

Chapter 64

Shaping Digital Democracy in the United States: My.barackobama.com and Participatory Democracy

Rachel Baarda

University of Ottawa, Canada

Rocci Luppicini

University of Ottawa, Canada

ABSTRACT

Ethical challenges that technology poses to the different spheres of society are a core focus within the field of technoethics. Over the last few years, scholars have begun to explore the ethical implications of new digital technologies and social media, particularly in the realms of society and politics. A qualitative case study was conducted on Barack Obama's campaign social networking site, my.barackobama.com, in order to investigate the ways in which the website uses or misuses digital technology to create a healthy participatory democracy. For an analysis of ethical and non-ethical ways to promote participatory democracy online, the study included theoretical perspectives such as the role of the public sphere in a participatory democracy and the effects of political marketing on the public sphere. The case study included a content analysis of the website and interviews with members of groups on the site. The study's results are explored in this chapter.

INTRODUCTION

In November 2008, Barack Obama's election as president of the United States was heralded as the beginning of a new era of citizen participation in American politics (Carpenter, 2010; Marks, 2008; Tapscott, 2009). Writers attributed Obama's vic-

tory to his use of the Internet, which he used to engage and mobilize supporters and raise funds (Scherer, 2009; Talbot, 2008). Theorists also argued that Obama's use of digital media allowed citizens to participate in politics as never before. In 2008, Marc Ambinder wrote in *The Atlantic*: "Obama clearly intends to use the Web, if he is

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elected president, to transform governance just as he has transformed campaigning... What Obama seems to promise is, at its outer limits, a participatory democracy in which the opportunities for participation have been radically expanded.” Andrew Raseiej, co-president of techpresident.com, declared shortly after Obama’s victory: “there’s a newly engaged and empowered citizenry that is ready, able, and willing to partner with the Obama administration on rebooting American democracy in a 21st-century model of participation” (Marks, 2008).

Based on the widespread claims about a new age of citizen participation under President Obama, this study explores the use and abuse of digital media in promoting participatory democracy. More specifically, the study examines the ways in which Obama’s social networking site, my.barackobama.com, influences participatory democracy. The study draws on interviews with members of my.barackobama.com, as well as the text of the website itself.

BACKGROUND

The Rise of E-Democracy

What is *participatory democracy* and what good for? Participatory democracy has been defined as a democratic system which “involves extensive and active engagement of citizens in the self-governing process; it means government not just for but by and of the people” (Barber, 1995, p. 921). Common themes in participatory theory include the belief in a widespread loss of faith in representative democracy; the idea that increased democratic participation can educate and transform humankind; and that people should participate more directly not only in government, but also in the workplace and other spheres of society (Barber, 1984; Kaufman, 1960; Miller, 1987; Pateman, 1970). Participatory theorists also emphasize community over individualism,

and they highlight the importance of public debate and deliberation (Barber, 1984; Mansbridge, 1983; Miller, 1987).

In the 1990s, with the advent of the Internet, some theorists began to argue that electronic technology could create participatory democracy through digital communications media (Budge, 1996; Dahl, 1989; Hague & Loader, 1999). “Digital media” describes media types, like film and audio, which “traditionally were accessed in analog format, but...are being converted to a digital format” (Dillon & Leonard, 1998, p. 72). Digital media includes both offline and transmitted media (Feldman, 1997). Digital media transmitted over the Internet is expected to enhance democracy.

The use of digital technology to revitalize democracy is called e-democracy, also known as *digital democracy*, teledemocracy, and cyberdemocracy (Hague & Loader, 1999). The UK Hansard Society, which promotes increased political participation, offers one definition of e-democracy: “The concept of e-democracy is associated with efforts to broaden political participation by enabling citizens to connect with one another and with their representatives via new information and communication technologies” (Hansard Society, as cited in Chadwick, 2006, p. 84). Dahl (1989) argues that digital technology can prompt a “third democratic transformation” which will restore the characteristics of the Athenian participatory democracy.

Digital democracy theories have five characteristics that, in some ways, parallel the characteristics of participatory democracy theories. Firstly, digital democracy can supposedly reverse declining trust in political processes and institutions and voter apathy (Hague & Loader, 1999). Theorists of digital democracy present the Information Age as an opportunity to “rethink and, if necessary, radically overhaul or replace those [liberal democratic] institutions, actors and practice” (Hague & Loader, 1999) that are causing the crisis of participation. Secondly, digital media can supposedly create a more educated citizenry

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