

## Chapter 12

# Deliberation, Participation, and “Pockets” of E–Democracy

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### ABSTRACT

*Over the past few decades, researchers have attempted to unravel the puzzle of whether or not democracy exists online. According to recent evaluations (Norris, 2001; Hindman, 2009), while we find that the ‘Net may have the potential to help spread democracy through its open-ended discussions and mass appeal, it has deteriorated into an elite-level discourse due to what is commonly referred to as the “Long Tail” effect (Anderson, 2006) by researchers. This chapter reevaluates the popular theories of democracy online and calls into question the relevance of the question “does digital democracy exist?” Instead, I propose that digital democracy should be evaluated in terms of the sustainability of democratic tendencies within a given site, rather than its mere existence. I argue that scholars have jumped to the conclusion that the potential for democracy online has withered because they have focused too heavily on how a few key websites function to control the majority of traffic on the Web, and have not looked deeper into the infrastructure that is built within these websites and others to evaluate whether or not at a micro-level these sites act and public forums for the open deliberation of ideas and common questions. Instead of viewing democracy through a democratic lens based on liberal proceduralism, we should think of digital democracy existing in “pockets” – self-contained, community-based, democracy based on small, semi-autonomous, group dynamics.*

### INTRODUCTION

A fundamental inconsistency exists within today’s society between the creation of new, interactive

participatory spaces through information technology, on the one hand, and the decreased role of the individual as a general participant in governance on the other. The questions of whether digital democracy exists and if individuals, groups or policy makers can harness democratic values on the ‘Net

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in order to empower and affect change in politics, both online and off, has generally been combined into one single question: Does democracy exist online? According to scholars, the advent of the Internet as a political medium for the mass public through the creation and implementation of new open, interactive, user-centered applications such as weblogging or “blogging” held great potential to strengthen both online and offline democracy through citizen participation in politics. This early argument for digital democracy was quelled, however, as scholars began to examine the Internet more thoroughly; often concluding that the Internet had not fulfilled any democratic promise but instead had become a forum for “new elites” - the popular blogger or the frequent forum poster.

Recent evaluations (Norris, 2001; Hindman, 2009) have concluded that if we view democracy on the Internet as being achieved through a framework of open deliberation available to users through such popular outlets such as blogging, then the current state of ‘the Net’ is lacking in respect to democratic principles; specifically, that the voices of individuals are equal in an online space, all having the same potential for being heard. According to these accounts, while we find that the Internet may have the potential to help spread democracy through its open-ended discussions and mass appeal, in reality it has deteriorated into an elite-level discourse due to what is commonly referred to in research as the “Long Tail” effect (Anderson, 2006), where a single site sees a disproportionate amount of web traffic in comparison to other like sites. However, such theories based solely on the readership of a particular user’s blog or a particular website’s proportion of web traffic have overlooked how the Internet works as a participatory forum for deliberation, where individuals come to hear and be heard using a particular website as their own public space to air comments on any given topic.

The question of digital democracy needs to be refocused. Instead of questioning whether or

not democracy exists online as some inherent feature built into the Web’s coding, the question should be rephrased into one of sustainability of democratic moments built around the sharing of common information. The question then should not be “does democracy exist” but rather “can democracy be sustained online?” Any given site on the Internet can now be designed so that it can allow for democratic tendencies - such as the free exchange of ideas and the freedom to speak openly without fear of punishment - to exist via the sharing of some common connection between individuals. But is this shared commonality sustainable for any prolonged period of time? Scholars have jumped to the conclusion that the potential for democracy online has withered because they have focused too heavily on the long tail effect and how a few key websites function to control the majority of traffic on the Web, and have not looked deeper into the infrastructure that is built within these websites and how individuals utilize this structure in order to build a democratic space. Instead of viewing the Internet through a democratic lens based on liberal proceduralism, where individuals who are presented with a number of alternative choices select only those alternatives that fall in line with their perspectives, we should instead question the sustainability of individual “pockets” of democracy – self-contained, community-based democracy based on small, semi-autonomous, group dynamics.

The purpose of this chapter is to lay the groundwork for a different conception of the role the Internet plays in modern society. I will begin by first outlining some of the major arguments and conceptions of democracy and how these conceptions function to define the democratic space online, along with giving some of the more potent arguments against such an idea. Afterward, I will expand beyond the literature by arguing that the question of “digital democracy” needs to be shifted from liberal proceduralist notions of whether or not democracy exists online, toward questioning sustainability of a democratic space once it has

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