

Technological Reinforcements: The Illusion of IT and Strong Democracy

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Abstract

From the late nineteenth century, professional organizations have developed, in part, to manage the problems caused by information overload. Professionalisation has also taken hold of government, which has had a negative influence on political participation. Rather than see information technology as an exacerbation of this trend, some academics believe that information technology can be used to rejuvenate political debate and participation. This paper illustrates the problems that information technology must overcome before it can be considered a useful tool in furthering the aims of democratic institutions. In its current form, information technology re-inforces existing institutions, and does not represent the revolution that many portray.

Introduction

Despite Francis Fukuyama's argument that liberal democracy represents the final form in the evolution of government, academics and political pundits worry about declining turnout rates for elections and the widespread cynicism of the electorate in much of the Westernised world. A summary of these concerns can be found in Robert Putnam's work on social capital. Putnam argues that the decline in political participation and trust between citizens ("civic engagement and social connectedness,") can be encapsulated in one phenomenon: more people are bowling, but fewer people are joining bowling clubs. People are becoming disengaged from society—more atomised. While Putnam acknowledges that people continue to show concern for larger issues, that concern is not transformed into community action. Rather than volunteer with a charitable organisation, people would rather write a cheque. (Putnam 1995) This retrenchment and isolation have led fewer people to participate in the political sphere as well, which in some academics' view, raises the spectre of democracy's decreased performance and the possibility of *de facto* authoritarian governments.

One immediate reaction to these perils is to argue for more direct democracy. In a throwback to the ideals of Greece, proponents argue that people are isolated from their political institutions because they no longer possess a stake in its operation. While popular notions of direct democracy may conjure images of grafting plebiscites and referenda onto the existing system, many proponents of greater participation hold a more nuanced and realistic view. The issue is not direct participation in the decision-making process, but the feeling that one's input matters. As David Held points out in his discussion of *participatory democracy*, thinkers who argue for greater participation in the political system cite the many ways in which people have been systematically restricted from actively participating in civil life. (Held 1987)

Participation, of course, requires information, and academic proponents of the democratic ideal also contend that people must be taught how to participate in government, and second, be given relatively unbiased information so that they can use their judgement to make decisions which best assist either themselves or society. These two ideals are summarised in Robert Dahl's final conclusions as to how governments might evolve. He argues that the *demos* (the body of citizens who are determined to be eligible to vote) should "simultaneously de-

termine the general ends of policy and set some broad limits on acceptable means. Typically, too, citizens would narrow these limits further by their activities between elections—lobbying, for example". In making this argument, Dahl contends that governments (and by extension, citizens) hold certain obligations:

- to ensure information about the political agenda, appropriate in level and form, and accurately reflecting the best knowledge available, is easily and universally accessible to all citizens.
- to create easily available opportunities that are universally accessible to all citizens,
- to influence the subjects on which the information above is available,
- and to participate in a relevant way in political discussions. (Dahl 1989)

As Dahl acknowledges, democracy is unlikely to reach these ideals, yet they remain the benchmarks against which democratic institutions should be measured.

Benjamin Barber, another proponent of participatory democracy, also criticises the existing liberal democratic values as ones that rely on manipulation as opposed to any kind of engagement with the *demos*. He argues that legislatures and courts use "penal sanctions and juridical incentives" to control behaviour by manipulating people's self-interest. The so-called "thin democracy" that exists today must be replaced, Barber contends, with a "strong democracy," which relies on a "participatory mode where conflict is resolved in the absence of an independent ground through a participatory process of ongoing, proximate self-legislation and the creation of a political community capable of transforming dependent, private individuals into free citizens and partial and private interests into public goods." (Barber 1984: 132) Barber's answer, then, is similar to the one advocated by Dahl. People must become more engaged in public policy development. This view should not be confused with the idea that people must be directly involved in governing; rather, it represents a more academic ideal of enlightened debate leading to policy direction.

Given the need for public dialogue, it's easy to see why some thinkers in this field look to Jürgen Habermas and his discussion of the public sphere. Habermas's public sphere is composed of groups who hold some form of political power—in the eighteenth century, for instance, the bourgeoisie occupied the public sphere, where they debated political issues. The public sphere slowly expanded with the movement for universal suffrage, but with the growth of bureaucracy and the media, differences between public and private spheres slowly collapsed, shifting the focus from discussion to consumerism. (Malina 1999) Those who believe in participatory democracy seem to believe in some kind of idealised public sphere—at least a place where the *demos* can have influence and conduct some form of debate—and vigorously argue that it needs to be re-established.

Yet this ideal is challenged significantly as industrialised ideals of specialisation have moved into government infrastructure. Western democracies are run less by elected politicians, and more by the professional bureaucrats who have been trained

to understand the functioning of government. As the public sector has become more complex, bureaucracies have become more specialised, filled with experts from various fields. This specialised knowledge underlies the professionals' rationale to control, as they rely heavily upon one of the primary characteristics of modernity—the *problem of volume*. The vast number of facts accumulated and stored over the past century hinders citizens from acquiring enough knowledge to make as informed a decision as a specialist in any particular field. And as sociologists like Magali Larson argue, professions tend to use this specialised knowledge to monopolise information. In this view, the professionals monopolise knowledge so that they can make it a more valuable commodity. (Larson 1977) In the political world, this monopolisation of information possesses an even greater function, as it lies at the very foundation of political power. One need only look at how often the political establishment relies on the professional judgement of economists to justify particular policy actions in defence of a particular ideology.

Professionalism, in fact, can very easily be identified with the principle of representative democracy. With the shift of democracy from the city-state to the nation, the sheer scale of democracy means that some specialisation is necessary. Citizens can indicate general preferences, but to expect them to fully participate in the running of government makes about as much sense in a modern society as to expect people to participate in every stage of clothing and feeding themselves. While self-sufficiency is a laudable goal, and one that some idealists still argue for (as seen in modern-day back-to-the-land movements), it remains unrealistic given the scale of society.

Dahl acknowledges the necessity of an elite body dedicated to the function of government policy: "The theoretical limit of effective political participation, even with modern electronic means of communication, rapidly diminishes with scale" (Dahl 1989) Yet, despite his prediction that effective political participation is diminished in a large society, he still hopes that society will not descend into a form of quasi-guardianship (in some Platonic sense) in which the *demos* accepts the decisions of their political overlords. The *demos* must, Dahl argues, exert proper control over the direction of policy, even if they don't participate in its day-to-day running. One way to create the necessary two-way interaction between government and the *demos* is through technology. In Dahl's idealised society, information technology could allow society to form a series of "minipopuloues" (groups from different parts of the country) which could deliberate for a year on various issues and advise the government on the general direction of policy. Communications would make it easier for these minipouloues to reflect society, as members could be selected from various geographical locations. In a sense, Aristotle's dictum that democracy's boundaries should be no more than a day's walking distance are expanded to a global level.

Given the importance of participation and education—as well as the computer's ability to create, distribute, and process information—it's understandable that so many inside and outside of the academy have been lured by the hype surrounding information technology. New technologies ease the costs of communications and could create a virtual public space for debate. Technology, on a theoretical level, can not only reduce the elite's ability to control information (as lower costs mean others can broadcast their message), but also can break down traditional forms of discrimination because of the ease with which people can hide their true identities. For these reasons, it has been difficult for some to resist viewing technology as a panacea for many of today's political problems. Yet, despite the

many potential benefits of information technology, it remains clear that the spread of edemocracy has done little, and probably will do little in the future, to fundamentally change our democratic institutions. While information technology can (and in some ways does) alter the way people in society interact, it tends to reinforce existing divisions in society as opposed to breaking them down. The problem (as opposed to the solution) is information. While computers can help to create, distribute, and process information, the problem for democracy remains that those people creating the tools that allow computers to accomplish these goals are designing to support the existing order—whether that be to reinforce the government's message or to help corporations shape public opinion to further the profit motive. Notions of communities of informed citizens changing the direction of government are false ones.

Faux Cyber Communities

The Internet, in its current form, often elicits the ideal of community. Supporters of digital democracy often reach for metaphors of the global community, where one can go online for a few hours and join a group of citizens from a political body of any size, whether local, national, or international. In this ideal, the cyber-citizen seeks information from any source and then debates their ideas with any person. Yet before one can evaluate the role of information technology in the democratic process, one must examine the limitation of computing technology in creating these communities. Many researchers in this area ignore the research being conducted in group decision support systems (GDSS), especially ones in a distributed environment such as the Internet. Yet, the research results from this literature apply to the research on information technology's role in the democratic process. Two conclusions are important to highlight.

First, for people to successfully collaborate in a distributed environment, the technology must be specifically designed to fit the task. While some researchers of democratic theory and information technology have examined the role of static web sites, chat rooms, and newsgroups in fostering social capital, GDSS researchers have long since dismissed these tools for group decisions. They are tools for communication, but they are ill-suited to generating ideas or making decisions.

Many researchers have identified different types of group activity, such as generating, choosing, and negotiating ideas (DeSanctis and Gallupe 1987; Olaniran 1994). Each of these tasks requires unique skills and may involve different types of interaction, some of which may be more or less possible in a virtual environment. For instance, in an electronic meeting room, computers can be used as an electronic chalkboard, keeping track of votes and people's opinions. The visual reminder of people's opinions can help to focus discussion. At the same time, software might allow group members to rank preferences, but might not be sophisticated enough to record opinions in a useful way. Perhaps one group member is relatively indifferent or undecided about two of the options, but is strongly opposed to a third. A simple ranking structure does not accurately reflect this member's opinions. As well, if conflict arises, these same tools do little to alleviate the situation. In fact, using a vote to achieve consensus is an ineffective means of conflict resolution, especially if a minority is marginalised in the process. This can be especially problematic in an anonymous computing situation, as members of the group may be unaware that certain members feel they are being marginalised. Before one can judge the suitability of certain tools, one must examine the way people interact with each other, not just at the goals of their interaction. Process issues include not only conflict, but also topics like

trust and leadership. These process issues are especially prevalent in a virtual setting, as one cannot mix virtual interaction with traditional face-to-face contact.

What becomes important, then, is that someone designs the tools that foster trust, generate ideas, sort through that information, and help to create some form of consensus. Without these tools, political leaders are left with an unfocused cacophony which generates more confusion than policy.

Second, social interaction in a virtual environment is limiting, which can create mistrust and frustration. This problem evolves because, as Riva and Galimberti state, in “most CMC [computer-mediated communication] environments, and in asynchronous CMC environments especially, two typical features of face-to-face conversation are missing...: (a) the collaborative commitment of participants and the co-formulation of the message and (b) the feedback that allows the social meaning of the message to be processed immediately.” (Riva and Galimberti, 1998) Riva and Galimberti are suggesting that people feel more emotionally distant from each other. This distance allows people to more easily objectify others—in a sense, de-humanising them. The lack of “feedback” enhances this problem, as virtual communications are much poorer at conveying the emotions behind ideas. People rely on multiple modes of communication in face-to-face conversation, such as paraverbal (tone of voice, inflection, voice volume) and nonverbal (eye movement, facial expression, hand gestures, and other body language) cues. (Warkentin, Sayeed and Hightower, 1997) In a text environment like e-mail, the loss of something as simple as a pause affects how someone may interpret text. In an audio-only environment, those pauses may appear, but a grimace or furled brow may not appear. The voice speaks, but people can’t hear the entire message. Different GDSSs contain different levels of media richness (the number of senses that can be used to interpret a message), all of which interfere with a person’s ability to correctly interpret another person’s intent. This restriction of media richness is referred to as a *bandwidth problem*—the richer the medium, the greater the amount of space required to transmit and store the necessary data. As compression and transmission technologies advance, it seems likely that these problems could be overcome; however, ideally, the role of GDSS lies in managing information and not just replicating a face-to-face meeting. Given the fact that information technology in its present form is media poor, people find it more difficult to get to know one another. Without that crucial bond of trust—critical in community creation—it seems unlikely that information technology could be used for people to gather on an *ad hoc* basis.

Given this information, Anthony Wilhelm’s conclusion that Usenet and other forms of online discussion more often lead to superficial evaluation of issues, even when political content is discussed, makes sense:

The sorts of virtual political forums that were analysed do not provide viable sounding boards for signalling and thematising issues to be processed by the political system. They neither cultivate nor iterate a public opinion that is considered judgement of persons whose preferences have been contested in the course of a public gathering; at least there is insufficient evidence to support such a salubrious picture of the political public sphere in cyberspace. (Wilhelm 1999: 175)

Usenet possesses the potential for political exchange, since, according to Wilhelm, it can be used to write political messages

of substance exchanged at length, it can allow the opportunity to reflect on message as well as ongoing debate, and it can be processed interactively, with opinion tested against arguments. Yet, this potential is not realised in practice, as Usenet does not guarantee equal participation nor a vigorous exchange of ideas.

Theoretically, nothing prevents someone from developing an appropriate system to guide participation. Given the open-source movement which sees programmers volunteer their time so that software can be produced according to the standards of a community not composed of government or business, it seems that the idealists may have some hope. Yet, even if a group with the requisite knowledge for designing an appropriate system of political exchange existed (such as the group that developed the Minnesota *edemocracy* site), would there be widespread acceptance and use without government or private backing? Also, as Stephen Coleman argues, one problem of online discussion is the fact that “techies” tend to take control of discussion. Their priority as programmers isn’t the quality of discussion, but to enable users to reach information. (Coleman 1999) The question of who designs these systems and whether these so-called cybercommunities remain inclusive is the next question that must be explored.

Information Devolution

Whether an academic agrees that information technology can create community and public space, there seems to be greater consensus around the potential role of ubiquitous information. Many argue that the Internet has introduced a new age of cheap information exchange with as profound an impact on the spread of knowledge as Gutenberg’s printing press. Not only is this information easy and cheap to reproduce, it remains (for the moment) difficult to censor. Some have gone so far as to make the connection between the fall of communism in Eastern Europe and Russia and the rise of information technology, while others point to a more realistic example of the Chiapas movement and their ability to publicise their cause. (Ferdinand 2000) Neither academics nor government agencies are immune from hyperbole when discussing the role of information and communication technology (ICT) in society. Articles and action plans declare that the spread of information technology is as important as the Industrial Revolution in transforming society. Rather than see information technology and the spread of so-called “instant communication” as a nuance in the existing system, many researchers see it as playing a fundamental role in altering the way we see society.

To redefine the debate around ICTs, Bruce Bimber argues that while information technology is a variable of democratic communication, it should be subsumed into the larger issue of information:

A useful way to conceptualize what is happening in the contemporary period, then, is in terms of changes in those features of information and the likely responses by systems of organizations and institutions adapted to an earlier information environment. Because the cost and accessibility of information are changing dramatically, for technological reasons, systems of organizations whose historical resource allocations and structure are adaptations to higher information costs may also change. (Bimber, 2000: 332)

As computers become indistinguishable from other forms of media with convergence, Bimber argues, it will become less important to analyse information technology or the Internet.

Instead, one needs to look at the role of inexpensive information exchange on democratic societies. The word “inexpensive” is important in this debate over information, as cost represents just as important a factor as the quantity of information and the speed at which that information can travel. The supposed “free” information exchange can create a deluge of data from many sources, supposedly uncontrolled by the gate-keeping media. From the spread of information and increased dialogue between citizens, democratic society is supposed to flourish.

Of course, thinkers who believe that the information “revolution” will lead to a more solid democratic process acknowledge some difficulties. Authors who focus on the role of ubiquitous information in society focus on the improvements to technology that are required to create the right kind of dialogue. One common complaint in the literature, for instance, is that government Web sites usually promote one-way dialogue—a way for the government to spread its message without being altered by the media—but don’t promote interaction between government and citizen (or even between citizens). In his report to the OECD, Roberto Gualtieri reported that egovernment activity had done very little to enhance democratic values or transparency in government. While information technology had been used to improve the quality of existing services, very little had been done to enhance the democratic process. (Gualtieri 1999) In fact, according to Elisabeth Richard, governments have even failed to go as far as the private sector in gathering opinion and using it to formulate future direction. Richard argues that governments need to adopt policies already in use in the private sector for managing consumer expectations as well as the masses of information that can be produced via the Internet. Governments, in her estimation, need to develop more “mass listening tools” to sift through information presented by the public. This could include setting up newsgroups that would allow citizens to discuss policies associated with particular departments. (Richard 2000)

Yet these arguments encounter two problems. First, ICTs have not led to the revolution that some authors claim is possible. And second, massive amounts of information often create as many problems as they are intended to solve.

Certainly, the proliferation of ICTs means that citizens and consumers are offered an ever-increasing variety of information that is “instantly” accessible—as instant as it takes to find information from a reliable source. Yet how profound is this transformation? If one analyses the effects of the Industrial Revolution, one can list a series of tangible societal shifts—urbanisation, increased wealth, and perhaps most important, a shift in power from the aristocracy to the bourgeoisie. What are the tangible shifts created by information technology? Futurists insist that it will shift the way people work, as for years they have argued that people will work from home. Others argue we will find ourselves involved in cybercommunities. Certainly, ICTs have allowed people to access work at home and have shifted the way information is presented. Yet these transformations are not revolutionary, only evolutionary. ICTs have increased the pace of change, but not the structures of society. And while ICTs can potentially revolutionise society, they may never reach that promise because the two bodies with the resources to tackle the technical difficulties are the very ones that want to ensure the status quo—government and industry.

Government bodies, while they often discuss information technology as a revolution, more accurately reflect the true nature of this information “revolution.” To date, it has represented a shift of economic priorities as opposed to a revolution of society. This argument is reflected in the European Union’s eEurope initiative, a development that will supposedly trans-

form Europe into a bastion of information technology, with every citizen given equal access and opportunity online. But, what this initiative represents in reality is merely an extension of existing power relationships and a building up of new infrastructure programmes. The citizen’s relationship with government, with employers, and even with other people will not radically shift. For example, to measure European government’s shift towards egovernment, the EU has adopted a four-point scale (as adopted from the original Dutch government convention):

Stage 1. Information: online information about public services.

Stage 2. Interaction: downloading of forms.

Stage 3. Two-way interaction: processing of forms, including authentication.

Stage 4. Transaction: case handling; decision and delivery (payment). (Council of the European Union Commission of the European Communities, 2001)

Stage 3 is particularly telling. Rather than consider two-way interaction as a way for citizens to interact with their government, the example given is only a digitisation of existing forms of interaction. While these stages represent a streamlining of government, they certainly aren’t revolutionary.

Of course, ICTs have changed some aspects of society that have a profound effect on democracy, but these changes haven’t been positive. Manuel Castells, in his tome on the shifting realities caused by ICT, successfully argues that ICTs have transformed the way governments interact with society. His analysis predates the Internet, and in this way, encompasses more than just a cursory look at one specific phenomenon of the information “revolution.” Politics has shifted away from a focus on discourse towards focus on image. As Castells demonstrates, the tenor of a debate has become more important than the debate itself. He exemplifies this point with American president Bill Clinton’s attempt to reform health care, which were blocked not because the public understood the contents of the bill, but because the media coverage was generally negative. In addition to reduced discourse, the speed at which information passes around the world reduces even more the idea of “slow deliberation” (decisions by definition in a democracy are not supposed to be efficient). As Castells states: “Media politics is not all politics, but all politics must go through the media to affect decision-making. So doing, *politics is fundamentally framed, in its substance, organization, process, and leadership, by the inherent logic of the media system, particularly by the new electronic media.*” (Castells 1997: 317) Given this argument, it seems that information technology makes proper political discourse less likely.

While technology may be viewed as a useful tool in disseminating information, it alone cannot solve the problems outlined by academics and lay people. Information may be the solution, but it also becomes a part of the problem. First, ICTs unleash a massive amount of information on the public, which must be categorised and offered in manageable form, else it simply overwhelms the citizen. As Beth Noveck rightly points out, the Internet threatens to bury the user in irrelevant information (Noveck 2000). The problem of information overload makes corporate influence particularly acute, as search engine providers like Yahoo! and AltaVista have enormous power to guide users to particular information. In the past, some search engines have not indicated which advertiser had paid to ensure that their Web site receives top billing based on particular search terms. As well, to believe that members of the *demos* are going to actively search out political information with any greater frequency seems difficult to believe. Certainly, the way

organisations transfer information has changed; certainly, forms of protest and sharing information have changed radically. But, in the Western world at least, this exchange of information is still generally controlled by the organisations that are capable of sorting the information and presenting it to the public. As Castells argues, the organisation that is currently trusted is the media when it comes to political content; the media possess kind of legitimising role in the political process. And given the deluge of information with which people need to contend on the Internet, one finds that the trust of certain media continues, as Noveck claims, to the Internet: “We depend on familiar and accepted media brands but also on unaccountable, commercialised search tools to sort information and make it meaningful.” (Noveck 2000: 24)

Ironically, some people view government participation in various Internet initiatives as the answer to corporate influence over the direction and form of discussion online. As Tsagarousianou, Tambini, and Bryan argue, governments must be the body to step in to ensure that the Internet and its development are advanced in the public interest. (Tsagarousianou, Tambini, and Bryan 1998) From one perspective, this desire for the government to take charge of stimulating democracy makes sense, as the public sector represents the only body large enough to implement a digital-democracy initiative on any scale. While a national body might allow development to occur on a local level, a national body would still be important to co-ordinate various organisations and ensure equality of access. Yet given the general distrust of the government, would any system implemented by government be viewed by the general public as anything more than a public relations exercise, no matter what the intent? And given the government’s role in using the Internet to present its own message, is it likely that it will use the Internet to increase the avenues of participation?

Conclusion

This paper has focused primarily on the technical difficulties presented by ICTs in creating community and “strong democracy”; yet other problems remain. The serious concern regarding the increasing digital divide is well-documented and relatively well-defined. The division between IT rich and poor involves not only computer technology and Internet access, but more importantly literacy, as schools in demographically better-off neighbourhoods are able to supply their children with a better education in technology. Many studies have shown that socio-economic status affects information technology use and understanding. (Wilhelm 2000; Lekhi 2000) Yet focusing on the digital divide seems to be a rather short-term view of the problem. While it remains impossible to speculate on the way this divide will narrow over the future, it seems reasonable to suggest that the computer could become as ubiquitous as any other piece of communication equipment. Certainly, increasing access for the poorer members of society remains an extremely important goal, one that governments seem to take seriously, even if only out of concern for the economic productivity of their citizens.

Rather than examine the short-term problem of access, one needs to analyse whether ICTs provide a tool for citizens to influence government. Given the limitations of technology and those who control its advancement, it’s difficult to see how this can be. As the Internet becomes increasingly commercialised and just another forum for the dominant media, it seems clear that ICTs offer little hope of increasing social capital. Given the deluge of information created by the Internet, I think it clear that it will be difficult to give communities the room they require to thrive.

One shouldn’t, however, become pessimistic about the use of the Internet. Corporate domination of the Internet will never completely occur, just as society has never managed to stamp out illegal activity. ICTs will be used as a tool of democracy, if only as a communication device for local groups. Yet, while one can argue that ICTs have helped these groups to make real changes in society, the fact remains that those on the periphery will remain just as marginalized. While organisations may use ICTs to exchange information and improve ways to challenge the government, those in government and business will also possess the same tools, and will arguably have the resources to better use them. Certainly, some people will point to file-sharing utilities and argue that the neither business nor government can control or regulate the Internet. Yet these examples, as important as they may appear, are small. The Internet, after all, has a number of centralised points that can be used to install more control. On a hardware level, Microsoft is currently developing its Palladium system, which would require digital signatures for all software, a move which could have profound implications for software not authorised by a centralised body.

Information technology has spread information, but it cannot be expected to work as a source of positive political change. Information technology is a communication tool that will serve the purpose of its designers—those designers, for the most part, have little interest in creating the kind of dialogue that proponents of participatory democracy consider important.

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