

Chapter VI

Digital Disempowerment

Kenneth L. Hacker

New Mexico State University, USA

Shana M. Mason

New Mexico State University, USA

Eric L. Morgan

New Mexico State University, USA

Abstract

The digital divide involves fundamental ethics 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 and produce social injustices at the same time as they produce expanded opportunities of political participation. Our guiding premise is that CMC/ICT policies that minimize inequalities of access, usage, and participation are more ethical than policies that neglect the democratization of new communication technologies and networks.

The objective of this chapter is to argue that the ethics concerns regarding the digital divide entail fundamental issues about how democracy and democratization are related to computer-mediated communication (CMC) and its role in political communication.¹ As the roles of information and communication technologies (ICT) and CMC 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 and produce social injustices at the same time as they produce expanded opportunities of political participation. Our guiding premise is that CMC/ICT policies that minimize inequalities of access, usage, and participation are more ethical than policies that neglect the democratization of the new communication technologies and networks.

There are three basic assumptions that guide the development of this chapter. First, we assume that the rapid and accelerating adoption of Internet, World Wide Web, and CMC/ICT technologies is changing how social and political structures are formed and changed. The societal formation we know today as network society is produced by patterns of social interaction that are increasingly tied to the emergence and expansion of communication networks. The era of single and unrelated communication technologies is over. Even TV and radio are integrating more into Internet-based systems of communication. Our second assumption is that the perpetuation of political inequalities that appears to accompany the embedding of CMC and Internet communication into everyday life raises moral (ethical) issues concerning participation in a democratic political system.² This is because online technologies are becoming more common for political communication (Bimber & Davis, 2003). Our third assumption is that CMC and Internet communication, notwithstanding past hyperbole, are capable of enabling citizens to extend their scope of political influence.

We begin our analysis with a review of existing trends that produce the social formation known as network society and the expanding role of CMC in political communication. We then move into an examination of political theory and how it affects the development of American democracy, including digital democracy. From there we discuss the linkages between political theory and communication theory. Next, we argue that there are numerous and strong ethics issues related to indications that CMC may be facilitating structural inequalities in democratic systems such as the United States. We view the formation of these inequalities as digital disempowerment. Finally, we proffer some recommendations for research and policy considerations including an ethic of CMC-based deliberation.

34 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage: www.igi-global.com/chapter/digital-disempowerment/23577

Related Content

Evaluating Public Programs Implementation: An Exploratory Case Study

Maddalena Sorrentino and Katia Passerini (2010). *International Journal of Electronic Government Research* (pp. 1-13).

www.irma-international.org/article/evaluating-public-programs-implementation/45737

E-Participation and Canadian Parliamentarians

M. Francoli (2007). *Encyclopedia of Digital Government* (pp. 697-702).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/participation-canadian-parliamentarians/11579

Reconfiguring Performance Information Linking with Accountability: Reporting and Internal Management

Étienne Charbonneau and Younhee Kim (2012). *Digital Democracy: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools, and Applications* (pp. 1367-1385).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/reconfiguring-performance-information-linking-accountability/67665

Citizens Collaboration and Co-Creation in Public Service Delivery: The COCKPIT Project

Panagiotis Kokkinakos, Sotirios Koussouris, Dimitrios Panopoulos, Dimitrios Askounis, Antonis Ramfos, Christos Georgousopoulos and Erik Wittern (2012). *International Journal of Electronic Government Research* (pp. 33-62).

www.irma-international.org/article/citizens-collaboration-creation-public-service/70075

The Role of E-Government in Rebuilding Bosnia-Herzegovina

M. Handzic (2007). *Encyclopedia of Digital Government* (pp. 1424-1428).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/role-government-rebuilding-bosnia-herzegovina/11692