Chapter 4

Habermas, Networks and Virtual Public Spheres: A Blended Deliberative Model from Developing Countries

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines Habermas’ conceptualization of the public sphere as it applies to a non-Western context, in Bangalore City, India. It provides examples of how Information and Communication Technologies are being used to empower ordinary citizens to participate in local governance, though deep digital divides persist. The chapter highlights problematic aspects of using technologies to promote better governance in the face of pervasive asymmetries in access to resources, power to leverage networks, and in levels of civic competencies. Drawing on the capabilities approach, it argues that there is need for a blended model of deliberative ‘e-democracy’ that does not privilege online venues and interactions, but employs technologies in strategic combinations with existing civic networks to improve governance in developing countries.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines Habermas’ conceptualization of the public sphere as it applies to a non-Western context, in Bangalore City, India, to understand how information and communication technologies are used to help ordinary citizens participate in local governance, though deep digital divides persist.
In Habermasian terms, the public sphere is seen as comprised of institutional communicative spaces that facilitate the formation of public opinion and political will, a sphere that mediates between the private domain and the realm of public authority by allowing free access and free flow of information and ideas (Habermas, 1991). With the proliferation of new media technologies, it is expected that the virtual public sphere will empower citizens to engage in effective public discourse and effect political change. The concept of deliberative democracy follows the notion of the public sphere and is rooted in Habermas’ idea of communicative rationality. Deliberative democracy underscores the notion of providing reasons for decisions taken and the concept of reciprocity where decision makers owe it to the people to justify their decisions. These ideas are foundational to governance, if we define governance as inclusive of the role of citizens in the policy process and how groups within a society organize to make and implement decisions through the processes of differentiation, networks, trust, diplomacy and coalition building (Rhodes, 1997).

Deliberation, reciprocity, and mutual respect are critical to civic interactions that occur within governance, particularly in situations where deep differences exist, where consensus is not likely, and people have to arrive at acceptable solutions via dialogue.

There have been many critiques of the Habermasian model of the public sphere as a civic arena of deliberation and opinion-formation (Fenton & Downing, 2003) and of deliberative democracy (Besson & Marti, 2006). The role of information and communication technologies in facilitating an online public sphere is also vigorously debated (Papacharissi, 2009). Ultimately, if we define publics as groups of people engaging with issues through discursive interactions, they can be constituted either through face-to-face interactions or through various mediated forms and in online venues. An interactional public sphere emerges when political issues become actualized through talk and other forms of civic action.

The level of complexity in examining the role of the virtual public sphere in empowering ordinary citizens increases in the context of developing countries where people are engaged in conflict and political struggle to gain access to basic resources such as clean drinking water and infrastructure such as paved streets. In addition, in most developing countries, there are many digital divides (Keniston, 2004) that limit the role of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in governance. Thus, the use of online networks as a basis for a new politics of alliance and governance, to contest the mainstream and offer alternative views and politics, becomes subject to bridging the many digital divides that currently exist.

This chapter examines these issues using ethnographic and participant observation data from two citizen initiatives in Bangalore City, India and a case study of a partnership between a not-for-profit eGovernments Foundation with city governments to provide free e-governance software, with built in information transparency requirements. It highlights the issues that are not addressed within the virtual public sphere and online deliberative democracy theories such as the normalizing and exclusion that come with designating a specific form of communication as the rational and legitimate norm, and not recognizing these spheres as venues for cultural power struggles. It examines the problematic ethical aspects of using information technologies to promote better governance in the face of pervasive asymmetries in access to resources, power to leverage networks, and in levels of civic competencies. Drawing on Sen’s (1987) capabilities approach, it argues that there is need for a blended model of deliberative ‘e-democracy’ that does not privilege online venues and interactions, but employs technologies in strategic combinations with existing civic networks to improve governance in developing countries.