

ICT and E-Democracy

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INTRODUCTION

The virtual public sphere does not exist and operate the same everywhere. Every virtual public sphere is different because each country's economic, social, political, and cultural characteristics and relations are varied. As a result, the impact of **information communication technology** (ICT) on political and social conditions will also differ from one country to another. According to the German philosopher, **Jürgen Habermas** (1989,1996), the public sphere is a domain existing outside of the private sphere of family relations, the economic sphere of business and commerce, and the governmental sphere dominated by the state. The public sphere contributes to democracy by serving as a forum for deliberation about politics and civic affairs. According to Habermas, the public sphere is marked by liberal core beliefs such as the freedoms of speech, press, assembly and communication, and "privacy rights, which are needed to ensure society's autonomy from the state" (Cohen & Arato, 1992, p. 211). Thus, the public sphere is defined as a domain of social relations that exist outside of the roles, duties and constraints established by government, the marketplace, and kinship ties.

Habermas' public sphere is both a historical description and an ideal type. Historically, what Habermas refers to as the bourgeois public sphere emerged from the 18th century Enlightenment in Europe and went into decline in the 19th century. As an ideal type, the public sphere represents an arena, absent class and other social distinctions, in which private citizens can engage in critical, reasoned discourse regarding politics and culture.

The remainder of this article is divided into three parts. In the first part, the background of virtual public spheres is discussed by presenting a broad overview of the major literature relating to ICT and democracy as well as distinguishing between virtual and public spheres and e-government. The second section deals with some significant current trends and developments in virtual public spheres. Finally, the third section discusses some future implications for off-line civil society of virtual public spheres.

BACKGROUND

ICT, in the eyes of some forward-thinking observers, (e.g., Abramson, Arterton, & Orrren, 1988; Barber, 1984; Becker

& Slaton, 2000; Cleveland, 1985; Clift, 2004; Coleman & Götze, 2001; Croff & Casaregola, 1996, 1998; Davis, Elin, & Reeher, 2002; Grossman, 1995; Negroponte, 1998; Rheingold, 1993; Saco, 2002) makes possible the type of public sphere envisioned by Habermas. According to these e-democracy advocates, ICT provides citizens with numerous opportunities to engage in the political process and take a more active role in the governance process. For example, a guide to effective public engagement notes: "A spectacular array of tools are emerging that give ordinary citizens a greater 'voice' in nearly every aspect of society today" (Lukensmeyer & Torres, 2006). Benkler (2006), for example, asserts ICT, in the form of the ubiquitous World Wide Web, encourages a more open, participatory, and activist approach to politics because it enables users to interact with other users in a way that the mass media does not and is therefore less susceptible to corruption than the mass media (p. 11). Nonetheless, the view that ICT can facilitate deliberative democracy is far from universal; a number of authors assert that technology creates its own set of problems with regard to democratic discourse practices (e.g., Margolis & Resnick, 2002; Sunstein, 2001; Taylor & Saarinen, 1995). Furthermore, these critics of technology argue correctly that advocates do not adequately account for the continued tenacity of mass media's stranglehold over the public discourse in liberal democracies well into the 21st century.

HOW ICT MAKES VIRTUAL PUBLIC SPHERES POSSIBLE

The idea that ICT serves as a catalyst for social and political change has been a motivating force behind netactivism since the dawn of the personal computing era. The ability of individuals to gain access to, store and manipulate vast amounts of information, which ICT makes possible, would lead to a situation where "vast numbers of people empowered by knowledge...assert the right or feel the obligation to make policy" (Cleveland, 1985). The potential of ICT, then and now, is that it enables a many-to-many, decentralized, and nonhierarchical flow of information. By contrast, mass media information flows in a top-down, one-to-many and centralized manner, which requires large amounts of capital investment, concentrating political and economic power in the hands of a small number of multinational or state-run corporations.

ICT consists of numerous tools that create linkages across space and time; allow people to build and participate in communities of their own choice; spread their message to diverse constituencies and collaborate over a networked environment. These tools include but are not limited to: 1) the World Wide Web (WWW), the graphical interface with the Internet; 2) **wikis**, a tool that enables individuals to collaborate on content creation using the WWW; 3) **blogs**, or Web logs, which allows individuals to upload personal content to the WWW; 4) social networking sites, which allow individuals with no pre-existing ties with each other to form online communities and engage in **peer-production**; and 5) handheld and other portable computing devices, which can be used by individuals and groups to communicate “from the field.”

HOW VIRTUAL PUBLIC SPHERES DIFFER FROM E-GOVERNMENT

It is necessary here to distinguish between e-governance, which is the “product” of virtual public spheres, and **e-government**. E-government is the use of IT to provide governmental information to citizens and to assist in the delivery of public goods and services. E-government emerged as a phenomenon among Western governments during the mid-1990s. At that time, governments borrowed techniques and processes involving ICT already in use by businesses to facilitate consumer access to goods and services and to optimize management and organizational operations. The principal focus, then and now is on a “services first, democracy later approach” (Clift, 1998); in other words, using technology to provide government services more efficiently, that is, cut costs, rather than as a means to foster greater public engagement and civic deliberation about politics and government (Northrup, Kraemer, Dunkle, & King, 1990).

In this article, I define virtual public sphere as the use of ICT to achieve two chief ends of **e-democracy**: 1) to empower ordinary citizens to engage in effective public discourse regarding the proper ends of politics and the means to attain those ends and 2) to provide the technological means to effect public policy change. While building the necessary public infrastructure to support e-governance typically lags behind a service-based strategy in terms of public sector online efforts, more governments are collaborating with civil society to build online deliberation and policy-making spaces. As the global ICT revolution reshapes social and economic institutions, e-democracy, or “the use of information and communication technologies and strategies by democratic actors (government officials, the media, political organizations, citizens/voters)” (Clift, 2004, p. 38) will continue to make significant strides. Interestingly, the country with perhaps the greatest international reputation for

the advanced use of ICT, the U.S., actually lags behind in the global e-government revolution of other countries such as Canada, South Korea and the UK. According to a report issued by the IBM Center for the Business of Government, the above-named countries “have taken giant strides toward modernizing citizen participation by creating policy frameworks and departments with mandates to coordinate citizen engagement online” (p. 34).

CURRENT TRENDS AND DEVELOPMENTS IN VIRTUAL PUBLIC SPHERES

As noted, a growing body of literature builds the case for ICT creating the necessary infrastructure for virtual public spheres, best exemplified currently by the WWW. According to empirical research, small-scale, virtual public spheres have emerged around the world, which closely resemble the ideas put forth by the visionary thinkers discussed earlier. This article, however, can provide only a surface treatment of the numerous experiments in deliberative e-democracy such as those below (year of implementation is in parentheses after project):

1. **The Hansard Society eDemocracy Programme, UK. (Ongoing).** (<http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/programmes/e-democracy>). An effort to develop virtual public spheres around policy deliberations involving members of the UK Parliament, public officials and private citizens. The group’s official Web site refers to these as “digital dialogues” or the use of ICT to enable and enhance civic engagement. A current initiative, as of October 2007, involves the Ministry of Justice and has three principal aims: 1) to promote knowledge of ICT-based engagement, 2) to cultivate online engagement skills in the central government, and 3) to analyze case studies to develop benchmarks for administrator and user demographics, attitudes and behaviors.
2. **Dialogue with the City, Perth, Australia (2003).** According to the Web site (<http://www.wapc.wa.gov.au/Coast/Perth+coastal+planning+strategy/306.aspx>), this process was implemented by the Western Australian government to engage the citizens of Perth in planning for their future in the face of some of the highest population and economic growth rates of any city in Australia, which places a significant demand on land, resources and environment. The stated aim of the project is to make Perth the most livable city by 2030.
3. **The International Centre of Excellence for Local eDemocracy (ICELE). UK. (2006).** The goal of

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