Democracy and the Internet: Access, Engagement and Deliberation

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ABSTRACT:

The internet has the capacity to facilitate the creation of new forms of civic engagement, but the realisation of these opportunities requires institutional and cultural reinforcement. The democratic character of e-citizenship and the equal distribution of online resources to the public require the fulfilment of four conditions: access, engagement (incorporating education, motivation and trust), meaningful deliberation and a link between civic input and public policy output. Furthermore, the gap between the main features of cyberspace and the inherent prerequisites of democracy, such as a finite space and a set of rules, create tensions that need to be negotiated politically. Although the empirical evidence available includes some encouraging signs regarding the future use of the internet for civic engagement, the existing limitations and obstacles mean that the new media will complement, rather than replace, the old media as a democratic public sphere.

Keywords: Access, Citizenship, Civic Engagement, Deliberation, Internet, Public Policy.

1. INTRODUCTION: BRIDGING THE GAPS

Liberal democracies are allegedly facing a crisis of systemic legitimacy and public trust. Voter turnout is only one of many democratic functions being affected. Other symptoms are the breakdown of communities and the decline of social capital [1], the dumbing down of political information [2], the patterns of conflict and dependence between politicians and journalists [3], [4] and the lack of public trust in political institutions and processes [5], [6]. The apparent decline in the political culture has significant implications both at the philosophical / ethical levels (legitimisation) and at the practical one (quality of life).

In addition to this set of trends, there is an emerging gap between governance and citizenship, i.e. between power-holders and power-givers. In recent decades, power has moved away from the nation-state towards multi-level governance, whereas the political rhetoric and the institutional voice of citizens remain tied up to the nation state [7]. The agenda of the 21st century politics includes a new set of issues and problems that cut across nation states, such as war and international terrorism, environmental destruction of a global scale, immigration and asylum, genetics and biotechnology, privacy and intellectual property rights. Individual governments seem unable to tackle these issues on their own, which has led to the creation of complex networks of policy-making. Several scholars have asked for the extension of the national citizenship to the international domain [8], [9]. At the moment this seems to be an unlikely - and perhaps an unfeasible - project.

The existence and evolution of democracy requires a finite space within which issues are discussed and decisions are made. Given the role of the media as such an arena for the mass political process, there has been an extended discussion on their potential effect. The media have been recently accused of leading to social isolation and alienation, promoting negativity, image and conflict over substance and consensus, placing considerable public power on corporate hands, and undermining democracy [10]. Other scholars, such as Norris, have presented evidence of a virtuous relationship between media coverage of political information and civic engagement [11] and have raised doubts about the corrosive effect of the media on social capital. Journalists can be seen as scrutinising political leaders, making information accessible to the lay citizen and bringing up civic concerns.

Due to the revolution of communication's scale and speed facilitated by new technologies, the debate between optimists and pessimists is magnified when it comes to assessing the impact of the *new* media on democracy. The discourse over e-democracy has traditionally taken place within two oppositions, the conflicting visions of optimists and pessimists (or 'utopias' and 'dystopias' [12]) and the conflicting explanations of technological determinists (incorporating both previous groups) and proponents of the 'reinforcement' model. As it has been argued elsewhere [13], the quest for a blanket effect and/or a unique source of change is a fruitless enterprise. The distinction between technology and human agency (comprising of socio-cultural and psychological components) is to a large extent artificial; both elements affect each other in an organic cycle of interaction. Therefore, scholars and politicians should focus on identifying and developing the necessary institutional, cultural and technological means that will make the most of the opportunities, and tackle the challenges, presented by technology. The internet can enhance citizenship and democracy, but positive evolution is not part of the hardware or software - it needs to be facilitated.

From a review of the recent literature, four discrete obstacles emerge that restrain the ability of new ICTs to enhance citizenship: access, engagement, meaningful deliberation and impact on public policy. The analysis presented here concurs with Kurland and Egan's 'three fundamental characteristics' (access, voice and dialogue) [14] although it builds on that by considering recent empirical evidence and also by presenting engagement and impact on public policy as conditions on their own merit.

2. ACCESS

Entry into the political space within which citizens contribute to the political debate and the decision-making process (whether we call that civil society, public sphere or cyberspace) is paramount. Access to the new information and communication technologies is for e-democracy what the right to vote has been for electoral politics. Hence, the digital divide is surely one of the biggest hurdles facing the effective use of the internet for civic participation in the democratic process. According to

Norris [15] the gap between information-rich and information-poor citizens has been reinforced in the online world. There is a consensus that well-educated, affluent, young males are disproportionately represented in the population of internet users [16], [17].

The fact that the younger generations are overall more digitally literate is encouraging because it gives them a platform for the development of their culture and identities. Furthermore, new technologies facilitate civic access and social networking for population groups that are currently excluded by the process, either due to physical constraints (such as a disability) or because of lack of resources (time, money, etc). However, if we consider information technology as a tool of empowerment then the fact that this resource is not evenly spread across the population weakens its democratic potential. More importantly, that inequality is not random; it is particularly evident amongst specific segments of the population, which could create new forms of social exclusion.

An additional parameter to this problem is the global nature of cyberspace and the gap between information-rich and information-poor *countries*. If the lack of access can create inequalities within national public spheres, it can also widen the gap amongst nations. Given the cross-national nature of emerging problems mentioned above, and the need for policy-making at the international level, the effect can obtain an extra dimension. Therefore, it could be argued that, because of its vital importance for the universal character of e-democracy, access (or the right to access) needs to be reinforced institutionally and politically. As scholars have mentioned, this is not just an issue of technological applications, but also a matter of digital literacy and culture.

3. ENGAGEMENT

Obtaining access to the Internet does not mean that there will be a positive effect on democracy. Even if there were guaranteed universal access to the new technologies, the next hurdle would be the citizens' engagement with the political process. 'Engagement' is an umbrella term that comprises of several elements. The first one is motivation: not all individuals are interested in politics, especially considering the continuously negative and adversary coverage of political leaders and processes, which according to several scholars has created a culture of non-participation. Additionally, not all individuals are politically educated enough to feel that they can participate meaningfully in processes of democratic deliberation, preference measurement or civic mobilisation. Given the complexity and scale of modern policy-making, it is impossible to have an informed opinion about every issue in the political agenda and to also have the time and motivation to express and negotiate it.

Another very important factor that has a cyclical relationship to engagement is trust: mistrust breeds disengagement (and vice versa); and, also, trust breeds engagement (and vice versa) in a virtuous circle of social capital [18]. As Smith [19] has shown social capital in the early stages of life leads to political socialisation, which in turn leads to civic engagement. Politically relevant social capital itself is created through personal networks and social exchanges, as La Due Lake and Huckfeldt have shown [20]. In short, social interactions with other individuals eventually lead to greater civic participation.

The internet has been accused of causing social isolation and mistrust, and therefore of aggravating civic disengagement. However, Uslaner argues that trust is a variable independent of the internet. Taking a 'reinforcement' approach, he argues that "Internet usage does not destroy trust, but it doesn't create trust either. No matter what you do on-line, you don't become more (or less) trusting… Trusting people are also no more or less likely to go on-line more than misanthropes" [21].

However, that argument may not take into account the fact that, provided that more children and young people continue to go online, and considering generational replacement, the internet may have a *long term* effect on people's (overall) trust levels. That is to say, although the levels of trust in today's adults may not be directly affected by technology, increased (virtual) interaction in adolescence and young adulthood in the future might lead to a different kind of socialisation, and subsequently to a different kind of civic engagement.

Although it is too early for a conclusive assessment of these issues, new technological applications force us to 'think out of the box' when it comes to evaluating political participation. It is a common pitfall to assess online citizenship and online civic engagement using 'offline' measures (such as voting intentions, party memberships etc). However, the internet could well facilitate the creation of totally different forms of civic engagement or civic culture that so far had been unfeasible. Moreover, recent evidence [22] indicates the development of an online youth civic culture expressed through awareness, volunteering, campaigning and the public exercise of voice.

Unless one adopts an approach of pure biological determinism, and accepts the influence of socio-cultural factors, it can be argued that trust can be 'constructed'. If the system can manufacture mistrust, it should also be able to manufacture trust. Another question arises then, which is whether *unqualified* trust in institutions is welcome. Some scholars, following a rational choice approach, have even gone as far as to argue that individuals *cannot* have trust in institutions: the expectation of reciprocity is the basis of trust and, therefore, we should not anticipate institutions to meet our individual expectations [23]. Those scholars welcome the steady decline in the levels of public trust in government, over the last thirty years, as a sign of healthy rationalisation of the public. However, recent trends in public trust following the 9/11 in the United States disprove that model by highlighting the importance of non-rational factors. Furthermore, the various effects of mistrust in the quality of life have been well-documented [5]. Therefore, the development of *qualified* trust is vital for civic engagement and democracy.

In summary, engagement constitutes of - or interacts with - motivation, political education and trust. These are all prerequisites for the transformation of internet access into meaningful civic engagement. Again, the facilitation of those key elements requires a combination of political, institutional, cultural and technical measures.

4. DELIBERATION

It could be argued that the ability to express one's opinions and ideas, however marginal those may be, is important. In that sense, the fulfilment of the two conditions mentioned above would be a step forward. Indeed, scholars such as Mitra [24] have demonstrated how virtuality challenges the hierarchy of

the dominant and the marginal, since it eliminates the distinction between centre and periphery. The structure of cyberspace, or rather the *lack* of any structure online, facilitates the re-negotiation of identities - individual and collective [25]. In addition, new technologies can accelerate civic awareness and mobilisation around issues, causes and social movements leading to the growth of civic activism [26], [27]. The empowerment of individual citizens and movements, the facilitation of grassroots mobilisation and civic engagement in issue politics are important elements of the liberal and pluralist democratic models.

However, if we accept that democracy is more than mere preference measurement, participation in elite-defined referenda and elections, and contribution to lobbying campaigns, then dialogue becomes a vital part of the process. Gastil and Dillard [28] found that "deliberation can increase the sophistication of citizens' political opinions, and the value of such a change is considerable". Furthermore, Price, Cappella and Nir [29] concur about the 'value of disagreement' and find that "exposure to [it] does indeed contribute to people's ability to generate reasons, and in particular reasons why others might disagree with their own views". The value of civic dialogue is of obvious importance to the deliberative model of democracy. However, other mainstream democratic theories, such as communitarianism and direct democracy also base their contributions on the foundation of rational discussion: deliberation is at the heart of communities; while direct participation in decision-making requires a very clear and comprehensive knowledge of the issues involved (otherwise radical democracy could degenerate into the tyranny of the masses).

Therefore, deliberation is an integral part of meaningful civic engagement and the internet offers an infinite amount of virtual spaces within which such discussion can take place, from emails and listserves to Internet Relay Chat (IRC) to Usenet newsgroups, Bulletin Board Systems and instant messengers. However, two specific problems have been identified that may affect the quality of deliberation. The first problem is the potential lack of disagreement because of the polarisation of like-minded individuals into cyber-ghettos. That problem has been identified as 'homophily', i.e. the tendency of people to look for and fragment into groups of like-minded individuals. If proven true that would mean that new technologies facilitate the clustering of people into homogeneous interest groups rather than make them face each other. However, Stromer-Galley [30] raises doubts about the accuracy of the homophily and fragmentation thesis and indicates increased diversity of opinion within online spaces.

The second problem occurs at the other extreme, i.e. when diversity is stretched to become abusive behaviour or what is commonly known in computer-mediated communication studies as 'flaming' [31]. Flaming is the uncivil and disruptive attitude of individuals within online fora, message boards etc due to the anonymous and user-friendly nature of the medium (see for example the study of Usenet newsgroups by Hill and Hughes [32]). These practices undermine the quality of the debate and hinder the production of meaningful outcomes relating to the substance of issues and policies. Although these activities could be seen as part of a distinct sub-culture emerging online (which has been defined as 'cyber-conflict' [33]) and as being a part of political tactics amongst socio-political and ethno-religious

groups, flaming has a detrimental effect on the utility of unmoderated virtual spaces.

Scholars analysing civic networks and online fora have noted that *some* form of gatekeeping is necessary in order to protect the smooth functioning of those spaces. Tambini [34] argues that the new media can have a significant effect on the enhancement of citizenship through appropriate regulation. Dahlberg (e.g. [35]) attributes the success of Minnesota E-Democracy to features such as the formalisation of rules and the careful management of the forum, which underlines the importance of a well-structured and well-managed space. These accounts concur with Murray's findings from a Markle Foundation-sponsored 'hyperforum'; Murray concludes that for meaningful deliberation a strong and interactive facilitator is necessary and that "[u]ncontrolled, open public participation in a hyperforum seems infeasible… because there would not be a cohesive sponsoring and participating community" [36]. It is interesting that while the new media is liberating us from the restrictions and editorial controls of the old media, a structure of gatekeeping and agenda-setting needs to be negotiated so as to moderate online behaviour, enhance the quality of deliberation and ensure the utility and sustainability of a forum.

Apart from homophily and flaming, another issue which has been often mentioned as an obstacle for cyberspace becoming a democratic public sphere is the pattern of inequality in participation evident amongst newsgroup or forum contributors. Schneider, among others, found 'extreme' concentration of participation among few contributors [37], but this can be attributed more to the Pareto law (power law distribution, [38] rather than to a weakness of the medium. Referring to similar patterns in weblogs, Shirky explains that "[i]n systems where many people are free to choose between many options, a small subset of the whole will get a disproportionate amount of traffic (or attention, or income)…The very act of choosing, spread widely enough and freely enough, creates a power law distribution" [38]. Hence, although this phenomenon casts a shadow over the utopian image of an egalitarian virtual public sphere, it does not constitute a situation for which a solution needs to be manufactured.

5. IMPACT ON PUBLIC POLICY

The fulfilment of the conditions of access, engagement and deliberation would equal a significant move towards a more meaningful use of new technologies for the enhancement of citizenship and democracy. At that stage, the formation of a social consensus might be possible, while individual citizens would develop their civic education and critical thinking. Still, ethical and practical reasons dictate that the result of this civic contribution should materialise into public policy. Unless a link is established between the (online) public dialogue and the (offline) public policy then citizens could feel what Papacharissi called a 'false sense of empowerment' [39]. The problem is purely political and is part of a broader pattern that has been well documented in the political communication literature, i.e. the growth of asymmetrical communication that flows one-way from the political leadership to the public via old and new media with an increased emphasis on image and presentation. In academic and political circles 'political communication' has come to connote persuasion (or 'spin'), while for the lay citizen it probably does not mean anything anyway. As Coleman notes (referring to the use of the internet by politicians) what is

missing is "any notion of a relationship between public input and policy output" [40].

Apart from the ethical grounds - of political legitimisation - there are also practical reasons for establishing a relationship between civic engagement and decision-making. It has been shown that the narrowing of the gap between governance and citizenship can have great operational benefits for the management of difficult projects, crises and natural disasters [7]. Therefore, the fourth and final prerequisite for the maximum use of the internet for citizenship would be an institutional process of feedback between governance and citizenship, a channel of public participation in one or more of the public policy stages (design, implementation, assessment). What differentiates a *formal* (or institutional) process of citizenship from all other civic activities online would be the guarantee of equal accessibility for all citizens and affected parties. E-consultation could constitute one of the ways to institutionalise citizenship online, given that it combines both the provision of detailed information on the policies involved (thus promoting rational-critical decision-making) and the open access for all citizens and affected parties.

However, the logistics of such a project could limit its *scale*. Combining all four requirements in order to produce public policy 'baptised' in inclusive and rational civic input might only be achieved consistently at the local / community / neighbourhood level. The complexity and detail of the issues involved, the need to include all affected parties (or to give them the right to be included if they wish so), the necessity of relevant and efficient public contributions, while keeping to limited resources, means that there could well be a limit to what the internet can offer to institutional citizenship, at least in the foreseeable future. Obviously, that definition excludes numerous less formal opportunities and contributions, such as awareness of global issues, mobilisation and activism through NGOs and pressure groups, discussion at a private/non-formal setting, individual action and support of causes etc. These activities are, arguably, equally or more important for an individual's civic engagement and can have a great empowering effect on the citizen, on the groups and movements affected, or on the society / government involved. But the democratic character of online civic activities should be reinforced through the introduction of minimum provisions guaranteeing the equal availability of these processes to all citizens who wish to access them.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS ON E-CITIZENSHIP

Having considered a variety of issues, arguments and empirical data, four factors emerge affecting the democratic character of online civic engagement: access to the new technologies (including the narrow definition of entry into the virtual sphere and the broader sense of understanding the IT culture); engagement with the process (influenced by political education, motivation and trust); meaningful and civil deliberation with people from diverse backgrounds and of different opinions; and, finally, a link between civic input and public policy output. Although it is undeniable that partial fulfilment of some or all of these conditions can have positive effects for the inclusion of more citizens in the political process and the reduction of the democratic deficit, it could also lead to asymmetric empowerment or disempowerment of specific citizen groups, if

that asymmetry is disproportionately evident amongst specific population groups.

In their analysis, Kurland and Egan [14] present a series of educational, cultural and economical barriers obstructing the generation of civic engagement online, ranging from IT skills and resources to self-regulation to gender to deliberation skills. Even if these barriers were to be overcome, and the four conditions were met, there would still be the issue of *scale*. The logistics and complexities of contemporary policy-making and public administration processes mean that, in order to have a meaningful communication between citizenship and governance, the space within which issues are discussed and decisions are made should be finite. The bigger the scale, the more difficult it is to ensure universal access, meaningful engagement (including political education), meaningful deliberation and impact on public policy. That, in turn, requires the setting of *boundaries* of some sort, i.e. the line between those included in and those excluded from that process. At the moment, the only reasonable and democratic criterion by which this division could happen is *locality* (i.e. excluding some citizens from the policy-making process according, for example, to the policy area involved would be very contentious).

Thus, despite the collapse of space and time in the online world, and the global nature of current issues, a *locus operandi* seems to be the *sine qua non* of democratic engagement. This proposition concurs with empirical analyses into online civic engagement; Tambini argues that "it is the local experiments - the so-called 'civic networks' - that are most advanced, and offer the clearest insights into emerging patterns of political communication" [34].

In addition to the issue of scale, there is another operational requirement that emerges as vital but contentious; that is the issue of control, i.e. gatekeeping. There is an emerging consensus in the literature that some form of social control is necessary if there is to be meaningful interaction of citizens. It is too early to say whether that could happen via self-regulation, although the anonymity and accessibility of the internet makes that very difficult. Once gatekeeping has been accepted as necessary, all sorts of questions about agenda-setting, framing, manipulation, centre v. periphery and the dominant v. the marginal emerge.

The tensions and problems raised by both requirements of a *locus operandi* and a *modus operandi* for online citizenship mirror similar questions that have already been raised offline. The management of these tensions and the negotiation of rules that ensure inclusive but effective civic engagement online rests upon the will of political leaders and citizens, rather than the technology itself.

In conclusion, although the internet contributes to the creation of new forms of citizenship and empowerment, the equal distribution of those resources to the citizens require the fulfilment of four conditions (access, engagement, deliberation, impact on public policy) and the negotiation of two operational requirements (finite space, social control). The realities and logistics of those prerequisites mean that in the foreseeable future the internet will not *replace* offline modes of citizenship, but rather that it will *complement* them. The prevention of new forms of social exclusion and asymmetric empowerment requires the political reinforcement of democratic citizenship,

through the universal provision of institutional and cultural resources.

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