Afterword

ABSTRACT

This book has examined the impact of virtual public spheres or the use of ICT by civil society to enhance participation in the political process and governance. The work of many scholars, including those included in this work, as well as theoretical developments, point to virtual public spheres as providing the link between e-government and e-democracy. Critical to the capability of virtual public spheres to this is their capacity to strengthen social capital offline as well as online.

AFTERWORD

The chapters in this book show that virtual public spheres can serve as the bridge connecting e-Government with e-Democracy. Virtual public spheres represent an extension of civil society and deliberative democracy into the virtual realm of ICT. Whereas e-Government is largely service-driven and emphasizes efficiencies in operations, e-Democracy takes the concept further to encompass both deliberative and participatory practices while emphasizing inclusion and equal access. The critical factor that virtual public spheres can contribute to e-Democracy, which is largely absent from e-Government, however well conceived, is social capital. Social capital is necessary to maintain strong, stable civil society (Putnam, 2000). However, as some of the chapters in this book point out, making the transition from offline to online democracy is not without its problems. Two of the most serious issues with ICT identified in the literature are deconcentration and the flood of information online, both discussed in detail in Chapter One. Decentralization leads to fragmentation (and polarization) and too much information contributes to paralysis of decision-making, both elements that could undermine democracy. The proliferation of information sources and the absence of a central point of control results in users who, faced with a veritable flood of information (much of which is unreliable or unverifiable), choose content on the basis of whether it agrees with their opinions or not. Furthermore, Dahlberg (2005) notes that the Internet’s lack of order increases the threat of corporate colonization that extends beyond corporate control of online communication to the competition for the attention of everyday users.

How can virtual public spheres meet these challenges? What lens should be used to make larger sense of these developments against the increasingly shifting backdrop of modern social movements? One needs to look to modern democratic theory in order to place e-Democracy within the broadest possible context. Fuchs (2003), for example, considers three theories, “strong democracy” (put forward by
Benjamin Barber), “discoursive democracy” (based on Habermas), and “directly-deliberative polyarchy” theory (developed by social theorists Cohen and Sabel). The three theories overlap in important aspects:

Their starting point is criticism of existing liberal democracy. It proceeds from two perspectives, normative and practical. From a normative point of view, they object that liberal democracy is now hardly in keeping with a reasonably demanding interpretation of the democracy principle. From a practical point of view they presume that liberal democracy confronts problems no longer amenable to solution within its institutional framework and by its procedures alone. The most important problem they see is the unquestioned dominance of particular interests in politics, which in the long run erode the foundations of the democratic process itself. According to these approaches, participatory democracy is thus the normatively desirable and the practically necessary form of democracy; it is: “desirable both in itself and as a problem solver.” (Cohen & Sabel 1997: 314)

Fuchs considers three important points regarding e-Democracy including directness of participation (i.e., all citizens actually making political decisions), deliberation (i.e., the means by which political discourse is conducted), and institutionalism (i.e., the mediums through which participatory practices are upheld and supported). The chief participatory mechanisms emerging from ICT are: (1) Internet-facilitated referendums and (2) interactive communication where a common will of citizens can be formed as a result of online deliberation. However, given the current state of things, there are several basic issues regarding both mechanisms, which need to be better addressed before either one can inspire more confidence in their ability to transform the democratic process. Concerning Internet referenda, the chief drawbacks include: too many important policy questions to be left to large populations to decide, inability to inform citizens of important information surrounding voting referendum issues due to lack information, low motivation to participate on the part of citizens, and lack of accountability for referendum policy. Deliberation using interactive formats is equally troublesome for several reasons including the issue of fragmentation identified by several authors in this work and because e-Forums do not typically allow for complete interaction between all citizens. Groups such as AmericaSpeaks have addressed this last problem with limited success. Additionally, “partners in communication are neither physically nor visually present; they are mutually anonymous others… In Internet communication, the anonymous other is thus not identifiable as a citizen belonging to the same demos as ego himself.” In other words, in situations where citizens cannot see and directly address the other (as is the case with online public spheres), there is no guarantee that the other belongs to the same community and, therefore, is a valid stakeholder in discussions involving community interests. Thus, while there exist available remedies for the negative effects of decentralization and information over-load, they are not also without some problems of their own. In this book, we make the case that mechanisms might be devised that enable the virtual public sphere’s democracy-enhancing features while at the same time reducing or eliminating its negative effects. Most importantly, virtual public spheres offer the promise of extending civil society’s reach into the virtual world.

The skeptical view of virtual public spheres questions whether e-Participation will produce lasting political change. Kuhlen (1998), for example, examines the role information, communication, and media all play in relation to direct democracy. More importantly though from our perspective, Kuhlen’s work investigates the value of virtual public spheres to support the contention that increased discussion, interaction (between citizens, groups, and politicians) and participation can produce a more informed body politic. Kuhlen, however, casts doubts on the Internet’s ability to produce radical change in democratic
political systems; he argues that ICT will instead usher in a regime in which the media will lose its monopoly on shaping public opinion. Another positive, if limited, change is the potential for ICT forums to increase interaction between geographically distant people, provide feedback to posted ideas, create banks of easily accessible knowledge, and allow for real-time reaction to statements posted on forums. Kuhlen concludes that e-Democracy probably will not replace current indirect, representative systems of democracy.

Several authors in this book concur with this limited view of the potential of virtual public spheres to effect dramatic political change, particularly in societies that do not have a long tradition of democratic politics. Nonetheless, we affirm that the true value of virtual public spheres to offline political systems seems to lie in their capacity to contribute to offline civil society through an infusion of online social capital. Several earlier researchers have investigated the capacity of ICT to help build social capital, particularly among socially marginalized groups and individuals. Law and Keltner (1995), for example, found that ICT helped the social integration of marginalized groups through enhanced access to others like themselves. By providing additional opportunities for communication among community members, one also raises the overall level of social trust, which might be transformed into collective action towards achieving common social goals (Kavanaugh and Patterson, 2001). Increased interaction might lead to civic engagement, but the social capital also leads to an improvement in the community’s overall quality of life. For example, Alkalimat and Williams (2001), in a study of community technology centers, found that increasing social capital was the critical ingredient in promoting social and political change in the community.

Glogoff (2001) reinforces the point that online communication can help increase social capital, especially among disenfranchised groups. Other authors examine the effects on social capital of a resident-maintained “networked community” in Melbourne, Australia (Meredyth, Hopkins, Ewing and Thomas (2002). The authors found that as a result of the increased access to electronic communication, there has been an augmentation of bonding capital but this has not had the desired effect of increasing bridging social capital. It is possible that in groups that are more integrated into society’s mainstream, the impact of virtual public spheres is even more pronounced. For example, in a study of a middle-class suburban community in Toronto, Canada, Hampton and Wellman (1999) found that Internet usage bolsters social ties, regardless of whether they were strong or weak before.

Quan-Haase and Wellman (2002) discuss the effect of the Internet in general on social capital. They point out that three approaches to the effects of the Internet on social capital can be identified. First, the Internet acts as a transformative agent. This is in keeping with the literature that asserts that ICT can bring about a dramatic increase in civic engagement. Second, the Internet diminishes bonding social capital. In other words, the Internet serves as a gigantic distraction drawing people away from family and community with its entertainment and information opportunities. Third, the Internet supplements bridging social capital. Thus, instead of taking people away from what they normally do, it simply adds an alternative means to accomplish many of the same communicative ends; in addition to talking on the telephone, people are sending each other e-mail and instant messages. As Quan-Haase and Wellman write, “Although face-to-face and telephone contact continue, they are complemented by the Internet’s ease in connecting geographically dispersed people and organizations bonded by shared interests” (2002, 9).

The bulk of the cited research points to encouraging signs regarding the linkages between virtual public spheres and social capital. In general, they open up the opportunity for increasing communication among people, even if it merely complements pre-existing modes of communication. Some virtual public spheres aspire to both bridging social capital and bonding social capital, given their close connection to
communities in a specific geographic location. Most of the virtual public spheres that were discussed, however, have more limited ambitions. For them, an enlargement of bridging social capital as a result of their efforts would be enough. Moreover, as Quan-Haase and Wellman and others point out, this alone may be sufficient to bring about the political change desired by the proponents of virtual public spheres.

In this book, Monnoyer-Smith, Raman, Hacker et al, and Anderson and Bishop utilize theoretical frameworks to describe the transition from offline to online deliberative democracy. Monnoyer-Smith frames the discussion of ICT and deliberation using the notion of *deliberative machines*. She reassesses the role of ICT in public deliberation and looks at the conditions surrounding discursive interactions. Her analysis shows that virtual public spheres may be unique in allowing previously excluded populations access to public discourse. Her work allows researchers to see deliberative procedures in a broader socio-political context. From this perspective, virtual public spheres are potentially transformative mechanisms that extend participation in novel ways.

Raman argues for a blended model of deliberative e-Democracy, one that does not privilege online venues and interactions but employs technologies in strategic combination with existing civic networks to improve governance in developing countries. In this work, she shows the important nexus between offline civil society and virtual public spheres, broadly defined to include non-Internet technological applications.

Hacker and Morgan argue that the partnership of e-government with new media networking can significantly increase the connections of e-government to e-democracy. They argue, “Democracy involves citizen input, deliberation, and involvement with public spheres (Hacker and Morgan, 2011).” The rise of social media, therefore, provides unique opportunities for the development of virtual public spheres. However, drawing upon the work of van Dijk (2006) they point out that the powerful in society also tend to be early ICT adopters and, in a manner that somewhat recalls the economist Douglass North’s Path Dependence theory (North 2009), elites thus have a disproportionate effect on the evolution of technological change. In this way, Hacker, et al, charge that new social networks, including those that arise around new media, can perpetuate existing social inequities.

Anderson and Bishop survey a number of studies of e-government and e-democracy initiatives. They point out the difficulty in moving from e-government to e-democracy and find that many efforts fall short of the sustained deliberation needed to achieve e-democracy. Anderson and Bishop see a need for e-democracy initiatives to embrace approaches that better enhance deliberation rather than simply make government more accessible. They aim to refocus research efforts on the characteristics reinforced by the creation of deliberative forums in the virtual world. Moreover, they recognize that the move to e-democracy is incomplete without a more robust virtual public sphere.

According to Fuchs (2003), directness of participation was a major strength of e-Democracy, helping to extend civil society’s reach into the virtual world. Barnes and Kaase (1979) found close correlation between individual participation and civil society. Furthermore, Foley and Edwards (1996) speculate that, “it seems likely that specifically political associations (whether social-movement organizations, interest groups, or political parties) are more conducive to promoting civic engagement than many other sorts of association. That would certainly be in keeping with Tocqueville’s argument” (p. 52). In their chapters, Backhouse, Gimeno and Freeman, Nyirenda, and Bwalya, et al. discuss attempts to employ ICT to enhance participation for the purpose of social change.
Gimeno and Freeman present a case study of human rights videoblogging on YouTube, the popular video-sharing website. According to Gimeno and Freeman, videoblogging enables individuals to upload human rights videos to the Internet and possibly effect profound social change on a global level. However, this unprecedented ability to communicate wrongs also underscores the need for universal ethics standards to protect the rights of victims as a critical element of a virtual public sphere that is informed by Habermas’ normative theory of communicative action.

Bwalya et al argue that in developing countries such as Botswana, concerted efforts to promote ICT usage and create an appropriate ICT infrastructure, are but the initial steps in the long process needed to reach e-Democracy. E-Democracy is a multi-dimensional phenomenon that is deeply embedded in a country’s policy, culture, finances, in addition to its organizational and regulatory environments. Thus a stumbling block in developing countries that want to move towards e-Democracy is the absence of a strong civil society, a theme that is reiterated by Nyirenda. Further, Nyirenda’s study corroborates the ICT paradox, in other words, “that while ICTs can be a solution to aid civil society organisations overcome their contextual bottlenecks, it is in many cases these same contextual bottlenecks that limit civil society’s ability to effectively apply technology to achieve their organizational challenges…” Thus, while one of e-Democracy’s strengths is political participation enhancement, the paradox—at least in developing countries—is that strong civil society and high levels of popular participation are the necessary preconditions of e-Democratic status.

Backhouse evaluates the role of e-participation in virtual public spheres. She situates e-participation within a broader discussion of the public sphere, highlighting the possibilities for robust virtual public spheres. Backhouse notes the complexities involved in creating venues for e-participation. She notes that quality participation requires significant attention to their design and support. Moreover, these venues can work in concert with more traditional forms of participation. As noted with the discussion of AmericaSpeaks, this can deepen participatory engagement in many ways.

As pointed out in the first chapter, e-Government can be a catalytic force for social capital, which could help spur the transition to e-Democracy. The chapters in the third section by Burbridge, Das and DiRienzo, Tudor, Popa and Blidsel, Loutzenhsier, and Loukis, Xenakis, and Tseperli examine the many challenges that many countries face as they try to navigate from offline to online government and eventually, it is hoped, to e-Democracy.

Burbridge et al using a cross-country study of 140 countries examines the impact of trust on the level of e-Government, showing that, even controlling for level of development and other socio-economic factors, trust was a major factor determining level of e-Government. They argue that trust has a significant impact on the use of e-government. Drawing upon survey data, they develop a rich analysis of the role trust plays in encouraging e-government initiatives.

Tudor, Popa and Blidsel point out the challenges facing Romania as it moves toward e-government. Romanian civil society is still a work in progress and efforts to ensure transparency and participation are ongoing. This raises several issues for local public administration and efforts to implement e-Government.

Tudor, et al find that e-Government in local public administration is an evolving process. Transitioning from totalitarian regime to democratic government and without a well-established civil society, Romania continues to seek ways to incorporate ICT into the governance structure. E-disclosure is an important component of the successful transition to e-government in this regard. Transparency, accountability and resource allocation present significant challenges to overcome in this transition.

Loutzenhsier views e-Government through the lens of succession planning in public administration. She argues that succession planning is a good tool for helping to bridge the digital divide. It can also
help with global networking and in shifting the emphasis more towards citizen-driven service delivery. In the case of the latter, e-Government can be used to help strengthen civil society.

Loukis, Xenakis, and Tseperli look at the use of Computer Supported Argument Visualization (CSAV) techniques as a way to overcome barriers to e-Participation. They provide a detailed look at the process and its implications for e-participation. They use a pilot project by the Greek Parliament to evaluate how such technology can advance e-participation. They find CSAV can enhance e-participation efforts in a number of ways. This technology allows participants to see the core content of legislation in ways that make complex issues more comprehensible to lay citizens. They conclude that CSAV technology can increase the quantity and quality of participatory efforts both online and offline.

REFERENCES


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