

Chapter 61

Trolls Just Want To Have Fun: Electronic Aggression within the Context of e-Participation and Other Online Political Behaviour in the United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

Over the last two decades, public confidence and trust in Government has declined visibly in several Western liberal democracies owing to a distinct lack of opportunities for citizen participation in political processes; and has instead given way instead to disillusionment with current political institutions, actors, and practices. The rise of the Internet as a global communications medium and the advent of digital platforms has opened up huge opportunities and raised new challenges for public institutions and agencies, with digital technology creating new forms of community; empowering citizens and reforming existing power structures in a way that has rendered obsolete or inappropriate many of the tools and processes of traditional democratic politics. Through an analysis of the No. 10 Downing Street ePetitions Initiative based in the United Kingdom, this article seeks to engage with issues related to the innovative use of network technology by Government to involve citizens in policy processes within existing democratic frameworks in order to improve administration, to reform democratic processes, and to renew citizen trust in institutions of governance. In particular, the work seeks to examine whether the application of the new Information and Communication Technologies to participatory democracy in the Government 2.0 era would eventually lead to radical transformations in government functioning, policymaking, and the body politic, or merely to modest, unspectacular political reform and to the emergence of technology-based, obsessive-compulsive pathologies and Internet-based trolling behaviours amongst individuals in society.

1. INTRODUCTION

During the last two decades, there has been increased questioning of traditional democratic politics in Western liberal democracies, largely due to a decline in and a lack of opportunity for

public participation in these processes. Such concerns are largely thought to be embodied in (amongst other phenomena) low voter turnout during elections; a trend particularly noticeable amongst young people where only half of those eligible to vote actually do so (The Electoral

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Commission Report, 2005). This is especially worrying and problematic for governments, as it speaks of growing political apathy and a broader, more general disillusionment with current political institutions, actors and practices. Whilst it is impossible to comprehensively untangle all the reasons for the decline in civic participation in these countries, there is little doubt that many citizens feel distanced from any sense of political relevance or power, often under the impression that not only will their votes and individual voices be drowned out in the clamour of the crowd, but that the rules which govern their daily lives are drawn up by politicians and bureaucrats whom they will never meet and who are usually extremely difficult to contact (Eggers, 2005).

Leading commentators have described the political processes and institutions integral to Western democracies as undergoing what has been variously described as ‘a crisis of legitimacy’, a ‘credibility crisis’ or a ‘crisis of democracy’ (cf. Habermas, 1985, Archibugi & Held, 1995), and are fast reaching agreement that the fundamental flaw lies in traditional decision-making practices which are, in their current form, often democratically inadequate as they fail to provide extensive and relatively equal opportunities for citizens, communities and groups to contribute towards the shaping of decision-making agendas (Sclove 1995). The focus of discourse and scholarly activity, both in academic and policy circles, has thus gradually shifted away from a more centralised, top-down conception of ‘government’ – those formal institutions and processes which operate at the level of the nation state to maintain public order and facilitate collective action (Stoker, 1998) – towards the notions of ‘governance’, an idea which, while traditionally a synonym for government, has been captured in recent theoretical work as signifying ‘a change in the meaning of government referring to a new process of governing; or a changed condition of ordered rule; or the new method by which society is governed’ (Rhodes, 1996: 652).

Governance is thus seen to be ultimately concerned with crafting the conditions for ordered rule and collective action, or ‘the creation of a structure or an order which cannot be externally imposed, but which is the result of the interaction of a multiplicity of governing and each other influencing actors’ (Kooiman & Van Vliet, 1993: 64), and is thus a conceptual way of capturing shifts in the character of political rule which has been stretched to encompass a range of different transformations including an emphasis on drawing citizens and communities into the process of collaborative participation in political processes and the creation of new forms of governable subjects (Newman, 2005).

This article aims to assess, through the use of a relevant exploratory case study, whether the innovative use of network technology (in particular the Internet and its associated applications) in the Government 2.0 era would, in attempting to involve citizens in policy processes within existing democratic frameworks, eventually lead to radical transformations in government functioning, policymaking, and the *body politic*, or merely to modest political reform and to the emergence of obsessive-compulsive technology-based pathologies and Internet-based addictions amongst individuals in society. In doing so, it seeks to explore the factors, particularly those rooted in a country’s legal and institutional foundations, that might hinder or enable the successful implementation of e-consultation projects at different levels of government and develop a set of recommendations for overcoming any barriers encountered. The main idea behind Government 2.0 is participation by citizens, through the use of Web 2.0 Technologies, a term referring to the collection of social media through which individuals are active participants in creating, organizing, editing, combining, sharing, commenting, and rating Web content as well as forming a social network through interacting and linking to each other.

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