of the political discussion does not always promote the civic ideal; much of it is isolated (and at times unpleasant), and its contribution to democratic will formation cannot always be assumed.¹⁴

Why is this the case? It is our contention that the Internet's failure to realize its potential for enlivening deliberative democracy is a consequence of the lack of popular and official commitment to the Internet as a "public good". We use the term public good, in this case, to define goods that have properties of "publicness" in that they are associated with a well-functioning public sphere. What is more, the benefits of ensuring generalized access to public goods extend beyond individual benefits to include social benefits. Defining something as a public good suggests that it would be unjust to allow lack of access to exacerbate existing social inequalities. There should be social rights of access to public goods; market forces or commercial imperatives should not determine the distribution and use of public goods. There are two important anti-democratic consequences of our failure to strengthen the public sphere by defining the Internet as a non-commercial public good: first is the emergence of the digital divide; second is the corporate colonization of cyberspace.

The digital divide is the gap between those with regular and effective access to the Internet and those without. It is, in part, a gap between the info-rich and the info-poor; but it is also a gap between those with the capacity to engage in the public conversations and political life of cyberspace, and those who are excluded from this important new dimension of the public sphere. Unsurprisingly, the digital divide parallels the stratification of social and economic affluence. The capacity for online political engagement is closely tied to income and education: 30% of Canadian university graduates use the Internet to obtain political information, whereas a mere 10% of those without post-secondary education do so.¹⁵ While approximately two-thirds of the Canadian population has access to the Internet at home, it is rural, remote and Aboriginal communities, along with disabled and low-income Canadians who are least likely to enjoy home-based access to cyberspace. Those without Internet access lack an increasingly important means of obtaining political

¹³ Pippi Norris, *Digital Divide: Civic Engagement, Information Poverty, and the Internet Worldwide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

¹⁴ Dahlgren, *supra* note 10 at 151.

¹⁵ Elisabeth Gidengil *et al.*, *Citizens* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2004) at 32.

information. In addition to being deprived of an important vehicle of political engagement, these citizens are also absent from the cyberspace-based dimensions of public life – an absence that limits their capacity to influence the norms and values that govern in civic life and shape expressions of political will.

Without a collective commitment to the right of Internet access as a public good, the digital divide will persist. As the communicative spaces of cyberspace become increasingly central to the political conversations that define the public sphere, the negative consequences of this divide for deliberative democracy will be amplified. Democracy will be impaired by the fact that a substantial portion of the population faces digital disenfranchisement. Tackling the digital divide requires comprehensive efforts to bring equipment and connectivity to currently excluded individuals and communities. It must also involve efforts to remove financial barriers to high-speed Internet service, including the development of comprehensive public – rather than commercial – municipal WiFi networks.¹⁶ But corporate players will continually challenge these efforts as long as the commercialization of the Internet proceeds unabated.

Concerns regarding commercialization and corporate colonization of the Internet go to the heart of the idea of the public sphere and deliberative democracy. To the extent that the communicative spaces of cyberspace are a part of the public sphere, they must be substantially free of control and manipulation by power hierarchies associated with the state or the economy. As information is increasingly commodified with innovation and control of the Internet being left to markets, this goal becomes increasingly impossible. Lincoln Dahlberg's examination of corporate colonization of cyberspace and the marginalization of critical communication demonstrates how large corporate portals and commercial media websites dominate "online attention" – cyberspace's most valuable resource.¹⁷ The data is striking: In 2000, AOL-Time Warner accounted for one-third of all online time in the U.S.¹⁸ When Americans used the Internet to access the news of the day, 61% visited the websites of major U.S. television networks or newspapers – the top sites in the U.S. include CNN, MSNBC and Yahoo!News. Only 8% visited alternative media websites.¹⁹ These patterns go against the vision of cyberspace as an alternative to the mass media.

Many Internet users rely on search engines such as Google News and Microsoft Newsbot to access news and information. While there is no doubt that these services improve access to the diverse universe of alternative news sources that have come

¹⁶ Graham Longford & Andrew Clement, "How Long Will Toronto's Wireless Network be Free?" *Toronto Star* (7 September 2006) A 16.

¹⁷ Lincoln Dahlberg, "The Corporate Colonization of Online Attention and the Marginalization of Critical Communication?" (2005) 29:2 *Journal of Communication Inquiry* at 160-80.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* at 164.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* at 167.

into existence over the past decade, the search selection criteria favour the mainstream mass media and commercial websites. Search engines systematically prioritize certain types of sites and information at the expense of others, leading to a narrowing of the Internet's value as a means by which to give voice to alternative perspectives and increase the communicative spaces that constitute the public sphere. Introna and Nissenbaum have argued that allowing the continued evolution of search engines to be guided by market ideology and commercial interests is "at odds with the compelling ideology of the Web as a public good."²⁰ Of even more concern, however, is a campaign by major American Internet service providers, like AT&T, Verizon and Comcast, to adjust their services so that information and sites that are most profitable to them would be delivered more quickly or prominently. The principle that is at stake here is "Net neutrality" – that is, that a free and open Internet is threatened when corporations are allowed to privilege certain data with faster and higher quality service or greater prominence. American telecommunications legislation that would protect Net neutrality was introduced in 2006, but corporate interests have been lobbying for amendments that would privilege free market rights over Net neutrality. While the Federal Communications Commission recently forced AT&T to adhere to Net neutrality as a condition of regulatory approval for its \$82 Billion (U.S.) merger with BellSouth, Net neutrality has yet to be enshrined in U.S. legislation. In Canada, meanwhile, the Harper minority government has moved aggressively to increase the role of market forces in telecommunications and has expressed reservations about protecting Net neutrality for Canadian consumers.²¹ Regardless of the outcome, however, it is certain this debate will continue – and so will the debate regarding whether or not the Internet is a public good.

Finally, for the Internet to contribute to deliberative democracy, cyberspace must be a realm of reflexive citizen engagement. We must, therefore, be concerned that corporate colonization of cyberspace is resulting in increased prominence for consumer services and infotainment at the expense of politically lively public dialogue: "The corporate domination of attention not only marginalizes many voices but also promotes the constitution of participants as individualized-instrumental consumers rather than critical-reflexive citizens."²² If, indeed, we experience the Internet as atomized consumers rather than engaged citizens, the Internet's contribution to deliberative democracy is minimized. It is concerning that one of the more exciting Internet innovations – the ability of Internet users to personalize and constrict the flow of information using browser settings (such as "favourites" and "bookmarks"), listservs, customized web portals, and RSS news feed – may actually promote the very sort "cyberbalkanization" that is detrimental to the public sphere. There is an obvious tension here. The emergence of a diverse range of counterpublics is a democratic response to heterogeneity; but, at the same time, the

²⁰ Lucas D. Introna & Helen Nissenbaum, "Shaping the Web: Why the Politics of Search Engines Matters" (2000) 16:3 *The Information Society* at 178.

²¹ Michael Geist, "Bernier's troubling stand on net neutrality" *Toronto Star* (12 February 2007), online: *The Toronto Star* <<http://www.thestar.com/article/180608>>.

²² Dahlberg, *supra* note 17 at 170.

Internet's capacity to foster hyper-atomization goes further, potentially undercutting the shared text and common public culture that is essential to a well-functioning public sphere. There is the very real possibility of a fragmented public sphere in which distinct communities ultimately congeal as disparate islands of political communication, a consequence that runs counter to the enrichment of deliberative democracy.²³

Monitorial Democracy and the Internet

The monitorial dimension of democracy relates to citizen action to ensure governments are responsive and accountable between elections. One of the politically exciting developments associated with the Internet is the enhanced capacity of grassroots movements to monitor policy makers and then inform and mobilize interested publics when there is a perceived need for citizen action. We see cause for optimism in the way the Internet has been taken up and used to network, organize and mobilize political actions that enhance democratic accountability. Indeed, because effective monitorial democracy often involves the identification of counterpublics that are willing to challenge our governments and powerful non-state actors, the political action of monitorial democracy crosses over into the realm of deliberative democracy, where there are additional positive ramifications.

Some of the most striking examples of cyberspace facilitating monitorial democracy have involved networked social movements and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) taking action to influence international forums, treaty negotiations and meetings. Perhaps the best known of these cases involved the use of the Internet to organize social movement demonstrations and mass protests at the Seattle meetings of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1999. The diversity of the groups involved, their effectiveness in capturing public attention, including the posting of images on the Web of excessive police force against protestors, stunned even long-time observers of grassroots citizen action. But these events actually followed on the heels of an even more impressive effort by many of the same movement organizations to successfully disrupt WTO negotiations toward a Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) in 1997 and 1998. Canadian groups like the Council of Canadians were among the social movement organizations that played a key role in this truly international political campaign. As nodes of strategic coordination, mobilization and information dissemination within a global network of 600 organizations from over 70 countries, the Council and other organizations became part of a truly "networked movement" capable of consolidating knowledge, expertise and resources with impressive flexibility and speed.²⁴ Over a number of

²³ William A. Galston, "If Political Fragmentation is the Problem, is the Internet the Solution?" in David M. Anderson & Michael Cornfield, eds., *The Civic Web: Online Politics and Democratic Values* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003) at 35-44.

²⁴ Ronald J. Deibert, "Civil Society Activism on the World Wide Web: The Case of the Anti-MAI Lobby" in David R. Cameron & Janice G. Stein, eds., *Street Protests and Fantasy Parks: Globalization, Culture and the State* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2002).

months, the quiet and secretive process of negotiating an MAI was brought to public attention. As public opinion polls revealed popular concern about the consequences of an MAI, politicians were lobbied and key countries eventually withdrew their support for the WTO-based negotiations, making success impossible.

In campaigns like these the Internet has been linking people and information in unprecedented ways, producing new forms of political organization and action. In the United States, what is now known as *MoveOn.org* emerged in 1998 as an e-mail petition encouraging politicians to “move on” from highly personal and partisan politics to more pressing issues of concern to the ordinary person. Within days, this e-mail campaign had produced a petition with hundreds of thousands of signatures. Today, *MoveOn.org* has 3.3 million members who are linked through a website, e-mail updates and, when necessary, phone networks that are organized in cyberspace. On 26 February 2003, *MoveOn.org* organized a “Virtual March on Washington” in which hundreds of thousands of peace activists flooded the White House and U.S. Congress with over one million faxes, e-mails and phone calls, virtually shutting down congressional communications networks.

Of course, cyber-organizing is not exclusively a tool of progressive political forces. Political networks on both the left and the right have emerged as a result of Internet-based efforts to share information and facilitate the emergence of influential counterpublics. The capacity of the Internet to transcend space and time has truly transformed monitorial democracy. However, as impressive as many cases of monitorial democracy in action have been, they don’t amount to anything close to the meaningful disruption of the “structural power” of powerful state and corporate actors. What they do demonstrate is the extent to which the Internet can facilitate the realization of “interstitial power” operating at the margins and in relations to specific issues.²⁵ This is not insignificant and could have positive consequences for deliberative democracy since networked citizens organizing around particular issues have the potential to emerge as counterpublics that continue to interact, share information and strengthen the virtual public sphere of cyberspace.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this essay we have attempted to balance our certain optimism about the potential contributions the Internet could make to deepening democracy with a realistic assessment of the ways in which this democratic potential is limited by the existing character of social, political and economic relations, as well as by the attitudes, orientation and activities of governments, citizens and corporations. The reluctance of our governments and political parties to embrace the Internet as anything more than a supplement to existing practices has meant that, while the Internet has changed the practice of electoral democracy, democracy has not been deepened. With regard to deliberative democracy, the corporate colonization of the Internet and our lack of willingness to treat the Internet as a public good has

²⁵ *Ibid.*

hampered the Internet's potential to facilitate the sort of democratic transformation of the public sphere that could deepen deliberative democracy. However, we are not without hope. In the realm of monitorial democracy, we contend that the Internet has enhanced democracy by transforming social movement networks and empowering grassroots movements with new tools to monitor policy-makers which subsequently inform and mobilize interested publics. The enhancement of monitorial democracy is an important development, but its significance is lessened by the limited and sometimes negative impact of the Internet on the other dimensions of democracy. The challenge for the future is to transform attitudes regarding the role of the Internet in democracy. Governments and political parties must be encouraged to take full advantage of the interactive character of the Internet to strengthen electoral democracy. More importantly, there is very real urgency associated with popularizing an understanding of the Internet as a public good. For the Internet to realize its potential to deepen deliberative democracy, we must commit ourselves to Net neutrality, the corporate decolonization of cyberspace and the politicization of a revitalized virtual public sphere.