Parliament in the Age of the Internet

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Information for Parliamentary Democracy

The successful functioning of any parliamentary democracy is dependent upon efficient, multi-directional flows of information. Citizens need information before they can make sensible choices about who will represent them. Representatives within elected parliaments and assemblies, interest organisations, political parties and individual citizens need information about the activities of the executive so that between them they can pass effective legislation, scrutinise executive functions and generally hold government to account. Representatives need information from individual citizens and groups about those issues of local or national importance that they are expected to follow up. They do so in order to represent the public and thereby have a strong prospect of being re-elected. Citizens need information from and about their representatives so that politicians can be evaluated on the basis of their record and so that representative institutions are transparent in their activities. These are only some of the strands in the necessary lacework of information flows which make up a contemporary polity. It is not fanciful to suggest that, without information, democracy in any of its forms could not exist. Indeed, information coupled to effective communication provides the lifeblood of a democracy. The health of the democracy like that of the human body, is made more robust if that lifeblood flows richly and freely throughout the polity.

What would be the result if none of these information flows existed? We can envisage a situation in which no information is offered to citizens before they elect their representatives. Many would refuse to vote at all on the reasonable grounds that they could not make an informed choice. Others would vote blindly and their decisions would bring about a government that would have majority support but no degree of conscious endorsement. In such a 'non-information society', the executive would provide little or no information to the parliament elected to scrutinise it. If this were the case, then parliamentary representatives would support or criticise the government of the day on the basis of speculation, rumour and ideological prejudice, rather than any insight into the mysterious activities of this hypothetically secret executive. Representatives would receive no feedback from those who elected them: no surgeries would be held (or no constituents would attend them); there would be no mail from concerned citizens; there would be

no scientifically-conducted polls to tell politicians what citizens are thinking. So, politicians would need to base their claim to be representatives upon an intuition that they know what their uninformed voters would want them to do. Equally, citizens and interest organisations would have no means of assessing how well their representatives' intuitions have served them. There would be no record of parliamentary debate, no coverage in the press or on television or radio, no way of gaining access to the deliberations of parliamentarians, and less still of interacting in any way with such deliberation.

Of course, we are engaging in reductio ad absurdum. Such a political scenario is hardly conceivable, not least because a political state that so rejected or was indifferent to the centrality of information to democratic processes would in effect have lost legitimacy and either collapsed or lurched into some non-democratic variant of governance. To regard such an uninformed political condition as an acceptable form of democracy would be utterly implausible, for flows of publicly available information are inherent to democratic representation. The stronger and clearer the flows of information between citizens and their representative arrangements, as well as between the legislature and the executive, the better is the health of liberal democracy.

Paradoxically, at the end of the twentieth century there exists both an increase in the capacity of societies, locally, nationally and globally to generate and disseminate information, and at the same time increasing disenchantment on the part of citizens towards many of the institutions and procedures of democracy. Political scientists have devoted much energy to explaining why citizens have been losing faith in government and democracy and their political cultural underpinnings which themselves find expression in different forms of democratic practice. One conclusion drawn by some commentators is that there is a 'crisis of political communication',[1] for the degree to which the public is exposed to high quality political information is dangerously low. Failure in this respect is variously attributed; to the media for its inattention to the provision of serious political information;[2] to politicians, and particularly party communications managers, for their tendency to blur lines between public information, propaganda and misinformation;[3] to parliamentarians for being too easily fobbed off by secretive and arrogant executives; and to citizens for their lack of civic engagement, discourse and insistence on being better informed.[4]

Information and communication technology in the democratic process

One response to this alleged 'crisis of political communication' is to examine the potential applications of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) to the political process. If the existence of efficient flows of information are as important for democracy as has been suggested, might not the immense developments in the means of

communicating information, based upon digital technologies, the con-vergence of computers and telecommunications (telematics) and the extraordinary development of Internet technology, have a profound effect upon the way that democracy occurs?

Computer networks of many forms are enabling the virtually instan-taneous transmission of information across spaces in unprecedented ways. As they do so new methods of working and organising are arising. Document handling systems are supporting the efficient produc-tion and storage of data; decision support, management and executive information systems are contributing to the search for more rational bases for decision-making; and many forms of 'teleworking' are emerg-ing as 'working across the wires' provides new opportunities for the location of work. The internet is now emerging as the dominant ICT of the end of the twentieth century. Its potential impact is extraordinary, providing wide, even global, electronic access to vast information resources, to the prospect of 'e-commerce', to transactions that are non-commercial such as registering membership or application; and to a new and powerful public relations and marketing resource. Addi-tionally, the web-site is used by many organisations for managing internal communications, supporting often complex organisations through the provision of an integrated, location-independent informa-tion resources.

How have scholars responded to questions about the impact of telematics?

Scholarly views have been far from unanimous, ranging from advocates of tele-democracy and the emergence of a new democratic polity which transcends the necessity for representation;[5] to those who have regarded ICTs as significant means of strengthening the representative process and democratic citizenship;[6] to those who see beyond the rhetoric of 'electronic democracy' to dangers of techno-populism,[7] Orwellian sur-veillance and the atomisation of social life.[8]

Whilst these and other issues are developed in some of the papers in this volume, our concern in this brief introduction is to take an altogether simpler proposition as our starting point: that ICTs are increasingly, for better or for worse, impinging upon the parliamentary process. Such effects have thus far been much more discernible and written about in the context of local democracy. However, ICTs are becoming more and more embedded into a variety of democratic forms[9] including processes of parliamentary democracy. In new and emergent parliamentary democracies, where there is a sense of 'blank sheet' structures being established, there is evidence of enormous enthusiasm for the incorporation of these technologies into the democratic process. In other long-standing parliamentary democracies too we are seeing a shift from ICT applications that derive from parliamentary library professionals and from individual enthusiasts and champions amongst

the representatives, towards electronic systems that are aimed at pro-
ducing greater administrative efficiency and democratic effectiveness.

Case studies

A number of questions recur in the following pages. How far are
parliaments innovating around information and communication in
response to capabilities resident within the new technologies? To what
extent is such innovation enlarging, constraining or reducing democratic
opportunity? Indeed, what understanding of democracy is revealed by
the use of new technologies? What lessons can be drawn about the
relationship between ICTs and parliamentary democracy? Not all of
the contributors agree about the answers, with the different cases
examined not presenting a uniform pattern of evidence, though there is
a general if not unanimous theme that the use of new technologies is
sub-optimal.

   Democracy is made manifest in numerous basic forms and even more
numerous variants upon them. Each one of these democratic forms is
itself the subject of electronic innovation and associated techno-zeal-
otry. For example, tele-democracy, a term usually reserved for ICT
applications that seek to develop direct forms of democracy, is clearly a
democratic form that has been substantially experimented upon. 'Push-
button' democracy continues to beguile and deceive. Innovations and
experiments come and go with regularity, but longevity is yet to become
a central feature of any of them. Free-nets, HOST networks, Public
Electronic Networks work with the grain of another democratic form,
that of pluralist or associative democracy. Creating a public facility for
citizen expression and discourse is one of their guiding principles,
though in practice democratic application has often been superseded by
commercial exploitation. In this volume such innovation and experi-
mentation is examined only insofar as it impinges upon our core
concern with representative, parliamentary democracy.

   The central purpose of this volume is to look at parliamentary
democracy, based upon the principle of political representation. Some
argue the case in some circumstances for doing away with representative
structures and making room for stronger forms of delegation and direct
voting. Such an argument lurches into the kind of quasi-utopian zeal
that emanates from the assumption that a better informed citizenry can
become directly self-governing. The technocratic obsession with push-
button democracy has tended to distract serious attention from the
likely impact of ICTs upon the health of representative democracy.
Moreover, we are careful to distinguish between parliamentary democ-
racy and government. Governments are intensive users of ICTs pursuing
their use for the delivery of public services, for the provision of
information to service consumers, for acquiring consumer feedback
about levels of satisfaction with services and for the efficient and
effective production of public services. These are all interesting aspects

of democracy in the information age, when seen at its broadest. In this volume, however, we are intent upon concentrating on parliaments, their inhabitants and their processes, as well as on the relationships that surround them that strengthen or weaken their democratic standing. What are the effects of ICTs upon all of that?

Representative institutions take many forms, so the papers which follow fall initially into three main sections, followed by a concluding section of analytical perspectives. Firstly, there is the established Westminster model, best exemplified by the UK Parliament. Some Westminster MPs have long complained at the technological backwardness of this ancient institution, while others have resisted new technologies as being disruptive to traditional practices. The papers by Coleman and Campbell reflect this oscillation between the heady possibilities and the rather flattened down reality of technological life at Westminster. The Australian Parliament, though based on the Westminster model, is one of the most high-tech legislatures in the world: evidence, if it is needed, that political culture is at least as important as technological availability.

Secondly, there are new parliamentary democracies which seek to embody democratic representation in innovative ways. In the new Scottish Parliament there is a conspicuous effort to transcend the procedures of Westminster and to use ICTs to make legislators more efficient, transparent and accountable than those in older parliaments. In South Africa, where parliamentary democracy did not come easily, there is an understandable concern to connect legislators to those they represent—but 'infrastructural' inequality limits the value of such connectivity unless it is supported by public policy. In Slovenia there is a desire to use ICTs to foster a political environment of public transparency after decades of institutionalised state secrecy, though the hallmarks of state centrism are still to be found embedded in the design and practices surrounding the parliamentary web-site.

Thirdly, case studies of the effects upon representative bodies in Germany, Denmark and the USA indicate common threads as well as national differences in the ways that ICTs are employed.

In particular, there, is a concern about the sub-optimal design and development of web-sites that lead to their democratic usefulness being to support political elites at the expense of the wider citizenry. In the final section of this volume contributors have been invited to consider the likely effects of ICTs upon the future of representative democracies. These perspectives range from radical optimism about the democratic potential of ICTs to cautious scepticism of their alleged benefits to democracy. Both perspectives are valid. Had one set out in the 1930s to examine the effects of the new medium of television upon parliamentary democracy there would have been similarly mixed speculations, partly because all new technologies inspire both hopes and fears for the future, but also because technologies are not applied in a vacuum, but

within specific political cultures. In this sense, the question is not about how parliaments will be affected by the internet, as if new technology is an irresistible extrinsic force, but how parliamentarians—and citizens—choose to use ICTs in the service of enhancing and evolving the process of democratic representation.

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