“YouTube Debate”: A New Era of Internetized Television Politics?

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ABSTRACT

The convergence of television with Internet technologies has renewed the discussion about a new era of political communication. The adoption of Internet communication regulations in television programs has created a new hybrid model of “Internetized Television.” This hybrid model aims to reverse the passivity of television democracy, supporting a more active political participation by citizens. In this paper, an extensive empirical study of certain variables relating to participation in internetized television was conducted, focusing, in particular, on the impact of this new medium during the 2007 national elections in Greece, when a specific broadcast was aired on TV, namely the “Skai-YouTube Debate.” Based on the results of the authors’ survey, an in-depth theoretical discussion of the political and communicative challenges imposed by this form of internetized television was conducted.

Keywords: Democracy, Internet, Internetized Television, Political Participation, Social Media, Television Politics, YouTube

INTRODUCTION

The role of the Internet in the cultivation of a more active citizenship is a current debate in political theory enriched lately by the widespread use of social media (Web 2.0). The Internet seems to have all the “credentials” necessary to support a model of participatory democracy. Furthermore, the incorporation of Internet technologies into television technologies is creating a new model of political communication. This hybrid model, which has emerged as a “reciprocal incursion” between traditional television and Internet technologies named “Internetized Television” (see also Fortunati, 2005, p. 27) could possibly enhance citizens’ political participation by building on the advantage of direct communication between them and politicians.

In order to empirically test the model of Internetized Television, we focus our attention on the example of the Greek national elections in September 2007, during which a private TV channel, SKAI TV, in cooperation with YouTube, introduced a new type of political debate promoted through a specific broadcast called the “Skai-YouTube Debate.” The broadcast provided citizens with the opportunity to upload
their questions to the video-sharing website “YouTube” and then address them to politicians. First, in Part I of our research, entitled the “Skai-YouTube Debate” — The broadcast analysis, the procedure of this debate is analyzed, basically including the topics covered by the questions and the age group of those who uploaded the videos. Important information regarding the participants and the topics discussed during the debates is derived from this analysis.

Second, in Part II, entitled “Participation in Internetized Television Politics (PITP),” a concrete model of variables that influence participation in Internetized television is provided and tested, with special interest in what the impact of this model is on young, future citizens. Several variables, such as age, education and Internet access, are investigated in terms of their influence on Participation in Internetized Television Politics (PITP). The survey results were obtained from a questionnaire addressed to a representative sample of 900 people from different age groups and educational backgrounds. The motivation for this research was to determine whether this hybrid-model of Internetized television is a precursor of changes in the current apolitical nature of television politics, characterized by the distance between citizens and politicians.

It should be clarified that in this paper the term “political participation” implies a multi-level procedure that does not refer only to the act of voting, which is the final yet crucial stage of the process. Political participation is closely dependent on the pre-voting process when the electorate is reaching a political decision. Based on this theoretical standpoint, the procedure of participation has herein been divided into three stages 1. First of all, citizens form their questions and claims regarding politics, secondly, they address these to politicians, and, finally, according to the answers given, they decide who they will vote for. Certainly, this procedure is more likely to be followed by a conscientious citizen who approaches politics in a critical and skeptical way.

Finally, the challenges imposed by this new model of Internetized television format in political debates are categorized into two basic arguments: a) the political challenge, which evaluates the possible transformation of TV audiences into active audience-citizens, and b) the communicative challenge that concerns the transformation of the one-dimensional, communicative model of traditional TV into the interactive model of Internetized TV.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to provide a better insight into the theoretical issues that concern our research, the literature review has been divided into three parts. First, the promising role of the Internet in political participation is analyzed and, then, the emergence and characteristics of Internetized television are commented upon. The final part of the literature review refers to the role of televised political debates, as the broadcast herein analyzed is principally a television debate.

Political Participation and the Internet

While the Internet was gaining a prominent position in the media landscape, with a gradual increase in Internet users worldwide, a multifaceted debate has emerged regarding the political role and potential of this new medium. The Internet, unlike TV, offers the possibility of personalized, direct and almost unlimited interaction, granting its users a sense of total freedom. Since this discussion has received ample academic attention (for a synopsis of this discussion, see indicatively Bimber, 2001, pp. 53-55; Norris, 2002, pp. 59-61; Oates & Gibson, 2006, pp. 1-5), our analysis will be restricted to only the issues that are directly relevant to our research.

The positive (or utopian) view emphasizes the possible contribution of the Internet and new technologies towards participatory democracy. Cyber-optimists identify in the Internet the potential to bypass the limitations and deficien-
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