Preface

The chief objective of this book is to assist the lay reader in understanding the phenomenon of digital democracy that is occurring around the world. Information and communication technology (ICT) has the tremendous potential to alter in significant ways how we govern ourselves and engage in political activities. Facilitating citizen access and participation in governance and policy making has been part of the appeal of ICT to forward-thinking people, both inside and outside governments, ever since the very first personal computers were introduced publicly. Many governments, however, use e-government—in some cases quite heavily—to pursue a “services first, democracy later” approach (Clift 2003, para. 21). Indeed, the democratic aspects tend to be ignored or downplayed by governments, which more frequently focus on technology as a means to facilitate the efficient delivery of services. However, as e-government has taken root all over, more and more societies clamor for the next stage—the transition to e-democracy.

Another important objective of the book is to introduce the reader to a useful framework for understanding the diverse patterns of e-democracy development around the world. In this regard, we draw on the public sphere theory of Jurgen Habermas in order to make sense of the plethora of virtual public fora that have been making vital contributions to e-democracy. In the course of this exploration we ask questions such as: What is different about ICT-mediated political discourse? How can government and civil society work together to develop effective virtual town halls? What are some of the possible pitfalls one is likely to encounter along the way to e-democracy, and how might these be best avoided? Is e-democracy possible in developing countries and under what conditions? These are some of the questions that are raised and answered in the book.

Finally, the book’s last objective is to provide examples of effective virtual public spheres based on such efforts throughout the world. In many chapters, the authors provide cases of successful deliberative democracy online experiments, which they analyze for their efficacy, and which will provide models of online public spheres that should prove useful to students and activists.

Simply stated, the book’s mission is to provide the most up-to-date information on an important development in the use of ICT in politics by government and civil society: The widespread proliferation of virtual public spheres. Although its focus is largely on developed countries, it should also prove valuable to users in developing countries as well. Indeed, a few of the chapters have been written about the experience of developing countries in moving towards e-government and e-democracy. The book strives to be exhaustive in its coverage, but at the same time, readable. As much as possible, the use of specialized jargon has been avoided or defined within the text. In short, the editors’ objective is nothing short of making this the most up-to-date and readable book on virtual public spheres currently available to readers. Furthermore, we attempt to bridge the gap that currently exists between the more theoretical
discussions of deliberative democracy online that is found, mostly in scholarly books and journals, and the practical reports, mostly on the World Wide Web, of state-civil society net experiments.

Up to now, there has been very little written exclusively on the role of deliberative forums in e-democracy and few attempts to summarize, interpret, and understand international examples of virtual public spheres. This book fills the gap with both theoretical and empirical treatments of the subject. It is our hope that readers will find this book a useful guide to an important political development on the Internet.

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