

Chapter 5.1

Digital Disempowerment in a Network Society

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this article is to examine how the inequalities of participation in network society governmental systems affect the extent that individuals are empowered or disempowered within those systems. By using published data in conjunction with theories of communication, a critical secondary data analysis was conducted. This critical analysis argues that the Digital Divide involves issues concerning how democracy and democratization are related to computer-mediated communication (CMC) and its role in political communication. As the roles of CMC/ICT systems expand in political communication, existing Digital Divide gaps are likely to contribute to structural inequalities in political participation. These inequalities work against democracy and political empowerment for some

people, while at the same time producing expanded opportunities of political participation for others. This raises concerns about who benefits the most from electronic government in emerging network societies.

INTRODUCTION

As the roles of computer-mediated communication (CMC)/information and communication technology (ICT) systems expand in political communication, existing Digital Divide gaps are likely to contribute to structural inequalities in political participation. This is true for both within-nation and across-nation gaps. These inequalities work against democracy and political empowerment and produce social injustices at the same time as they produce expanded opportunities to political par-

ticipation. Rather than assuming that increasing networking of societies leads to democratization, the broader relationship between the two needs to be examined.

Our examination responds to the larger question of how the structures of advanced societies are becoming increasingly networked and the role that CMC plays in both creating new social networks and restructuring existing ones, particularly in the political arena. We first present these structures followed by a discussion of the existing global Digital Divide, in which we point out the ethical concerns raised by allowing groups who could most benefit from connectivity to remain disconnected. Finally, we raise the important point that universal access may not be enough to solve the structural inequalities created by allowing segments of the population to remain disconnected. Rather, it is important to go beyond access and ensure that technology is used to reduce structural inequalities in the best ways possible by marginalized groups. By using published data in conjunction with theories of communication, a critical secondary data analysis was conducted. In this critical analysis, we conclude by offering recommendations for electronic government analysis and research from existing data and theories.

Network Society

Jan van Dijk (2006) defines network society in terms of communication networks that shape the most important forms of organization in a society. In what we have known for decades as mass society, citizens have been informed and entertained by mass media and somewhat disconnected from people outside of their primary (e.g. family, friends) and secondary social groups (e.g. workplace). In those nations that appear to have an emergence of network society characteristics, increasing numbers of social structures involve interconnected individuals using computer networks to seek out information, relationships, and

networks of influence. In these societies, political power and politics are more about relationships among people than characteristics of individuals (van Dijk, 2006). Dimensions of geographical space are accompanied by a technological space. This space is sometimes referred to as social geography, wherein social networks rather than physical space become the basis for closeness or distance. Political systems, which traditionally have been modeled as top-down organizational charts, may be changing into polycentric systems of power in which political power is based more on network position than traditional roles (van Dijk, 2006).

The consequences of people being connected to the new communication networks of network society are becoming more significant as participation in these networks is increasingly linked to tangible benefits. Network society perspectives of social organization and communication technologies include economics as well as politics. Indeed, economic reorganization is seen historically as the main impetus for the emergence of network societies (Stalder, 2006). Globalizing trade and finance make up an informational economy with the center of the global economy as finance (Stalder, 2006). Organizations become more flexible to meet changing markets and governments where changes and discontinuities constitute a new focus. As Castells (2001) notes, the organizational changes were enabled but not caused by communication technology innovations.

Power in network society social, economic, and political contexts can be viewed more as matters of position and network relations than of material or content advantages. Power in previous paradigms like Fordism or Weberian organizational assumptions was about getting others to do one's will. In contrast, power in networks is more about flows of influence, investment, and planning (Stalder, 2006). Barney (2004) argues that "access to networks and power to determine what flows over them is a significant marker of

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