Chapter 18

The Internet and Representative Democracy: A Doomed Marriage? Lessons Learned from the Downing Street E–Petition Website and the Case of the 2007 Road–Tax Petition

Giovanni Navarria
University of Westminster, UK

ABSTRACT

The chapter questions a conventional line of interpretation of the political relevance of the Internet in democratic countries: if on the one hand new communication media such as the Internet represent a positive element in the fight against the hubris of power; on the other hand, the same technologies can serve the agenda of those who want to influence popular consent in support of questionable politics and, hence, hinder the representative system in its very essence. To elucidate this point, the chapter focuses on the Road Tax online-petition that in the early months of 2007 attracted almost 2 million signatures on the UK Government e-Petition website. My argument here is that when simple and historical democratic means such as petitions are coupled with the new generation of Web technologies, the outcome might be unexpected. The road-tax petition will serve us as a blueprint of: the possibilities embedded in the use of new technologies within representative democratic systems, the challenges they pose for democracy, and their unforeseen consequences.

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INTRODUCTION

The web offers people the chance to express their views at very little cost and, as this week has shown, generate a national debate at the click of a mouse. - Tony Blair, 18 Feb. 2007

Started off as a closed niche for computer geeks in the Seventies, during the last two decades, the Internet has evolved into a complex communication network used nowadays by more than a billion people worldwide as the backbone of a broad range of activities (from communicating with peers to working; from shopping to learning; from leisure to politics). In 2001, the sociologist Manuel Castells argued that, for its persistent expansion, for its scope and reach in our society, the Internet is for the contemporary world what the printing press was for the Modern era: it is a driver of socio-economical and political changes. Paying homage to Marshall McLuhan’s work, Castells (2001) maintains that at the turn of the twenty-first century we have left what the Canadian media theorist defined the Gutenberg Galaxy and “entered a new world of communication: the Internet Galaxy.” (p. 3). Along these lines are many other scholars, politicians, and practitioners who, especially in democratic countries, consider the new communication galaxy a powerful instrument in the hands of citizens that can significantly alter the traditional role citizens play in established democratic systems.

In this chapter I challenge this line of argument. I do not deny that the Internet plays an important socio-economical and political role in advanced technological democratic societies, but, playing devil’s advocate and taking as an example Britain, a country that in the last two decades has witnessed a constant growth in the use of Information Technologies, I argue that the effects of new communication media on the quality of Britain’s democratic system have recently produced some ambiguous results that deserve further analysis. Such ambiguity in fact needs to be taken into account when promoting or assessing changes in governments’ use of new technologies applied to the democratic process. In this new era of communicative abundance, the question permanently seeking for answer is whether or not the Internet is good for democracy, or, in its more negative form, whether or not the Internet is in fact the end of it?

To elucidate my argument and clarify the quality of the ambivalent relationship between democracy and new communication media, the first part of the chapter looks at the meaning of the term democracy in the twenty-first century. The remaining part instead analyses a recent experiment of the British government with an Internet-based petitioning tool used to improve the quality of the relationship between the government and its citizens: the Road-tax petition, that is the case-study at the core of this chapter, was published in November 2006 in the UK Government newly launched electronic-Petition website and collected almost 2 million signatures. The pressure generated from that petition in the early months of 2007 played an important role in the Government’s decision (one year later) to postpone sine die its plans for a new road tax. Focusing on that particular petition, in this chapter, I sustain that in general to increase citizens’ political involvement in the complex mechanism of a representative system, that is to allow citizens to continuously scrutinize the use (and abuse) of power, assess their representatives’ work, and openly question the policies they advocate, the use of the Internet in government’s matters can guarantee a certain degree of transparency and accountability, which are indeed fundamental elements of a healthy democratic system. However, when simple and historical political tools such as petitions are coupled with the new generation of Web technologies, those referred in the literature as Web 2.0, the outcome can often result in an unexpected strong challenge of the political status quo. Therefore, I argue in this chapter, one important lesson to be drawn from experiments such as the British government e-petition website.