



New mediation and direct representation: reconceptualizing representation in the digital age

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Abstract

This article explores three responses to the emergence of digitally mediated political representation. The first regards disintermediation as a basis for direct democracy, transcending the traditional arrangements and institutions of political representation. The second model institutionalizes digital information and communication technology (ICT) within the rational–bureaucratic framework of existing governance. The third model is based upon a reconceptualization of democratic representation, based upon new notions of accountability, plurality and authentic reality. It is argued that virtual deliberation and indirect representation are under severe political strain and that digitally-mediated direct representation could provide a basis for a more dialogical and deliberative democracy in place of the dialogue of the deaf which tends to characterize contemporary political representation.

Key words

campaign • deliberation • democracy • interactivity •
mediation • permanent • representation

An extensive literature, both speculative and empirical, now exists examining the likely effects of new, digital media, such as the internet, upon the theory and practice of political representation. These accounts have often been characterized by crude dichotomies: technology as a utopian liberator versus technocratic dystopianism; direct democracy versus politics as normal; determinism versus choice. The aim of this article is to move beyond such dichotomized accounts and set out a more dialectical analysis, embracing the tense connections between the relationships of representation and mediation. Stated simply, the argument is that mediation does not simply affect representation, but is an essential element of representation. In a complex, mass society indirect social interaction is the norm and political representations tend to be vertically and indirectly mediated. The argument of this article is that new, digital technologies of mediation make possible more direct techniques of representation which do not transcend the necessity for representing or being represented in a political democracy, but serve to democratize representation by making it a more direct relationship.

REPRESENTATION, INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION

To represent is to mediate between the absent and the present. Representation is an essentially communicative activity, entailing the symbolic embodiment of a previously absent entity. Photography is perhaps the most vivid and spectral manifestation of this dialectical process; the photographic image depends for its success upon identically reflecting an absent presence, while having to be disconnected from its subject in space and time in order to guarantee its authenticity as a representation rather than an original. The tense conflation of disconnection and reconnection is central to the meaning and function of representation. A map presents a symbolic depiction of the London Underground and yet is decidedly *not* the London Underground. It is authentic insofar as it tells us what we need to know about the London Underground. Representation both replicates its subject and leaves it untouched: 'the thing remains, imparting information to the representation but not at the expense of any of its own matter or energy' (Nichols, 1991: 149). Representation performs an indexical, informational function; it renders an account which must be read, decoded, interpreted and evaluated for its authenticity.

The problem of *political* representation is rather more complex, particularly democratically accountable representation, where the information provided must accord (at least to some extent) with the wishes of those who are represented. Whereas a photograph, map, portrait or sketch represents without direct accountability to the represented subject, the democratic representation of public interests entails an intimate relationship between the wishes of the represented and the actions of representatives. As

Pitkin has argued, this relationship has tended to be depicted in contrasting ways: that representatives should be controlled by the mandates of the represented and that the role of representatives is to act in accordance with their own views, regardless of the wishes of the represented:

The mandate theorist says: if the situation is such that we can no longer see the constituents as present then there is no representation, and if the man habitually votes the opposite of their wishes we can no longer see them as present in his voting . . . The independence theorist says: if the situation is such that we can no longer see the rep acting, but rather we see the constituents acting directly for themselves, then there is no representation. (Pitkin, 1967: 153)

The perspicacious originality of Pitkin's analysis of political representation is her rejection of this dichotomy. She argues that:

[I]t is not enough to choose between the representative's judgment and the constituents' wishes; and there is no rational basis for choosing between them *tout court*. Representation as an idea implies that normally they will coincide, and that when they fail to coincide there is a reason. (Pitkin, 1967: 165)

Pitkin's final definition of the substantive act of representing serves to illuminate the perpetual communicative tension that characterizes all representative democracies:

[R]epresenting . . . 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, 1967: 210)

This definition allows us to make qualitative judgements about representation. Rather than succumbing to the populist lament that political representatives fail because they do not mirror or mimic public opinion – or vociferous opinion, media opinion or my opinion, as the case may be – it is possible to evaluate the act of representing in terms of its independence, recognition of the views of the represented, avoidance of conflict with the represented and capacity to explain apparently unrepresentative actions to the represented. Democratic representing involves the effective communication of meanings and intentions. This is an inherently problematic task, for the production of meanings is itself a mediated process. As Silverstone persuasively argues:

We need to understand this process of mediation, to understand how meanings emerge, where and with what consequences. We need to be able to identify those moments where the process appears to break down. Where it is distorted by technology or intention. We need to understand its politics: its vulnerability to the exercise of power; its dependence on the work of institutions as well as individuals; and its own power to persuade and to claim attention and response. (Silverstone, 1999: 18)

To represent is to mediate between experience, voice and action; to mediate is to represent the absent in the present. Within the dialectic between representation and mediation lies an acute tension, for the quality of representing depends upon a complex interaction between two relationships: the expressed wishes of the represented and the representative's informed apprehension of the interests of the represented; and the mediated flow of meanings and intentions between representative and represented. It follows from this that the nature of political representation is always likely to be intimately related to available means and methods of communication.

DISCOURSES OF MEDIATION AND REPRESENTATION

The megaphone is the metaphorical medium of demagogic politics. Megaphones transmit, but do not receive; they amplify the voices of the leaders above those of the led; they are territorial, reaching a geographically-defined public in a specific space; they are authoritarian: it is hard to heckle a speaker with a megaphone. Television is the quintessential megaphone medium. Since the late 1950s, the professionalization of political message-management has coincided with the rise of television as the principal medium of communication between the political elite and those they represent. In the spirit of megaphone communication, television is a national (or regional) transmission medium dedicated to a monological narrative directed at a non-interacting audience.

By contrast, radar is a more appropriate technological metaphor for an inclusive, collaborative and interactive conception of representation. The function of radar is to detect distant objects and determine their characteristics by analysis of high-frequency radiowaves reflected from their surfaces. In short, it is about sensitive listening. Analogue communication technologies, such as radio and television, are poorly suited for radar activity; digital technologies, such as the internet, make for effective radar devices precisely because they are interactive, diminishing the significance of the old dichotomy between sender and receiver, producer and audience.

Simultaneous with transformative changes in the realm of mediation, from analogue-megaphone to digital-radar technologies, have been dramatic changes in the conception and nature of political representation. Traditionally, the legitimating force in representative democracies has been contractual. Candidates for representation have offered promises to voters

who have evaluated them in terms of the quality of the benefits on display and the probity of the candidates as likely promise-keepers. The candidate who is elected as representative enters into a contract with voters to deliver the promised benefits. Failure to deliver is likely to result in non-re-election of the representative. In this model of representation, election campaigns are the key political moment for communication between representatives and citizens.

Political scientists have observed a recent trend from contractual to permanent representation. The so-called permanent campaign, whereby governing and campaigning are fused within a perpetual relationship, has come to characterize representative politics. Whereas contractual representatives entered into a relationship with voters based upon offers and obligations, permanent representatives tend to be reactive and reflexive, dependent upon monitoring and adapting to public opinion. In the words of the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, after his 1997 election victory, 'We are not the masters, but the servants of the people'. According to Mann and Ornstein:

The permanent campaign can be described as our unwritten Anti-Constitution. The written Constitution would keep the citizenry at arm's length from the governing process. The Anti-Constitution sees all efforts at deliberation outside the public eye as conspiratorial. The Constitution would normally consider the people as a sum of localities linked to government through representatives who take counsel with each other. The Anti-Constitution sees a largely undifferentiated public where one representative is interchangeable with another as long as he or she takes instructions. The Constitution would submit the results of governing to the people at regular intervals in many different election venues. The Anti-Constitution prescribes instant responsiveness to the continuous monitoring of the people's mass opinion and mood. (2000: 17–18)

At a more theoretical level of argument, Mansbridge (1998: 6) argues that 'representation by promising' is giving way to 'anticipatory democracy' in which 'the voter's power works backward and the representative's attention forward'. The electorate becomes more like a standing jury, reviewing the ongoing performance of government; and representatives become more like advocates, seeking to connect with citizens via a range of tools, including polls, focus groups, media management and interest-group networking. Mansbridge suggests that:

Rather than treating opinion polls as mindless and interest groups as no more than the tool of 'special interests', an empirical analysis driven by appropriate normative concerns should ask how well these institutions serve the purposes of mutual communication and education. (1998: 6)

In short, the problem might not be permanent representation per se, but the weak and inappropriate modes of mediation that support it.

Mansbridge's emphasis upon 'mutual communication and education' suggests a more publically deliberative approach to policy formation and decision-making. Whereas contractual representation required little deliberative input from citizen-voters, permanent representation creates strong incentives for citizen-jurors to deliberate on questions of public policy. Electorates aggregate; juries deliberate. When representation becomes permanent, citizens become more like standing juries than occasional electorates.

Rather than regard transformations of mediation (from analogue to digital) and representation (from contractual to permanent) as isolated phenomena, as commentators have tended to do, this article seeks to explore the dialectical, although not deterministic, connections between these paradigmatic shifts. Three main responses to these linked developments can be traced. First, some enthusiasts for the new media have regarded interactive communication technologies as a source of potential liberation from the artificialities and inherent ambiguities of political representation. Often regarded as idealistic, futuristic or technocratic, these thinkers were among the first to develop notions of 'electronic democracy'. Second, there are political practitioners, including elected representatives and parliamentary officials, who have tended to regard new forms of mediation as pragmatic techniques which can be adapted to the procedures and cultures of institutional representation. Their outlook is supported theoretically by Schumpeterian political scientists who, in the name of political realism, resist excessive claims made for digital media. Third, a synthesis is to be identified between developments in the spheres of mediation and representation, which could result in a reconceptualization of democratic representation.

TRANSCENDING REPRESENTATION

Dreams of disintermediation and direct democracy are not new. Traditionally, visions of prelapsarian and millenarian harmony have been rooted in notions of perfect mutual understanding based upon a normative notion of unadulterated communication (Passmore, 1970; Simonson, 1996). Peters, a critic of such normative claims, argues that:

'Communication' is a registry of modern longings. The term evokes a utopia where nothing is misunderstood, hearts are open, and expression is uninhibited. (Peters, 1999: 2)

For those who regard representation as a consequence of miscommunication, the use of interactive technology as a tool for transparency and transcendence through disintermediation has been an alluring prospect. Advocates of democratic reform have pointed to the connection between interactive communication technologies and direct democracy. Toffler (1981: 431) argues that 'spectacular advances in

communications technology' have undermined old political assumptions: 'the old objections to direct democracy are growing weaker at precisely the same time that the objections to representative democracy are growing stronger.' Becker and Slaton contend that:

New forms of electronically based democratic political organization will emerge [which] will transform representative government into a system much less responsive to traditionally organized pressure groups and more responsive to a broad base of its citizenry. (2000: 81)

Grossman observes that:

In kitchens, living rooms, dens, bedrooms, and workplaces throughout the nation, citizens have begun to apply . . . electronic devices to political purposes, giving those who use them a degree of empowerment they never had before . . . By pushing a button, typing on-line, or talking to a computer, they will be able to tell their president, senators, members of Congress, and local leaders what they want them to do and in what priority order. (1995: 146)

President Bill Clinton's former strategic adviser, Dick Morris, argues that:

The internet offers a potential for direct democracy so profound that it may well transform not only our system of politics but our very form of government . . . Bypassing national representatives and speaking directly to one another, the people of the world will use the internet increasingly to form a political unit for the future. (2001: 1033)

These proposals for citizen empowerment facilitated by interactive communication technologies offer support to republican and communitarian conceptions of democracy (Barber, 1998; Burnheim, 1989; Etzioni, 1992).

Critics of theories of digital transformation argue that they fail to take account of perennial problems of scale, complexity and design. These are formidable barriers to participatory democracy of any kind.

Scale

Political representation is often presented as a solution to the intractable problem of communities being too large to assemble in one place and deliberate collectively. Because most contemporary political units are national or regional in scale, face-to-face models of deliberation and decision-making which worked well for New England town meetings or Swiss canton assemblies are inappropriate. Even in the oft-cited Greek *agora*, the size of the eligible citizenry was so large that policies had to be made by a smaller council and discussions addressed by leading orators, rather than the give-and-take of participatory discourse. By electing representatives, whose principal tasks are to aggregate public preferences and deliberate on behalf of the public, the problem of scale is overcome.

In the view of some democratic theorists, the function of political representation is to produce a microcosmic reflection of the public. In accordance with this view, representatives should look like the public demographically and think like the public politically. John Adams, one of the Founding Fathers of the US, argued that a representative assembly 'should be in miniature an exact portrait of the people at large. It should think, feel, reason and act like them' (Adams, 1854: 195). John Stuart Mill considered that the British parliament, as a representative assembly, had a more important role in reflecting the interests and perspectives of diverse groups and classes than in actually governing or even influencing policy. Indeed, Mill's vigorous support for Hare's scheme for proportional representation was based upon a greater concern that parliament should be an inclusive coalition of minorities rather than a legislative powerhouse (Mill, 1861).

An extension of the microcosmic conception of representation is the claim that 'the politics of presence' is as important, if not more so, than 'the politics of ideas' (Phillips, 1995: 5). The argument of 'presence' democrats is that representatives' capacity to mirror the experiences of the represented is a key source of authentic legitimacy. This approach weakens the notion of a single public entrusting its welfare to a single representative entity; both citizenship and representation become more fragmented, pluralized and decentred, opening up the possibility that political representation can operate on the level and scale of human experience rather than state or institutional formations. In practice, however, as 'presence' democrats accept, attempts to overcome problems of scale through various forms of proportional representation can result in two problems: the absence of clearly aggregated majorities, leading to rule by minorities who hold the balance of power; and the balkanization of politics, whereby every preference becomes a 'special interest' and representation reflects consumerist demands rather than more enduring and coherent social values.

Complexity

A second defence of political representation against direct democracy concerns complexity. The rejection of the public's intellectual capacity for policy and decision-making is prevalent amongst early theorists of public opinion and democratic representation. Lippmann famously argued that:

The private citizen has come to feel rather like a deaf spectator in the back row, who ought to keep his mind on the mystery off there, but cannot quite manage to stay awake. He knows he is somehow affected by what is going on. Rules and regulations continually, taxes annually, and wars occasionally remind him that he is being swept along by great drifts of circumstance. Yet these public affairs are in no convincing way his affairs. They are for the most part invisible. They are managed, if they are managed at all, in distant centers, from

behind the scenes by unnamed powers. As a private person he does not know for certain what is going on, or who is doing it, or where he is being carried. No newspaper reports his environment so that he can grasp it; no school has taught him how to imagine it; his ideals, often, do not fit with it; listening to speeches, uttering opinions, and voting do not, he finds, enable him to govern it. He lives in a world in which he cannot see, does not understand, and is unable to direct. In the cold light of experience, he knows that his sovereignty is a fiction. He reigns in theory, but in fact he does not govern. (1925: 10)

Schumpeter made clear the consequences of this position:

Democracy does not mean and cannot mean that the people actually rule in any obvious sense of the terms 'people' and 'rule'. Democracy means only that the people have the opportunity of accepting or refusing the men who are to rule them. But since they might decide this also in entirely undemocratic ways, we have had to narrow our definition by adding a further criterion identifying the democratic method, *viz.*, free competition among would-be leaders for the vote of the electorate. (1976: 269)

A variation of this theme relates political complexity to the perennial conundrum of rational choice. Reference to trade-offs, prisoners' dilemmas and Pareto curves suggests that none but the most professionally and calculatingly organized factions could hope to influence policy formation or decision-making in accordance with their predetermined intentions (Arrow, 1951; Dunleavy, 1992; Riker, 1982). Given that individual actors are concerned to optimize their own preferences, in a condition of political complexity where consequences are often unpredictable and information resources are unequally spread, there is a strong possibility of collective choices running counter to majority preferences. As most citizens lack the skills to influence aggregate decisions, direct democracy could result in their systemic disempowerment.

Direct democracy is often associated with forms of populism that disregard complexity. Frequently, populist politics is driven more by values than knowledge. Levels of public knowledge about policy issues are notoriously low. Instant voting on questions of national policy via interactive communication technologies could result in uninformed 'technopopulism', with all the weaknesses of 'mobocracy', compounded by the speed of message flows.

Technocracy

A third defence of political representation against digitally-based direct democracy concerns the often uncritical view of new information and communication technologies (ICT). Technologies are never neutral: they are designed, shaped and socially modified in accordance with discourses that are often profoundly political and hegemonic (Lessig, 1999). For example, Introna and Nissenbaum have studied the design and practices of search engines and express concern about:

the ways that developers, designers and producers of search engines will direct these technological limitations, the influences that may come into play in determining any systematic inclusions and exclusions, the wide-ranging factors that dictate systematic prominence for some sites, dictating systematic invisibility for others. (2000: 170)

Search engines confer web existence upon otherwise isolated sites; the ways in which these are compiled and ranked determines the power of the medium. Similar critiques have been offered in relation to the linguistic nature of the web: where most users are non-American, but the overwhelming majority of websites are produced in the US for American-English speakers (Lebert, 1999).

The prospect of the internet enabling direct, plebiscitary democracy generates anxiety among political theorists and citizens alike. Whatever the deficiencies of representation (and, for most people, these apply to politicians rather than institutions or principles), until problems of scale, complexity and design are adequately addressed by direct democrats, their proposals are likely to remain within the realm of unrealised, technocratic prophecy.

RE-PRESENTING REPRESENTATION

While direct democrats and technocrats have wanted to technologize democracy, it can be argued that the traditional bodies of representative democracy have sought to institutionalize the technology, using ICT to replicate existing practices rather than adapt to new ways of communicating. This is consistent with the Schumpeterian trilogy of invention–innovation–diffusion, according to which organizations respond to new technologies in three stages: first, they use them to automate existing processes; then they begin to recognize opportunities for more efficient working; and finally, they re-engineer themselves around the benefits of the technology (Schumpeter, 1976).

As the central representative institutions in democratic nation-states, parliaments have tended to exemplify the Schumpeterian trilogy. Taking the British parliament as an example, it was slow to adopt the use of ICT, resisting central procurement of technological equipment and providing limited access to ICT for MPs. A 1994 survey of parliamentary use of ICT in several countries found that only Turkey, apart from the UK, lacked a parliamentary data network, and only Denmark, Finland, Spain and the German Bundesrat shared the British Parliament's lack of a video network providing live feeds of proceedings to members' offices. In the two years after that survey parliament created a data network for members (the PDVN), an online daily record of its proceedings and a website (Coleman, 2000).

The gradual progress of the British parliament from stage one to two of the Schumpeterian trilogy can be seen in relation to two main areas of its work: MPs' communication with their constituents and parliament's provision of information to the public.

As elected representatives, MPs have a problem: the executive often acts as if it does not need them, and the public often acts as if it does not want them. MPs are uncertain of their role, insecure about their legitimacy and eager to 'reconnect' with 'ordinary people'. Frustrated by the traditional media, which politicians feel represents them unfairly, the prospect of unmediated (or self-mediated) communication with the public has considerable appeal to some MPs. Most MPs now have email addresses at which they can be contacted by constituents and are receiving an increasing proportion of their correspondence electronically. This presents them with a number of problems. First, using the technology requires new skills and extra resources which put pressure on already overburdened offices. Second, there is a danger of email overload or emailers having expectations of speedy response that cannot be met by MPs' working practices. Some MPs have decided on principle that responses to emails will be no faster than to paper letters. Third, it is not always clear that email correspondence comes from a citizen in their own constituency and MPs, by tradition, only communicate about the problems of their own constituents. The process of filtering emails to authenticate the senders is relatively simple, but so far this has been slow to be adopted. So, MPs are caught in a dilemma of desperately wanting to be more in touch with those they represent, but not to be reached by constituents to the extent that they are overwhelmed. Several MPs have responded to this problem by making their email addresses inactive – a 'solution' that no significant business would dare to adopt.

MPs' websites are classic examples of automating bad practices. Whereas it used to be the case that politicians would produce self-advertising paper leaflets, usually destined for their constituents' waste paper bins, now they are putting their family photographs, soundbites and stories of successful campaigning on personal websites. Members of the US Congress were the first to establish websites, but, 'most members of Congress did not discuss legislation [on their websites], even legislation they had sponsored or cosponsored. Also, most avoided discussing policy issues' (Davis, 1999: 133). A 1999 Office of Management and Budgets (OMB) Watch study found that almost one-fifth of all material on congressional members' websites was over six months old and concluded that it is

difficult for a citizen to use the web to find information about their members' stances, as the site may not be updated, or may not contain the information that they are looking for. Even if the site is later updated, the user may not return. (Carter, 2000: 102)

In the case of the British parliament, even though there is evidence to suggest that web-based access to MPs is the preferred medium for internet users, only one in 20 UK internet users report visiting political websites of any kind, including MPs' sites (Coleman, 2001; Gibson et al., 2002).

The use of ICT to provide public information largely replicates offline services. *Hansard* online looks and feels much like the printed version; those unfamiliar with parliamentary proceedings are likely to find it no easier to use. The parliamentary website (<http://www.parliament.uk>) provides in electronic form the kind of information that interested members of the public might have asked for by letter or telephone. There has been a failure to use ICT to build connections between parliament and the public, such as by encouraging citizens to personalize information, discuss policy or legislative issues online or raise questions.

ICT has been used to support the ongoing process of making parliament more transparent. In 1989 cameras were allowed into the House of Commons for the first time. Then, broadcasters and politicians were sanguine about the potential of televising parliament, but two decades of live and recorded parliamentary broadcasting have tempered media enthusiasm (Coleman, 1999; Negrine, 1998). The rise of webcasting is a response to the demise of parliamentary broadcasting on universally accessible channels. The migration of parliament from television to the web is less a reflection of digital innovation than media marginalization.

The former leader of the House of Commons, Robin Cook, has argued that:

There is a connection waiting to be made between the decline in democratic participation and the explosion in new ways of communicating . . . The new technologies can strengthen our democracy, by giving us greater opportunities than ever before for better transparency and a more responsive relationship between government and electors. (Cook, 2002)

This is suggestive, but it would be a mistake to assume a deterministic relationship between 'new technologies' and a more direct form of representation. The latter calls for institutional adaptation of a procedural, political and cultural nature.

The House of Commons Information Committee, in its recent report, *Digital Technology: Working for Parliament and the Public*, argued that:

There is concern amongst the public – and indeed amongst Members – that the House appears remote, that it does not respond as well as it might to the public, and that it could do more to hold the executive to account. Public perceptions and expectations of Parliament appear to be changing and there is authoritative evidence to indicate that public participation in the political process appears to be in decline . . . Information and Communications

Technologies (ICT) can play an important role in influencing perceptions and helping to meet public expectations. Indeed, they cannot be ignored. (2002: 6)

The question for representative institutions is whether new mediation is simply a means of creating access to existing practices (Schumpeter's first stage), or whether these new processes of interactive mediation necessitate institutional adaptation to new ways of representing.

RECONCEPTUALIZING REPRESENTATION

The rationale for politicians' interest in digital mediation is a profound sense of disconnection from the public. Reconnection is their goal. Political connectedness (or connectivity) is an under-theorized concept. What does it mean for representatives and the public to be connected? For politicians, connectedness is a route to consent and legitimacy, both of which they regard as being distorted by distracting, biased and uncontrollable mediations of the public agenda. To connect is to have unmediated and undistorted access to the represented, to be better understood, to nurture public consent. The role of the represented in this conception of connectivity remains as spectators before the screen, locked into an unequal communicative relationship with an untrusted elite.

One-sided connectivity, rather like Postman's (1986) 'one-way conversation' of broadcasting, has more the characteristic of an assault than a partnership. Being connected, in a democratic sense, requires communicative collaboration between representatives and the represented, and a prospect of mutual gain for both. This entails representatives not just being in touch with the public, but being touched by them, in the sense of an intimate and mutually communicative relationship.

Reconceptualizing democratic representation in this way augments the significance of mediation. As a mediated process, representation is inextricably bound up with problems of signification and discourse. What do we expect political representatives to be like? What do representatives expect those they represent to be like? How well does the media present representatives and represented to one another? What rhythms, idioms and metaphors are appropriate when we speak of being represented? What do political speeches represent, and does it matter if most people fail to understand them? What is it like to *feel* represented? What are the available resources and strategies for political self-representation? If the represented are 'capable of independent action and judgment' and are 'not merely being taken care of' (as Pitkin insists), what sort of actions and judgements should we expect from 'ordinary' people – and if they do not show such signs of independence, what might this mean for the notion of democratic citizenship? Representing representation is a far from simple matter.

There are three ways in which digitally-mediated representation might stimulate and facilitate such mutually beneficial communicative collaboration. First, by enabling a more expansive and interactive kind of accountability to take place. Second, by accommodating a pluralistic network of representations, in contrast to the singular, linear conception of political representation characteristic of analogue mediation. Third, by creating new spaces of public self-representation and experiential reflexivity which might nurture what Young (2000: 138–9) refers to as ‘the sensibility of group-positioned experience’.

Accountability

Apart from authorization, via elections or other plebiscitary mechanisms, accountability of representatives to the represented is the most fundamental requirement of democratic governance. By holding representatives to account the public can sit in permanent judgement, with a view to rewarding or punishing politicians at the next election. But citizens are dependent upon highly mediated accounts of the political process, often leaving them bewildered and elected representatives frustrated.

In problematizing accountability, the absence of certain elements becomes apparent. The first of these concerns interactivity. Norms of accountability require representatives’ interests and actions to be open to public scrutiny. This is, in its weakest sense, an essentially protective measure, intended to guard against corruption and incompetence. A fuller and more positive notion of accountability entails giving accounts which, in an inclusive democracy, should not be confined to representatives. Account-giving involves much more than transparency: it calls for views, policies and actions to be explained, contextualized and related to social experience. Giving an account is to enter into a relationship with the account’s recipient. Such a relationship need not be that of leader and led or expert and lay public, but can be more complex, such as in accounts drawn from unique experiences or communities of practice (Wenger, 1998).

Democratic account-giving can take many forms, including those that are not typically political, rationalistic or linear. Levinas’s distinction between ‘saying’ and ‘said’ (which Young outlines in her work) is highly relevant here. Levinas argues that the form and cultural framing of communicative encounters (what he calls ‘saying’) is just as important as their content (the ‘said’). If, for example, the environment of an encounter is designed to confer high status upon one speaker and lesser status upon others, this will be just as damaging to meaningful accountability as mendacious content would be. The significance of accounting lies not only in what is said but in how it is said and the assumptions about those who are receiving it (Levinas, 1981).

By conceiving of accountability as an interactive process, as made possible by digital modes of communication, the credibility of normative claims for a more deliberative democracy where citizens' preferences are not simply calculated and aggregated, but exposed to public reason and the possibility of transformation, is enhanced.

An example of such a process, where the experience and expertise of the public was recruited in order to inform and broaden political debate, is a series of recent online policy consultations organized on behalf of the British parliament. These have been shown to provide a space for more inclusive public deliberation; generate and connect networks of interest or practice; lead to greater than usual interaction between representatives and represented; and avoid the uninformed and poor quality which characterizes much online discussion. Although such consultations are still in an experimental phase, the evidence from them suggests that citizens like being invited to think and make recommendations about policy issues that concern them (Coleman, 2003).

A second gap in the traditional conception of accountability relates to the time and place for account-giving. By contrast with democratic authorization, which takes place in regular, well-publicized elections preceded by regulated, relatively bounded campaigns periods, accountability has neither a time nor a place for its enactment. In its negative sense, accounting takes place when politicians are caught out; they are open to scrutiny because they were not cunning enough to evade it. A more positive notion of accountability conceives it as a permanent relationship of open communication.

If, as was argued above, representatives are now permanently in campaign mode, citizens are in ongoing judgement and scrutiny has become anticipatory, democratic accountability cannot afford to be occasional, ad hoc or governed by journalistic hunches. Traditional barriers to accountability, such as the speed of decision-making and the physical distance between representatives and their constituents, are becoming obsolete. Public networks of digital mediation, with their capacity for synchronous communication and asynchronous storage and retrieval of information, are well suited to permanent communicative relationships.

The print and broadcast media have not adapted well to the age of the permanent news cycle. Broadcast news inhabits a world of routinized time and ritualized space. The Greenwich time signal. *The World at One*. The shipping forecast. The BBC. If democratic representation is to be inclusive and responsive, it must mediate a range of temporal and spatial moments, both reflecting and enacting history. Representation is a site of permanent discursive dialectic, requiring channels of mediation that are both permanent and historically-rooted, live and archived, account-giving and account-collecting. The historically transcendent and geographically unbounded

character of digital networks renders them appropriate for the kind of ongoing accountability required for permanent representation.

Plurality

The traditional conception of political representation is bilateral and linear. The representative sits in the house of representation (parliament, Congress) and the represented live in their geographically bounded constituencies. The rise of devolved and supranational regions of representation have recently inspired arcane debates between sovereignty and subsidiarity but, even in these cases, the nodal points of representation are defined territorially, in ways that would have made sense to 18th-century villagers.

Traditional liberal pluralism, as reflected in most European and North-American constitutional arrangements, is open to challenge on at least three fronts. First, it is based upon a rigid and narrow conception of identity. Social identity is complex, comprising a variety of demographic, cultural and personal factors. To represent people on the basis of territorial residence can be constraining. Other kinds of constraints and diminutions are associated with the aggregative packaging of policies by political parties. A pluralistic notion of representation accepts that people experience the world from multiple perspectives, each of which is (or may be) valid. For example, a black British European who votes Labour but opposes Blair on the war in Iraq has a range of positions, each of which can only be represented fairly if all of the others are as well.

Second, not all democratic representation needs to be in the formal political sphere. There is a need for spaces of informal representation, reflecting aspects of the personal that are intimately associated with power, but not with formal governance. The informal realm of democratic self-representation, often associated with gender, sexuality, ethnicity, culture and morality, is as popular with the public as formal politics is unpopular, but formidable problems are encountered in trying to connect these to institutional representation.

Third, and closely related to the discussion of account-giving, there is the challenge of pluralistic styles of engagement. The tendency to see politics, representation and democracy as suit-and-tie affairs, pervaded by what Nichols calls 'discourses of sobriety' (1991: 3), has a gatekeeping effect, limiting the entry to representation to those who speak its language. Difference democrats are concerned to promote processes of political mediation that do not exclude the less confident or articulate, the marginalized and the informal. They argue that a fundamental problem of representation is not simply the exclusion of the public from policy deliberation, but the discourse of deliberation itself, as an exclusive, rationally-bounded process of mediating politics (Benhabib, 1996; Young,

2000). Sanders argues that the kind of public reason advocated by deliberative democrats is exclusive, and therefore that:

[T]aking deliberation as a signal of democratic practice paradoxically works undemocratically, discrediting on seemingly democratic grounds the views of those who are less likely to present their arguments in ways that we recognize as characteristically deliberative. In our political culture, these citizens are likely to be those who are already underrepresented in formal political institutions and who are systematically disadvantaged. (1996: 349)

The absence of social cues and the flattening of hierarchies within online environments accord with the demands of democratic theorists for a more differentiated, but less prejudiced or stigmatizing form of democratic representation. Miller (1995) has applied Goffmanesque analysis to online environments, exploring the range of 'expressive resources' used by people to 'give off' a sense of virtual presence. From weblogs to homepages to chat groups to email-based networks, the scope for digital self-representation is considerable. Digital self-representation is often 'desperately burdened by the lack of the other familiar markers of identity' (Crystal, 2001: 62), but this has the benefit of accommodating the complex, fluid and often multiple aspects of identity that characterize real (as opposed to institutionally represented) social life.

In practice, how might digitally-based communication contribute to the more pluralistic mediation of representation? While analogue media operate on the basis of singular conceptions of the public, the audience and the readership, digital media are embedded within a constellation of heterogeneous networks. When people communicate digitally their identities are more fluid; they can have more than one address, draw upon diverse sources of information and belong to a range of social networks. Although the debate between 'mobilization' and 'reinforcement' theories of online politics is far from being resolved, Norris has concluded, on the basis of her empirical study of civil society groups online, that:

[T]he existence of 'flash' movements triggered by particular issues or events, like anti-globalization protests in the streets of Seattle, Washington DC and Prague, and the anti-fuel tax coalition shutting down motorways from London to Oslo, suggests that this digital information environment has the capacity to alter the structure of opportunities for communication and information in civic society, providing a culture that that is particularly conducive for alternative social movements, fringe parties from the libertarians to the Greens, and transnational advocacy networks seeking to organize and mobilize dispersed groups for collective action. (2001: 210)

As well as protest and marginal political movements, the internet facilitates a degree of informal, self-directed, dialogical communication which has tended to fall outside the remit of the pre-digital media. From

virtual communities to loose networks of practice or passion, digitally-based communication tends to broaden the range and depth of what might be called non-politicized democratic activity.

Reality

Late modern politics is characterized by the demise of deference and the celebration of experience. Arguably, it has been the transparency and instantaneity of televised politics which ultimately undermined public deference. New media, particularly video technologies such as camcorders and closed-circuit television (CCTV), have provided an impetus to the sharing of mediated experience in seemingly live and untreated ways. In reality TV, the great multimedia phenomenon of the early 21st century, technologies of surveillance meet cultures of everyday experience to construct images (and sometimes illusions) of unadulterated self-representation.

Elsewhere I have identified a conspicuous gap between the forms of representation witnessed in two tele-mediated houses: the House of Commons and the *Big Brother* house (Coleman, 2003). The sense in which the public feels represented by each of these reveals radically contrasting conceptions of representation. Whereas MPs in the House of Commons are judged on the basis of how well they speak for us, the housemates in *Big Brother* are evaluated in terms of their authentic claims to be like us: to present the public to itself.

The authenticity of representation can be conceived in terms of resemblance and trust. According to the first, a representation is authentic because it seems to be like its subject. So, the *Big Brother* housemates derive authentication from speaking, thinking and acting in ways that resemble the public who are watching them. According to the trust-based conception, it is precisely the inevitable absence of obvious identity between representation and represented that necessitates an ongoing process of testing and judgement about discrepant claims and assurances of authenticity. As Silverstone (1999: 180) puts it, 'For trust to be relevant, there must be a possibility for others to betray us'. The debate about authenticity in politics is in reality about the alleged betrayal of the public through misrepresentation. This pervasive problem of authentication concerns citizens' sense of not being recognized, respected or understood by their representatives. The phenomenon of 'blogging' can be seen as a direct response to this sense of being lost, ignored and outside the sphere of public communication. The growing number of political weblogs are, in this sense, a grass roots attempt to authenticate deeper and more expansive accounts and narratives than traditional political discourse permits. Weblogs are indicative of a struggle to become meaningfully present in a world where private words often go unacknowledged.

The representation of political reality entails more than the cultivation of credibility. Authenticity arises in conditions of accessibility that transcend mere institutional transparency. Instead of politicians seeking to be more ‘in touch’ with the public, accessibility requires that they inhabit mutual communicative spaces with the public. These we might call spaces of touchability, where realities can be tested in the common realm of experience and emotion as well as opinion and persuasion. Spaces of political representation are perceived by the public to be exclusive, unwelcoming and unfeeling. Until recently, in the British parliament, visiting members of the public were described as ‘strangers’. To be governed by, or as, strangers is to be politically alienated.

CONCLUSION – TOWARDS DIRECT REPRESENTATION?

No matter how often the notion of direct democracy is dismissed, discussions of digital politics keep drifting back to it. There is a good reason for this: although the arguments for direct, plebiscitary decision-making are unsophisticated and normatively unattractive, the associated promise of direct information and communication flows is appealing and accords with both democratic norms of discursive autonomy and technological possibilities of relatively disintermediated interactivity. Extricating arguments for more direct forms of communication between representatives and represented from proposals for push-button democracy resists the lure of technopopulism and lays the foundation for a contemporary argument for direct representation.

In the 18th century politics was characterized by the notion of virtual representation, whereby the rich and privileged voted on behalf of the disenfranchised majority. This disappeared in the 20th century (after women finally won the right not to be represented by the votes of men), but in the age of mass media a form of virtual deliberation arose, whereby professional politicians and journalists tended to dominate political discussion on behalf of the public. Virtual deliberation is a product of indirect representation, itself a pragmatic response to Lippmanesque and Schumpeterian notions of democracy as paternalistic representation.

An atmosphere of crisis surrounds virtual deliberation and indirect representation in the early 21st century. There is widespread distrust of paternalistic representation (manifested by seemingly remote politicians, parties and political institutions); public disenchantment with virtual deliberation (primarily, the political coverage provided by television and the press); and a post-deferential desire by citizens to be heard and respected more. A response to this crisis is suggested by two innovations: the shift in democratic theory from aggregative to deliberative democratic norms; and the rise of digital ICT, with their inherent capacity for many-to-many

interactivity. In combination, these five factors make the notion of direct representation seem both practical and appealing.

Direct representation entails an adherence to Pitkin's agent-principal model of democratic representation, with three of its elements strengthened. First, communication between citizens and representative is conceived as a two-way process, situated in shared spaces of collaborative interaction. Second, the obligation of representatives to account to, and hear accounts from, citizens becomes central to the act of representing. Third, with the growth of the permanent campaign and anticipatory accountability, representation becomes a more ongoing, deliberative process, rather than an ad hoc aggregation of private preferences. Direct representation amounts to more than a stylistic change in the mode of political communication, although there is a strong stylistic element, rooted in a cultural discourse of authenticity and shared reality. More significantly, direct representation offers a basis for a more dialogical and deliberative democracy in place of the dialogue of the deaf which tends to characterize contemporary political representation.

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