

Chapter 73

What Does E– add to Democracy?

Designing an Agenda for Democracy Theory in the Information Age

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ABSTRACT

Technologies carry politics since they embed values. It is therefore surprising that mainstream political and legal theory have taken the issue so lightly. Compared to what has been going on over the past few decades in the other branches of practical thought, namely ethics, economics, and the law, political theory lags behind. Yet the current emphasis on Internet politics that polarizes the apologists holding the Web to overcome the one-to-many architecture of opinion building in traditional representative democracy, and the critics who warn that cyber-optimism entails authoritarian technocracy has acted as a wake up call. This chapter sets the problem, “What is it about ICTs, as opposed to previous technical devices, that impact on politics and determine uncertainty about democratic matters?,” into the broad context of practical philosophy by offering a conceptual map of clusters of micro-problems and concrete examples relating to “e-democracy.” The point is to highlight when and why the hyphen of e-democracy has a conjunctive or a disjunctive function in respect to stocktaking from past experiences and settled democratic theories. The chapter’s claim is that there is considerable scope to analyse how and why online politics fail or succeed. The field needs both further empirical and theoretical work.

INTRODUCTION

The democratization of communications, the theory goes, will bring about the democratization of the world. It is noteworthy that the praise of the political consequences of the massive use of ICTs is occurring just as a wave of pessimism

is sweeping across many sectors of the digitally sensible world of culture. As an example of the growing unease with the general celebratory mood, *The Edge*’s special 2010 issue should be mentioned, where John Markoff affirmed that, from Arpanet to the Internet, we are in the midst of a “post-industrial dystopia” in which the Web

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is opening Pandora's box. A closer look at "liberation technologies" (Diamond, 2010) and the political use of new media and ICTs (Chadwich & Howard, 2009) suggest a more complicated reality: technological advances are no substitute for human wisdom. Many observe how "the tools of modern communications satisfy as wide a range of ambitions and appetites as their 20th century ancestors did, and many of these ambitions and appetites do not have anything to do with democracy" (Bremmer, 2010, p. 86), according to a reading still focused on the alleged neutrality of technology. Yet, taking a broader outlook on the interaction of technology and human evolution, "sometimes, we may forget how much we owe to flakes and wheels, to sparks and ploughs and to engines and satellites. We are reminded of such deep technological debt when we divide human life into prehistory and history. The significant threshold is there to acknowledge that it was the invention and development of information and communication technologies (ICTs) that made all the difference between who we were and who we are" (Floridi, 2012). Our times might thus be more than just an age of information; perhaps we are entering what Luciano Floridi calls hyper-history; if this is true, then, regardless of what the outcomes will be, the stakes are high indeed.

My aim here is neither to fuel the enthusiasm of those who see a new form of democracy burgeoning, nor to take the conservative stance that see nothing new occurring. Rather, this chapter outlines possible ways to address the problem *in what does Internet change the paradigm for democracy studies?* The goal is to distinguish areas of transformation from revolutionary thrusts and thus offer the political scholar a broad theoretical setting that takes stock on developments in ethics and legal science as well as settled democratic theories. The chapter provides a conceptual map of clusters of micro-problems in order to further empirical work.

I will start by stressing that for digital democracy to be an interesting problem for enquiry it

needs to constitute a problem (i) rich in consequences, (ii) clearly defined and/or definable, (iii) accessible, in the meaning easy to understand but hard to solve, (iv) intrinsically open, leaving disagreement as a viable option. This chapter shall evidently not transform the topic, which is still something of a moving target, into such a well-defined issue since such a task would go well beyond the purposes of this chapter. What I shall attempt to do is to draw a conceptual map of questions that need to be addressed – or better, of clusters of micro-problems – and that cannot be easily articulated unless we take the "e" added to democracy seriously. This should show why the issue does respond (at least) to the requirements (i), (iii) and (iv) listed above.

BACKGROUND

First, a word on democracy as a form of government is needed. It has over the ages been associated with a variety of adjectives: direct, representative, procedural, formal, substantial, social, liberal, constitutional, epistemic, deliberative, participative... and last but not least "real." The conceptual typologies of democratic regimes (parliamentary/presidential, bi- and multipartisan, coalescent, consociated, concordant, populist, plebiscitarian, polyarchic etc.) also span over a vast amount of different organisations, just like the broad variety of historical experiences associated with it, does. Some even go as far as to claim that we are dealing with an "essentially contested concept" (Crick, 2002). There is, however, reason to believe this is not so, and the 20th century tradition of thought in theory of democracy offers some evidence in that direction (Kelsen, 1929-2000; Dahl, 1956; Bobbio, 1984-1987; Sartori, 1987).

For our present purposes I shall keep the broad connotations in the background and keep the constraints to a minimum (that some will surely feel are embarrassingly low), i.e. conceiving democracy quite generically to be a method

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