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## The Lonely Citizen: Indirect Representation in an Age of Networks

STEPHEN COLEMAN

*This article explores what it means to be represented and how the nature of representation might change in an age of networks. Citizens' perceptions of political connection and disconnection are examined on the basis of quantitative and qualitative surveys. A typology of political connection is presented and then expanded on the basis of the discussion of four potentially democratizing characteristics of digital information and communication technologies.*

**Keywords** accountability, connection, disconnection, networks, representation

The public, and particularly young people, now have less faith than ever in parliamentary democracy. We [politicians and media] who constitute the “political class” conduct politics in a way that turns off our voters, readers, listeners and viewers. . . . And so the task for Parliament is to connect. Too many people believe that government is something that is done to them. Westminster must stop giving the impression of being a private club and instead give the public a greater sense of ownership. (Rt. Hon. Peter Hain MP, Leader of the UK House of Commons, speech to Parliamentary Press Gallery, September 16, 2003)

References to the disconnection of citizens from the formal democratic process abound in contemporary political science literature. Extensive empirical data indicate that citizens in established democracies regard government as being remote, do not trust elected representatives, and are not as willing as they used to be to vote in elections or participate in other institutionally connected activities (Pharr & Putnam, 2000; Norris, 1999; Nye, Zelikow & King, 1997).

The extent, cause, and significance of these trends are widely debated, but insufficient attention has been paid to the construction and meaning of the rhetoric of connection and disconnection. What does it mean to be *connected* to a political representative? How does it feel to be disconnected? And to what extent are these terms redefined by

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the emergence of computer-mediated communication? This article addresses these questions and analyzes data from a new survey exploring the extent to which citizens feel connected to the process of democratic representation.

This emphasis on affectivity as a crucial dimension of representation reflects a growing scholarly interest in notions of democratic presence, reciprocity, and respect (Phillips, 1995; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; Young, 2000). The approach taken in this article is based on the claim that citizens are more than atomized bundles of interests and preferences in search of instrumental representation. The symbolic and affective dimensions of democratic representation have too often been overlooked by political scientists and are sometimes neglected in proposals for promoting civic engagement and social inclusion. Much of what it means to be represented depends on the ambivalences of self-identity and reflexive apprehensions of power and its diverse narratives. Models of citizenship constructed around people's instrumental interest and normative duty to participate have tended to miss the experiential and affective elements of what it means to be a civic actor, as opposed to a political consumer or free-floating ego.

The notion of instrumental, or even ritualized, citizenship has been well summarized by Dunleavy, with reference to the act of voting:

It is not a very up-to-date act; it is an under-involving act. Probably one of the least fulfilling kinds of things that people will do in a year is go to vote. You turn up, you have Corrupt Practices Act literature on the walls, there is nothing to do there, this is the one occasion in five years when 30 million voters are going to interact with their Government. . . . It is a picture of complete indifference which is projected to citizens when they come out to vote. (Dunleavy, 2001)

Not only as voters, but in a range of routine social activities, citizens find themselves in disconnected isolation from institutions and processes that are supposed to represent them. Disconnection gives rise not only to cynicism and disengagement, but also a pervasive sense that the political sphere is frustrating, joyless, and ultimately pointless.

### **Representation and/as Communication**

Political representation is necessary when citizens are removed—physically, cognitively, or otherwise—from the locus of public decision making and their interests, preferences, and values have to be expressed via an aggregating medium. Schumpeterian political realists have tended to invoke Burke in support of their conception of thin, indirect representation, in which the role of the representative is as trustee rather than delegate. In trustee representation, citizens are urged to vote but are not called upon to participate further, leaving the central functions of deliberating policy choices to an elected elite. In fact, Burke was rather less committed to the notion of the independent and detached representative than is often recognized. Burke advocated a form of representation in which there was close communication between representative and represented: “Certainly . . . it ought to be the happiness and glory of a representative to live in the strictest union, the closest correspondence and the most unreserved communication with his constituents” (Burke, 1871).

This understanding of the intimate relationship between representation and communication reflects a fundamental characteristic of what it means to represent. As Pitkin argues:

Representing . . . means acting in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them. The representative must act independently; his action must involve discretion and judgment; he must be the one who acts. The represented must also be [conceived as] capable of independent action and judgment, not merely being taken care of. And, despite the resulting potential for conflict between representative and represented about what is to be done, the conflict must not normally take place. The representative must act in such a way that there is no conflict, or if it occurs an explanation is called for. He must not be found persistently at odds with the wishes of the represented without good reason in terms of their interest, without a good explanation of why their wishes are not in accord with their interest. (Pitkin, 1972)

Although not bound simply to reflect, mimic, or personify the will of the represented, neither, according to Pitkin, should democratic representatives be detached from or indifferent to citizens' interests, preferences, or values. Representation entails connection, albeit tenuous, tense or ambiguous.

But what exactly does it mean to connect? Before the 20th century, the verb referred to associations and linkages between related terms, people, or parties, such as ideas in a book or the unification of two dynasties. With the rise of electricity, telegraphy, and telephony, the notion of connection expanded into a technologized metaphor, suggesting the social replication of the random contacts of electrical circuitry. To connect, in an age of distant mediation, is to conjoin presence and absence, establishing indirect and distant communicative relationships between parties hitherto unknown to one another. To connect in a mass society means to establish a telepathic relationship with recipients who might otherwise be strangers. E. M. Forster's exhortation to "only connect" expressed the angst and the ambition of disintegrated modernity: to transcend barriers of time, space, cognition, and culture and enter into a communion of speaking and hearing. For political representatives, the necessity and attractiveness of such connection invoke the democratic ambition to speak for others who are physically remote but communicatively close. To be connected suggests intimacy and understanding: We do not speak of a dictator connecting with his victims as he orders the electrodes to be fixed to their bodies. There is an implicit sociability about connecting; the more of us who do it, and the more we all do it, the better it will be to live in the world.

The disconnected citizen is not unique to late modern democracy. Recall Lippmann's "deaf spectator in the back row, who ought to keep his mind on the mystery off there, but cannot quite manage to keep awake" (p. 72), a pathetic figure whose bewilderment helped to define expectations of citizens' political behavior in the 20th century (Lippmann, 1922; Bachrach, 1967). Lippmann's "deaf spectator" lacked the cognitive skills to connect. Nearly a century later, the problem is different: Citizens are awake (educated) and quite able to hear what is going on, but the show on offer is not to their taste. The typology illustrated in Figure 1 sets out the normative characteristics of connected and disconnected representation.

### *Closeness*

Connection suggests boldness in the face of the seeming intractability of distance, not only linking the near to the far and the present to the past, but the informed to the uninformed and the strong to the weak. To be connected in a vast, complex society of inequalities, linguistic diversity, and group polarization is an ethical transcendence of

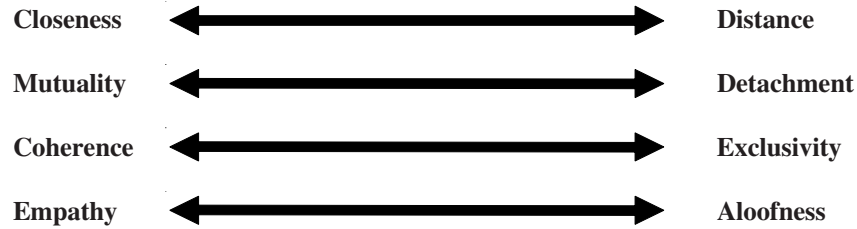


Figure 1. Typology of representation.

differential communicative opportunities. Connected representatives are those who are not regarded as “distant,” either in the geographical sense of being nonlocal and unreachable or in the sense of not being approachable or capable of communicating at many levels.

### *Mutuality*

The notion of connectedness implies mutuality: If I am connected to you, then you must be in some sense connected to me. To be connected means to be in touch, either physically or via mediation. Connection is more than merely reaching out: Being connected involves being reached as well as reaching, being touched as well as touching others; it is a relationship that is both dialectical and dialogical. Representatives who collaborate with those they represent, by sharing information, consulting regularly, and being highly accessible and “in touch,” are less likely to be regarded as disconnected than detached representatives who are perceived as secretive, self-serving, autonomous operators.

### *Coherence*

Connection conjoins and coheres, linking hitherto separated entities. The connected representative gives a single voice to many separate lives. Connectedness invokes the aspiration toward common understanding in a world of sovereign artificers. Connected representatives are good at articulating diverse experiences and narratives and aggregating competing interests and preferences. In contrast, politicians who are seen to pursue narrow ideological courses and to be obedient to partisan interests and structures are likely to be regarded as disconnected from those they represent.

### *Empathy*

Finally, and least tangibly, to connect is to empathize, in the sense of imagining oneself in the position of another (Goodin, 2003). As Bowlby (1969) argues, “Intimate attachments to other human beings are the hub around which a person’s life revolves . . . from these intimate attachments a person draws his strength and enjoyment of life and, through what he contributes, he gives strength and enjoyment to others.” Intersubjective connectedness entails not a sense of being someone else, but of knowing what it means to be someone else. In an increasingly postdeferral culture, citizens will disengage from people and institutions as they experience the solitary pain of not being recognized, heard, or valued.

### Feeling Represented

For citizens, being politically represented is a matter of intermittent concern. Apart from a small minority of highly active, often ideologically committed citizens, most people only have reason to connect to politicians and political institutions at exceptional moments of personal crisis or public excitement. Whereas the work of representing is a permanent one for elected politicians, the sense of being represented is an occasional realization for citizens.

In order to examine the extent to which UK citizens feel themselves to be connected to political institutions and other social actors, an online survey of a representative sample of 2,273 UK citizens was commissioned from the online polling organization *yougov*. The value of using an online survey is that secondary questions could be asked of respondents, seeking qualitative explanations for their initial responses. The first, quantitative survey, comprising seven questions, was conducted between September 11 and 13, 2003 (see Figure 2).

Of the sample, 72% reported feeling “disconnected” from Parliament, with nearly half (46%) feeling “very disconnected.” Over half of 35–44-year-olds (52%) and nearly half of 45–64-year-olds felt “very disconnected” from Parliament. Surprisingly, fewer 18–34-year-olds felt very disconnected from Parliament than in the older cohorts. There were no significant differences between responses to this question from men and women or between social classes ABC1 and C2DE. When asked how connected they felt with their local member of Parliament (MP), levels of disconnection were slightly lower. In these responses, disconnection decreased with age, suggesting that as people grow older, they are more likely to establish some sort of communication with their MP.

Respondents were asked how “in touch” they are with their local MP, local councillor, doctor, clergyman, and next-door neighbor. On a scale where zero indicated total disconnection and 10 indicated intimate connection, over half (54%) rated their level of connection to their next-door neighbor at a point of 7 or above. Perceptions of connection to local GPs were not far behind, with 52% reaching 7 or above. Only 1 in 10 felt connected to a clergyman at 7 or above, slightly behind councillors (11%) but ahead of

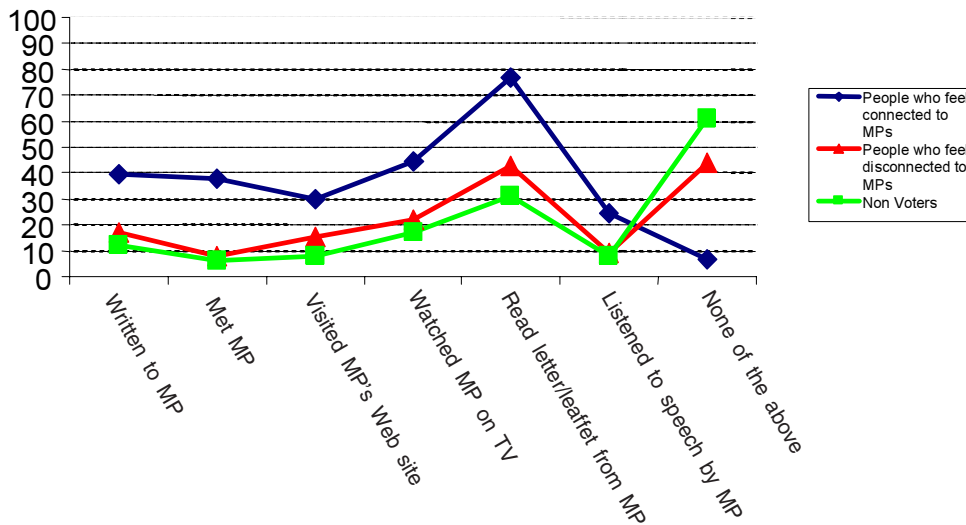


Figure 2. Connected–disconnected MP.

MPs, at 7%. Looking at the bottom end of the scale, taking 0 to 3 to indicate a perception of significant disconnection, next-door neighbors were so evaluated by 18% of the sample, GPs by almost 1 in 4 (24%), councillors by 77% and MPs by 79%. Clergymen were so rated by 4 out of 5 of the sample, with 62% expressing no connection (compared with 50% who rated their connection with their MP at zero).

When asked about the kinds of contact they had had with their MP in the past year, nearly half (48%) claimed that they had read a letter or leaflet from their MP. A quarter claimed to have seen their MP on television, 20% to have written to their MP, 16% to have visited their MP's Web site, 12% to have met their MP face to face, and 11% to have listened to their MP making a speech. Almost 4 out of 10 respondents (39%) claimed to have had no contact of any kind with their MP.

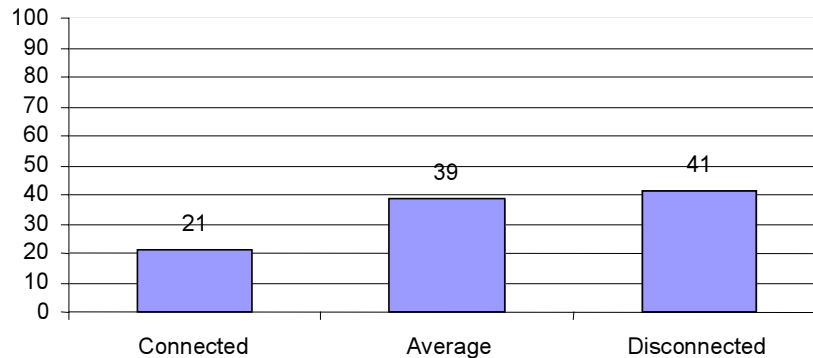
There was a significant correspondence between having had contact with and feeling connected to MPs. People who had met their MPs in person were more than five times more likely to feel connected to them than those who had not; those who had visited their MP's Web site were nearly three times as likely to feel connected. Ninety-four percent of respondents who had had no contact with their MP in the past year felt disconnected, compared with 61% of the overall sample.

In a 1999 survey by the U.S. Council for Excellence in Government (CEG), almost two thirds (64%) of Americans agreed with the statement "I feel distant and disconnected from government." The CEG research found that citizens who felt connected were more likely to have contacted their elected representative (57%–38%). Was there a similar correlation between communication with MPs and perceptions of connection in the UK sample? On average, those who felt disconnected from Parliament were 18% more likely than those who felt connected to have had no contact at all with their MPs (see Figure 3). Those who felt disconnected from their MPs were 37% more likely not to have had any contact with them at all (see Figure 4).

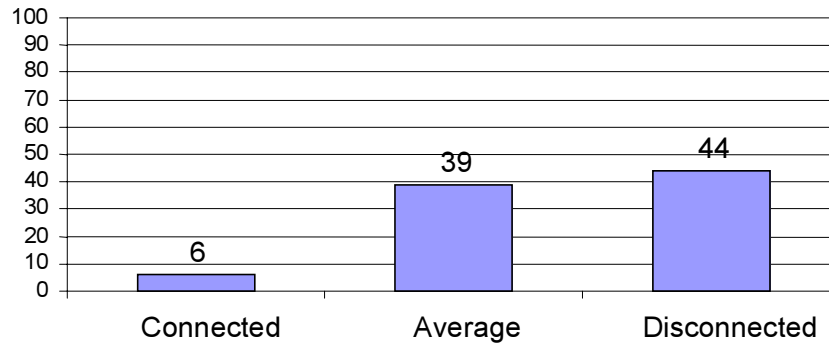
A key finding was that the vast majority (80%) of people who did not vote in the previous election felt disconnected from Parliament. Eighty-seven percent of those who did vote in the previous election felt connected to Parliament. Nonvoters were far less likely to have had contact with their MPs than voters.

### Articulating Disconnection

How can these widely held negative perceptions of citizen-representative connection be explained? The qualitative method used to obtain a more detailed picture of what



**Figure 3.** No contact with MPs according to perceived connection: Disconnection with Parliament.



**Figure 4.** No contact with MPs according to perceived connection: Disconnection with MP.

citizens mean by political disconnection was to recontact survey respondents, inviting them to complete two sentences: “I don’t feel connected to my political representative because . . .” and “A connected political representative should. . .” The 2,273 respondents to the initial survey were contacted by e-mail; 1,783 responded to the invitation and posted a total of 23,642 words to complete the first sentence and 25,821 to complete the second. In their comments, we could identify eight types of disconnected representatives, as described subsequently.

#### *The Unknown Representative*

A significant minority (about one in five respondents) did not know who their MP was. Considering that 39% of respondents had had no contact with their MP (mediated or otherwise) in the previous year, it is not surprising that about half of that number could not identify their MP.

I don’t know who they are and they make no attempt to rectify this.

I don’t even know who he/she is! We have only lived here 4 months, but we have not had any newsletters or correspondence from any political representative.

#### *The Invisible Representative*

Some respondents complained about their MPs’ lack of presence: “He isn’t very ‘visible,’ hardly hear anything about him.” The importance of being “seen” was clearly about more than formal representation. To be seen is a first step to being trusted. Respondents seemed to perceive unseen representatives as being ephemeral, faceless, ghostly figures:

Even though he only lives up the road I have never ever seen him.

I don’t even know who is representing me politically and I don’t know anyone who does. They don’t seem to want to be known.

After the election and its promises, nothing’s changed. I voted but have actually forgotten his name as I haven’t seen nor heard of him since.



***The Distant Representative***

Respondents were uneasy about the distance of their representative from them. Even in an age of time-space compression, local rootedness and attachment are highly valued as grounds for representing. Paradoxically, although distance between citizens and the *loci* of central power is a key reason for the necessity of political representation, representatives are expected to transcend the symbolic manifestations of distance in their work of representing. Respondents expected representatives to be near, in the sense of being reachable and touchable:

He never walks around our town; we have to go somewhere once every month for a surgery of about 2 hours.

They are not seen very often round here. They don't seem to like mixing with the public.

They have no local presence, and make no obvious effort to communicate with their constituents.

***The Alien Representative***

A repeated observation from respondents was that their MPs came from a different world, an alien planet. The prevalence of this metaphor was striking, perhaps reflecting a perception of representatives as “outsiders” with life histories that made them incapable of registering everyday meanings.

They live in a totally different world to the man on the street.

They haven't a clue about the real world. They say they do but I feel it is just lip service.

I don't think they are on the same planet. They have no idea about normal life.

***The Partisan Representative***

Respondents commonly complained about their representatives being politicians, more attached to their parties than those they represent. In the minds of many respondents, there seemed to be a split between the work of representing and the rituals of high politics. Respondents wanted to be consulted and heard rather than simply regarded as voting fodder.

He is a party loyalist, a careerist who toes the party line irrespective of whether it is appropriate to his constituency.

He just appears to be a publicity machine—not a politician.

He does not refer to me for my opinion on any question. Mainly he follows the party line.

***The Untrustworthy Representative***

Some respondents expressed serious distrust of their MPs, but these were a relatively small minority. In general, respondents distrusted the process of representation rather than the character of representatives. But there were strongly expressed exceptions:

I regard my MP as a self-serving opportunist who is interested in power for power's sake and will do and say anything to secure his position.

I can't trust any politician/party to treat me like an adult, and tell me the truth. There is so much secrecy and behind the scenes trade offs.

There is no relationship between his policies and my expectations.

***The Arrogant Representative***

In a postdeferential culture, representatives are required to respect people whose experiences and backgrounds they do not understand. As Sennett (2003) has powerfully argued, equality entails respect based on the autonomy of the respected rather than the comprehension of the respector. This places elected representatives in a mass society in the odd position of having to demonstrate respect for unknown recipients. A widespread complaint from respondents was that their MPs did not care about who they really were and how or what they thought.

She seems more at home in the *Today* program studio than the constituency. She has a huge majority and I suspect she takes us for granted.

They treat us as if we were invisible and do what they want, not what the people they represent want.

The MP for here looks down his nose at us lower mortals.

***The Irrelevant Representative***

Finally, a significant minority of respondents considered their MP to have little or no relevance to their lives. Unlike the respondents who did not know who their MP was, these individuals knew their MP in the way that a childless couple might know the local school or a vegetarian might know the local butcher shop. They were unconvinced that they had any need to be represented politically.

They don't play a part in my life.

I have never had any reason to ask the assistance or advice from my MP or councillor.

The most striking feature of these pervasive perceptions of political disconnection is the overwhelming extent to which they refer to process rather than outcome. In open survey questions, respondents were free to give whatever reasons came into their minds for feeling disconnected, but hardly any chose to criticize their representatives for not serving the right interests, pursuing correct policies, or delivering better outcomes. Connection

was conceived almost entirely in terms of the health of the representative-constituent relationship. References to mechanisms of connection, such as elections, accountability, or constitutional arrangements, were few, with the exception of some proposals for representatives to initiate local referendums and online consultations. Public frustration appears to be less about constitutionality or policy than affective perceptions of attachment, affinity, and respect.

When asked how their representatives could become more connected, respondents wanted them to be more accessible, to spend more time listening to constituents, to be more independent from parties, and to be more like the people they represented (see the Appendix for typical quotations).

### **From Indirect to Direct Representation**

After nearly a century of political representation based upon the principle of universal franchise, what is the public saying about how it feels to be represented by others? The overwhelming negativity of the survey and qualitative data considered here, as well as the extensive data from other studies of public attitudes toward politics and politicians, could be read as suggesting that the public has had enough of representation and now wants to make most or all political decisions for itself. There is certainly strong evidence that the public wants more say in politics and trusts its own judgments more than those of politicians (Bowler, Donovan, & Karp, 2003; Coleman, 2003a). But there is little to indicate that citizens want to dispense entirely with representative democracy and initiate a direct democracy, at least in its crudest sense of transcending all representative institutions and passing unmediated power over decision making to all voters. Indeed, when asked directly whether institutions such as parliaments should cede power to a plebiscitary electorate, few are in favor of this (Coleman, 2003b). Bowler et al. (2003) offer intriguing evidence to show that many citizens do not distinguish between direct and representative democracy; the determining variable is their attitude toward democracy as such. According to this thesis, distrust of representative democracy affects distrust of direct democracy; those who have faith in the public's democratic capacity in representative democracy are more likely to support greater direct democracy than those who do not. A helpful feature of Bowler et al.'s analysis is their rejection of the direct-representative dichotomy and their conceptualization of a spectrum of more or less direct or indirect democracy.

A second response to the data presented here is offered by Inglehart's post-materialism thesis, according to which there is a shift in emphasis from maximizing economic gains to maximizing subjective well-being. Postmaterialist citizens are regarded as moving away from trust in secular or religious authorities, and this is especially so in the case of the young and better educated (Inglehart, 1977, 1990). There is certainly evidence from the qualitative data that citizens care more about the quality of political relationships than could be explained by a simple materialist analysis of "who gets what." But, contrary to the Inglehart thesis, there is no significant evidence from this survey that better-off, more educated people feel any more or less disconnected from their political representatives—and the youngest cohort of respondents reported feeling slightly more connected.

A third response would be to interpret the public's mood of disconnection as a demand for a more direct form of representation. Indirect representation is characterized by an apparently inevitable fracture between the representing center and the represented outer layers. The indirectness of political representation is not in fact inevitable, but

contingently rooted in some of the most enduring features of modernity: the intractability of distance, the bounded nature of place, the professionalization of mediation, and the spectacular nature of authority. In a world of increasing interconnectedness, these justifications for indirect representation appear less credible.

With the emergence of reconfigured patterns of interaction across space and time, resulting particularly from computer-mediated communication, traditionally centralized and indirect social processes are under increasing pressure to adapt. Shopping, banking, learning, travel, and health care are being reshaped by new forms of mediation, so it seems unlikely that political representation could remain undisturbed. At the functional level of governance, the Internet has been at the heart of major programs to make information more transparent and to rationalize service delivery. At the level of political representation, parliaments have slowly started to engage with digital media at a number of levels, but neither representative institutions nor individual representatives have so far done much more than replicate offline communication practices (Gibson, Nixon, & Ward, 2003; Coleman & Spiller, 2004).

The prospect of using the inherent interactivity of the Internet to enhance democracy has been raised by a number of scholars. Early cyber-democrats predicted that representative institutions would be radically transformed, or would even become obsolete, in the face of the public's capacity to state views and vote on any issue (Toffler, 1980; Etzioni, 1992; Becker & Slaton, 2000; Morris, 2001). More recently, the simplistic linkage between the Internet and plebiscitary democracy has been criticized. Rather than regarding the Internet as a means of transcending representation, it has been conceived as a tool for refashioning and strengthening the hitherto weak and neglected relationship between representatives and represented (Blumler & Coleman, 2000; Coleman & Gotze, 2001).

Blumler and Coleman have argued against a deterministic notion of technologies possessing inherently democratizing features, preferring to emphasize the "vulnerable potential" of digital information and communication technologies, which will only be realized in specific cultural and policy contexts. The potential reconfiguration of representation in the digital age entails four conceptual and strategic shifts from the original typology presented at the beginning of this article.

### ***From Distance to Co-Presence***

Digital technologies have facilitated the growth of relationships of mediated co-presence, leading to a shrinkage of social space and the collapse of traditional constraints of distance. Virtual co-presence transcends the problem of proximity by digitally simulating the presence of physically distant actors so as to make them instantly "accessible, available and subject to one another" (Goffman, 1963, p. 40).

The consequence of mediated co-presence is to undermine conventional justifications for thin or minimal communication between representatives and represented. When addressing a political representative involved having to make physical contact—a visit to a weekly surgery or a letter addressed to a physical office—the management of the relationship was largely controlled by politicians, via appointment systems and mail protocols. As representatives can be addressed at any time and in any place via mobile phone, text message, or e-mail, citizens experience greater communicative equality. Politicians' Web sites become vulnerable to hackers; they can be talked about by bloggers; and an e-mail reply to a single constituent can be copied and distributed to thousands within seconds. So far, most analyses of this new situation have emphasized the discomfort of politicians in

the face of communication overload. The U.S. Congress has gone as far as to support a research project intended to address the curse of overload by unsolicited communications. The Congress Online report *E-mail Overload in Congress: Managing a Communication Crisis* states that “with individual House offices now receiving as many as 8,000 e-mail messages per month, and Senate offices receiving as many as 55,000, the burdens on staff are viewed as unmanageable.” Members of Congress, like elected legislators elsewhere, are in search of effective mail-filtering techniques and protocols designed to protect them from unwanted communicators. From citizens’ perspective, the problem is one of non-response rather than overload. Another Congress Online study, *Constituents and Your Web Site: What Citizens Want to See on Congressional Web Sites*, reports on a series of focus groups in which citizens were asked what they want from online communication with their representatives:

Participants . . . wanted assurances that, once expressed, their views would be both acknowledged and taken into account. Just as importantly, however, they expressed their appreciation for Members who showed the courtesy to tell them when they did not agree with them.

Whereas politicians are instrumental and managerial in their concern to control their connection with constituents, citizens are more affectively motivated, expressing concern about the quality rather than the volume of correspondence with their representatives.

In the UK, the Hansard Society has run some experimental online surgeries designed to explore how these peculiarly private consultations about public affairs work in a context of virtual co-presence (Coleman, 2004a). The most obvious benefit is the collapse of distance. The MP can be in London and the constituent in Lancashire, but, for the duration of the interaction, they are in the same virtual place. This not only frees time for the representative, who does not have to lose precious hours moving from one location to another, but allows the citizen to engage from the relative security and familiarity of a home or workplace. Virtual co-presence diminishes nonverbal cues, especially significant when constituents, often in the role of a victim or supplicant, encounter articulate, confident politicians. Online interactions are archived so that both parties to a meeting can recall what was said or promised. As with most forms of online communication, virtual or cyber-surgeries should not be thought of as a substitution for the richness of face-to-face interaction but as an additional option that for some at least, might prove more convenient or satisfying.

### ***From Place to Networks***

The proliferation of social networks, through which weak ties connect citizens to numerous others, weakens the logic of narrow representation, whether based upon bounded territory or partisan ideology. As people’s lives become more dispersed across networks of interest, preference, and passion, the possibility of representing them within centralized, hierarchical institutions becomes less credible.

Bellamy and Raab (2001), in a suggestive account of the decentering of the parliamentary state, argued that “the emerging polity will be a hybrid or mixed social form” in which “the state and its central machinery will never finally wither, though they may well become severely attenuated” and it will become “increasingly difficult to sustain the legitimacy and the effectiveness of the ‘parliamentary chain of steering.’” The post-modern analysis was taken further by Frissen (2002) who stated that “politics has been

relocated, not only in terms of substance but institutionally as well. If there are centres at all, there are many of them. In the present societal complexity, parliament is only one of the actors, and a modest one at that" (p. 179). Whether or not governance is, or will become, quite that decentered, it is clearly the case that the space of representative politics has expanded and is now more fluid than ever. For example, at the level of governance, policy networks now play a central role. As online communication becomes ubiquitous and information abundant, the threshold of access to the arena of collective action is lowered and potential mobilizers of public opinion find it easier to disseminate their messages (Bimber, 2002). Examples of this can be seen in the successful online campaigns conducted by anti-globalization activists and environmentalists, as well as indigenous and diasporic opposition groups in countries with undemocratic regimes (McCaughey & Ayers, 2003).

Work by Wellman on social networks and Hollander and Jankowski on online communities (or "community communication") has helped to redress the dominant emphasis in communication theory upon mass media and national audiences (Wellman, 1998; Jankowski, 2002; Hollander, 2002). Much daily communication occurs in very local environments. In working out their political attitudes, people are disinclined to be exposed to conflict with strangers in public places (Eliasoph, 1998). Most personal political discussion takes place in the safety of the home or among close friends (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995; Wyatt, Kim, & Katz, 2000). Even in online political discussion, the scope for speaking in public while staying in a private space has proved attractive to many citizens (Stromer-Galley, 2002). Consequently, rather than seeing themselves as territorially bounded constituents locked into a linear communication relationship with elected representatives, new political networks are increasingly bypassing the traditional structures of representation.

### *From Transmission to Dialogue*

The framing of 20th-century politics by broadcast media led to a sense that democracy amounted to the public watching and listening to the political elite thinking aloud on its behalf. The agenda of discussion has tended to be set by party communication managers and senior media editors, both locked into a systemic process of mutual dependence and ultimate control over the production of news and debate. This has produced an ethos of virtual deliberation in which, rather like the 18th century notion of virtual representation, where the rich voted on behalf of the poor, the politically well connected debate policy questions on behalf of the disconnected. The paternalistic model of political coverage is proving unattractive and major public broadcasters, such as the BBC, are desperately seeking new ways of engaging their audiences. In 2002, the director general of the BBC initiated a review to think of new ways of presenting politics.

With the rise of interactive media, the equation between communication and transmission is no longer defensible as the best or only way of serving the public interest (Coleman, 2004b). Liu and Shrum (2002, p. 7) defined interactivity as "the degree to which two or more communication parties can act on each other, on the communication medium, and on the messages, and the degree to which such influences are synchronised." In the context of representation, interactivity opens up unprecedented opportunities for more inclusive public engagement in the deliberation of policy issues. For example, the UK Parliament has run a series of online consultations in which groups of citizens with experience and expertise in relation to a specific policy area have been invited to enter an online forum for a period of 1 month and share ideas with one another and with MPs

(Coleman, 2004a). This has enabled MPs to broaden their agenda. For example, after an online consultation on the draft Communications Bill, Brian White, MP, a member of the committee scrutinizing the legislation, stated:

It helped us change the questions we were asking the witnesses and made us focus on areas we would not necessarily have thought of. It tended either to reinforce something that we already knew or raised questions that we would not otherwise have asked.

According to another committee member, Lord McNally: "It allowed us to get on the road, electronically. The alternative would have been to hold a series of public meetings around the country."

As important were the responses from citizens who participated in the online forum. For example:

It was a lot easier for ordinary people to go online than to get a big document on paper, read through it, and then write a letter for a submission to a government department. The committee was receiving evidence largely from a big group of industrial interest groups which had been following the consultations on communications reform for 5 years. And it ends up being a very narrow group. But in the online forum other voices were coming in, voices that are not normally heard. It also gave a chance for a wider set of issues to be debated than those which the committee itself had set out.

Throughout the consultation I was on a learning curve, listening to other people. Even if I disagreed with them it was refreshing. There was a sense of rational debate taking place.

Most of the time Parliament is just a remote idea. I like the fact that there is a little bit of energy around it and any relationship that might flow from these small beginnings might be extremely valuable.

In response to this kind of enthusiasm for e-enabled public dialogue, a range of initiatives and policies in the area of e-democracy are being developed by national, local, and supranational governments. Not all are well designed or even necessarily well intentioned. The scope for exploiting participatory exercises to domesticate and marginalize dissent is not lost on some politicians. But in several cases there does seem to be a genuine recognition that e-participation could be a way not only to make policies more legitimate and better informed but to generate a more deliberative democracy in which the public has a direct say.

### *From Spectacle to Play*

As relatively inexpensive and increasingly convergent media technologies have become accessible, and the rigid division between producer and audience evaporates, opportunities for self-representation become more realistic. Citizens are no longer content with the role of just being passive spectators. As the phenomenal popularity of reality TV has shown, people want to be (literally) in the picture and to have their judgments respected. One viewer of the UK *Big Brother* series, asked to comment on what politicians could learn from the show, said



I think that the main lesson that politicians should learn is that we believe what we see, not what they want us to hear. They would do better to show us their values by the way they live than to try to convince us by the use of spin . . . that things are different to the way we know they are. The main lesson they should learn is that we make up our own minds on what we see, and if what we see bears no resemblance to what they are telling us, then we lose faith in them, we do not start believing them. (Coleman, 2003b, p. 26)

The public is learning to adopt critical viewing strategies in order to decode the sophisticated presentational techniques employed by politicians.

The online manifestation of the reality TV phenomenon is blogging. There are now millions of Web logs in which otherwise unknown citizens offer their perspectives on the world and create a Web of links to the perspectives of others. Bloggers can rise from private obscurity to global fame, as happened to Salam Pax, the Baghdad blogger in the months before and during the war on Iraq. Some politicians are establishing Web logs, but the degree of openness and flexibility represented by such distributed cooperative working may in the long term prove more than disciplined party structures can cope with.

Professional representatives have a problem: They are expected to be extraordinary enough to be representatives, but ordinary enough to be representative. Some attempt to resolve this dilemma by simulating ordinariness, but they are likely to be judged ultimately by the extent to which they can observe Burke's exhortation to maintain "the closest correspondence and the most unreserved communication with [their] constituents" (p. 411).

### **The Directly Represented Citizen**

Early cyber-democrats envisaged a return to the Greek *agora* or the New England town meeting. Such idealism reflected a combination of overdeterministic reliance upon the apparently democratizing features of digital technologies and a naïve belief in the dispensability of representation. In fact, representation is inevitable in a world where total presence of those who will be affected by decisions is rarely, if ever, possible. But, just as the myth of the technologically facilitated *agora* has been a distraction, the assumption by political scientists and others that indirect representation is also an inevitability has served to constrain imaginative efforts to more closely link the act of representing to the needs and desires of the represented. The conservatism of indirect representation has resulted in the represented voting with their feet: They have walked away from a political process which they experience as ignoring their input and energy.

Direct representation offers many of the same benefits as direct democracy, but fewer of the burdens. In short, it offers citizens the prospect of representative closeness, mutuality, coherence, and empathy without expecting them to become full-time participating citizens. Interactive, digital mediation plays a crucial role in making direct representation a realistic possibility, as the model illustrated in Figure 5 suggests.

If the typical citizen of the analogue world of indirect representation suffers the loneliness of communicative isolation and impotence, the directly represented citizen, as an ideal type, might expect to experience representation in three enhanced ways. First, the nature of accountability would change from being a process of account transmission (from politicians via the media to the citizen) to account sharing—or two-way accountability. Narrative account giving by citizens will come to be regarded as serving an equally important democratic function as account giving by politicians. Second, by accommodating a pluralistic network of representations, in contrast to the singular, linear



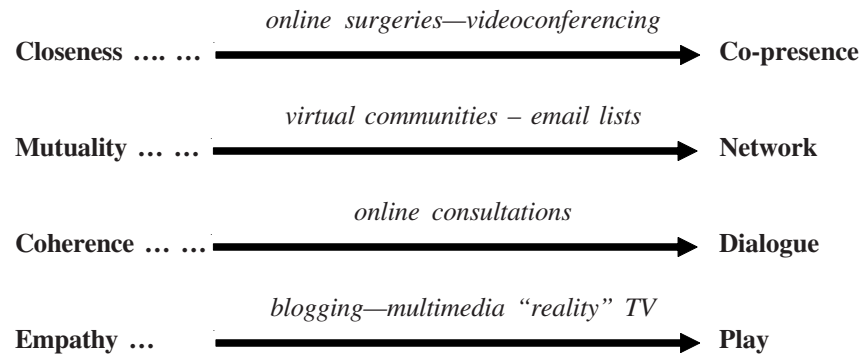


Figure 5. Role of digital mediation in direct representation.

conception of political representation characteristic of analogue mediation, democratic processes would be more sensitive to the diverse nature of the civic public—or publics. In short, there would be more practical scope for the development of hyper-pluralism. Third, by creating new spaces of public self-representation and experiential reflexivity, recognition and legitimacy might be accorded to the important connections between affective desire and rational instrumentality in public attitudes and behavior. Normatively, at least, digitally mediated direct representation could offer an escape route from the profound disconnection that characterizes contemporary liberal democracies.

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**APPENDIX: Prescriptions for Connected Representation*****Be Accessible***

1. Make every effort to be available to all of their constituents, regardless of their age, interest in politics, or preferred method of communication.
2. Always be available, even an e-mail address to leave queries or comments, knowing that he will get them.
3. Be more in touch with his local community, not just the flashy publicity stunts he pulls.

***Listen to Us***

1. Maintain regular consultative contact, in a variety of ways, with those he or she represents.
2. Find every opportunity to find out what really affects local people's lives, what their views are, including nonvoters and children. Talk and communicate with people and set up many more regular and varied meeting venues to give locals a voice. Show that you have listened to them and give them a voice in Parliament.
3. Listen to her constituents and take them into account in her decision making. Represent the people to Parliament, not vice versa.

***Be Independent***

1. Act democratically and reflect the opinions of his or her constituents, rather than act like sheep following the party leadership and whip.
2. Make decisions based on mini-referenda (local polls) aimed to reflect decisions from a cross section of their constituents.

***Be Local***

1. Live in the constituency, send his or her children to local schools, and understand the problems facing people in the area.
2. Spend time in his/her constituency, make people aware, get them involved, and be present at local events to get known as a face and a person, not just a name.
3. Be more in touch with his local community, not just the flashy publicity stunts he pulls.

***Be One of Us***

1. Be relatively normal, approachable, friendly, not patronizing, and appear to have some grasp of the realities of life for other people and keep their feet on the ground.
2. Come from the same community and background as myself so that he will understand my circumstances.