Teledemocracy

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INTRODUCTION

Up until very recent times in Western political philoso-phy, theory, science, and discourse, the words predomi-nantly used to describe the democratic pole of Aristotle's political continuum were *direct democracy*, *indirect democracy*, *social democracy*, and, in Aristotelian terms, *republic* or *representative democracy*.

The latter half of the 20th century, however, saw dra-matic changes in democracy around the world in its spread, variation in form, and in the use of the word. In fact, there have been a number of books in recent years that have discussed a wide array of models or degrees of democracy (Held, 1996; Sartori, 1987). Phrases such as *participatory democracy*, *managed democracy*, *strong democracy* (Barber, 1984), and *semidirect democracy* (Toffler & Toffler, 1994) are just some of the clusters of terms now used to define particular kinds of democracy that exist or are theorized to be better forms of it.

Also, as the 20th century drew toward a close, there was a virtual consensus among Western political scientists that a potentially dangerous schism has grown between the citizens of both representative and social democracies and their governing elites. Indicators of such are public-opinion polls that manifest an increasing discontent with the political class and politicians (usually termed *alien-ation*) and a general decline in voter turnout (albeit with occasional upticks).

Most of this dissatisfaction with, or alienation from, various forms of representative democracy is considered to be due to the growth of the influence of those who lavish large sums of money on the public's representa-tives in these political systems. Another widely perceived cause of this gap between the people and their govern-ments is the inertia of bloated, entrenched bureaucracies and their failure to acknowledge the wishes of the general public in policy implementation. Both of these phenom-ena seem to be present in all modern, industrialized, representative democracies, and they even seem to be-come manifest in the youngest, least industrialized coun-tries as well. For example, in the fall of 2004, Cerkez-Robinson (2004) reported that the turnout in the Bosnian national election had fallen precipitously because most Bosnians are tired of repeated fruitless elections.

As this complex problem in modern representative democracies seems to have become systemic, a potential technological solution has also come upon the scene. This involves the previously unimaginable proliferation of information and communications technologies of the late 20th century and early 21st century. This new and rich mixture of rapid, electronic, interactive communications has been seen by many political thinkers and actors as an excellent medium by which to close the gap between the people of representative democracies and their elected and administrative officials.

This has led to a plethora of new adjectives and letters to prefix the word *democracy*, each referring to some theoretical or experimentally tested improvement in the present and future forms and practices of both direct and/or indirect democracy using ICTs. Thus, in the past decade or so of reinventing government (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992), we have come to learn of such new ideas and ideals of democracy as *electronic democracy* (or e-democracy), *digital democracy*, *cyberdemocracy*, *e-gov-ernment*, and *teledemocracy* (Becker, 1981; this listing is far from exhaustive.)

Taken together, they demonstrate that the future of democracy around the world is in flux, that there is a broadly perceived need by those in and outside govern-ment for some changes that will ultimately benefit the general public in various aspects of governance, and that these new technologies are seen by many as part of the solution. As alluded to above, there are numerous experi-ments and projects along these lines that have been completed, many are in progress, and there are multitudes to come that probably will be a part of any such transfor-mation in the future of democracy on this planet.

BACKGROUND

In December 1981, I wrote an article for *The Futurist* that was titled "Teledemocracy: Bringing Power Back to People." I had not heard, seen, or remembered reading the word before using it, and some scholars told me that it was too vague and unclear to be of much use. Nonetheless, I have continued to use it in numerous contexts, as have some others (Arterton, 1987; Ytterstad et al., 1996).

This article will attempt to clarify how I originally employed it, how I modified it over the years to bring about greater clarification, and where it stands now and into the future. This is necessitated by the fact that others have come to either misinterpret or misrepresent the essence of the concept as it was originally conceived and since refined by myself. I will also point out how my usage of teledemocracy can be distinguished from the generic use of some other related concepts like e-government, digital democracy, and so forth. Finally, I will point out how some others are using it or a more generic term, more or less in line with my original and/or revised definition.

In the original 1981 article, I referred to the phenomenon of burgeoning citizen abstention in most democracies, which was apparent well before then (Levin, 1960). I also acknowledged a number of experiments in using interactive television and the increasing use of national referenda in some Western social democracies on major issues. In addition, I made reference to new methods of scientific deliberative polling that were proving to be successful in stimulating thoughtful survey results in lieu of conventional scientific public-opinion polling (using random-digit dialing methods), which produced a superficial, top-of-the-head, oft-cited but equally oft-disparaged public opinion.

Here is the way I defined it at first:

Teledemocracy—the term coined for electronically aided, rapid, two-way political communication—could offer the means to help educate voters on issues, to facilitate discussion of important decisions, to register instantaneous polls, and even to allow people to vote directly on public policy. (Becker, 1981, p. 6)

Some others have agreed that this was, indeed, the first usage of this term. In 1997, a thesis at a university in Germany written by Martin Hagen stated that

the oldest concept of electronic democracy is "Teledemocracy." Developed in the 1970s, it became the first widely accepted concept of electronic democracy in the 1980s. While it is impossible to trace who first coined the term "teledemocracy," it was used by Ted Becker...in the late 1970s.

A European Union report on May 31, 2001, that is on the Internet noted that the term teledemocracy was originally coined in 1981 (http://www.eucybervote.org/Reports). A Spanish Web site that also reported the results of a thorough search on the word is also in agreement on the original coinage.

As time passed and I became aware of further developments in this field, I continued to revise and clarify what I meant for teledemocracy to include that was entirely consistent with the original coinage. In 1986, in a book chapter called "Teledemocracy Emergent," I came up with what I believe to be a somewhat clearer definition:

The great difference in feeling and perception between protagonists and antagonists of teledemocracy does not stem from any problem with definition. Quite simply, teledemocracy is the use of telecommunications technology to promote, improve, and expand (a) direct, pure democratic forms such as town meetings, initiative, referendum and recall; and (b) the citizen information and feedback functions of indirect democratic forms such as republics, where the population elects various legislative and executive officials to plan, promulgate, and carry out public policy. In other words, teledemocracy would include such novel phenomena as "electronic initiatives," "electronic town meetings (ETMs)," and "electronic public hearings." (Becker, 1986, p. 264)

In essence, this was a lexical definition based on the developments in using ICTs in ever new ways to help the public become better informed, thoughtful, and active citizens so as to "generate a more democratic republic and a stronger system of direct democracy in the future" (Becker, 1986, p. 267). By implication, through the addition of the word thoughtful, the idea of two-way was expanded to include multilateral discourse among many people and to crystallize that teledemocracy was not limited to two-way TV interactions. This should have been manifested from the fact that in the televote method of scientific deliberative polling that was the major empirical basis of the concept of teledemocracy, the randomly selected respondents were encouraged to discuss the contents of the survey brochure with friends, relatives, coworkers, and family before deciding and voting (Campbell, 1974; Slaton, 1992).

Unfortunately, the ideological foes of this definition and vision (and the experimental phenomena upon which it is based and to which it often refers) are many and well placed, and do not have the same democratic values in their view of the role of the public in a representative democracy. These opponents of teledemocracy particularly entertain extremely negative views of direct democracy or more direct citizen engagement in any governmental activity. Thus, one of their ploys has been to misrepresent the definition of teledemocracy as being one in which (a) citizens are isolated in their homes to vote electronically and do not in any way deliberate together (Elshtain, 1982) and/or (b) representative democracy must be replaced by direct electronic democracy.

In his book that describes and analyzes many of the same projects conducted or discussed by Becker and others cited above, Christopher F. Arterton (1987) con-

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