Chapter V

Digital Public Sphere: Rhetoric or Reality

Seung-Yong Rho, Seoul Women’s University, Korea

Abstract

In the Information Age, simultaneous citizen-government interaction through information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as e-mails, digital policy forums through bulletin boards, and real-time digital chat has already happened. Digital deliberation is one of examples for improving citizen-government interaction through ICTs. In this context, it is important to evaluate current practice of digital deliberation. That is, can we consider current practice of digital deliberation as authentic citizen participation in governance process? Based on the analysis of the current practice of digital deliberation through ICTs, unlike the expectation, this chapter argues that there was a lack of active participation by citizens as well as public servants. The policies should be made by the will of citizens in democratic governance but current practice of digital deliberation did not support this statement. Citizens’ unawareness of digital deliberation, citizens’ lack of active participation, and public officials’ less positive perspective on the digital deliberation make current digital deliberation unconstructive. These practices have violated the principle of democracy, which is government by the people. The citizens’ strong will of active digital deliberation is a key to the success of digital deliberation in the democratic governance. In addition, public officials’ positive views and strong support on the digital deliberation are important to make digital deliberation effective.
Introduction

Citizen-government interaction is essential in a democratic society and for democratic governance. It, however, has not yet been well developed and structured in the literature. Some researchers in fields such as psychology, communication, political science, and public administration have provided grounds for developing a model of citizen-government interaction.

In the field of psychology, Riva, Giuseppe, and Galimberti (1997, pp. 141-158) identify two structural characteristics of interaction as the copresence of utterances and cognition. While the former occurs when one party communicates with the other party, the latter occurs through both parties’ coordination of their action and their availability to one another. Communication is a cooperative action in which one party must receive a response from the other party in order to acquire what has been transmitted and understood. Then, they (Riva et al., 1997, pp. 147-148) suggest two models. One is the parcel-pose model in which one party passes information to the other party. In an information age, however, they argue that this model is replaced by the other model, the model of communicative interactionism, in which every communication is intended for both sender and receiver in a “double listening” process. The sender is continuously comparing what the sender has sent with the return communication.

Also, in the area of communication, much research has focused on the interaction among parties. That is, according to traditional communication theory research, there are two types of communication mechanisms: interpersonal and mass media mechanisms. While the interpersonal mechanism involves a face-to-face exchange between two or more individuals, mass media mechanisms transmitting messages, such as radio, television, and newspapers, enable one or a few individuals to reach an audience of many. In the digital age, however, research has paid attention to computer mediated communication, indicating the duality of interactivity and importance of the roles among parties, including sender and receiver (Rice, 1987, pp. 65-94). One of the important arguments in the field of computer mediated communication is that it involves the willing participation of parties, for instance, citizens and governments, in a communication process.

In contrast to research based on psychology and communication which have not incorporated the concepts of citizen, citizenship, government, and bureaucracy into their communication models, researchers in political science and public administration have considered the previous notions and the context of interactivity essential. In particular, in the fields of political science and public administration, citizen-government interaction has been mainly studied from the perspective of citizen participation.1

Scholars have pursued questions about citizen participation in groups, social activities, and political activities (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). Many researchers in the area of political science and public administration have argued that citizen participation is essential in democratic governance since it helps build consensus in policies, enhances legitimacy in administrative decision making, and restores trust in government (Berman, 1997, pp. 105-112; Creighton, 1981; King & Stivers, 1998, pp. 3-18; Langton, 1978a, pp. 1-12; Sanoff, 2000). For example, social capital theorists consider citizen participation as the essence of the health of democracy. In addition, as O’Connell (1999) argues in Civil Society: The Underpinnings of American Democracy, effective citizenship makes government effective.

Copyright © 2007, Idea Group Inc. Copying or distributing in print or electronic forms without written permission of Idea Group Inc. is prohibited.
E-Government Concept: A Holistic and Eclectic Framework
www.igi-global.com/chapter/government-concept-holistic-eclectic-framework/77089?camid=4v1a