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ARTICLE

Democracy via cyberspace

Mapping the rhetorics and practices of three prominent camps

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Abstract

Electronic democracy rhetoric has proliferated with the growth of the internet as a popular communications medium. This rhetoric is largely dominated by liberal individualist assumptions. Communitarianism has provided a resource for an alternative vision of electronic democracy. A third model, deliberative democracy, has recently been employed by electronic democrats who want to move beyond the individualism/communitarianism opposition. In this article, I outline each of these visions, describing the democratic assumptions and electronic democracy practices that each embraces. In particular, I explore the ways in which each vision sees the internet as aiding its cause. I conclude by pointing to the relative lack of research into the possibility of the deliberative position being realized through cyberspace. I suggest that a more rigorous analysis of the intersection between the internet and deliberative democracy would not only be sociologically fruitful but may provide interesting possibilities for enhancing contemporary democratic forms.

Key words

communitarianism • deliberative democracy • electronic democracy • internet • liberal individualism

INTRODUCTION

Each new communications technology, from the telegraph to cable television, seems to spark a wave of enthusiasm regarding the potential of communications technology to transform democracy. Now the internet is being celebrated as a means by which democracy can be strengthened and extended. Like earlier incarnations of electronic democracy, a wide variety of claims are being made about the internet's democratic potential. In this article I aim to explore some of these rhetorics and the practices they embrace.¹ In particular, I want to show how internet-democracy rhetorics and practices fall within three broad 'camps': liberal individualist, communitarian and deliberative.²

These three electronic democracy camps are distinguished by their respective understandings of democratic legitimacy. For liberal individualism, a democratic model gains legitimacy when it provides for the expression of individual interests. For communitarianism, a democratic model is legitimated by enhancement of communal spirit and values. For deliberative democracy, a democratic model is legitimated by its facilitation of rational discourse in the public sphere. All three positions can be identified within internet-democracy rhetoric and practice. While liberal individualist assumptions dominate, they do not go uncontested. Communitarian ideas are strongly embraced by a number of internet-democracy advocates, particularly by those opposed to liberal individualism. The third position, deliberative democracy, is increasingly being drawn upon as an alternative to both liberal individualist and communitarian models.

I will examine each of these internet-democracy camps in turn. My aim is not to provide either a critical evaluation or exhaustive survey of the three camps. Instead, I intend to provide a sketch of internet-democracy rhetorics and practices that highlights the main political assumptions being drawn upon. This sketch sets the basis for further research. In particular, I hope it will stimulate more extensive analysis of the third camp, and in particular, of the possibility of deliberative democracy being facilitated though the internet.

THE LIBERAL INDIVIDUALIST CAMP

With the development of cable television in the 1970s, a breed of (predominantly North American) electronic democrats emerged promoting the idea of teledemocracy: individuals governing directly from their arm chairs via the use of telecommunications media. One of the most famous early examples that these teledemocrats draw upon in order to show the viability of their vision is the Qube experiment. Qube was a commercial, interactive cablecasting system that operated in Columbus Ohio between the early 1970s and the mid-1980s. Households subscribing to Qube could respond to questions raised in cable programmes, including public affairs

shows, via a small black box with five buttons connected to the television set (Becker, 1981: 6). Futurologist guru Alvin Toffler (1981: 439) celebrated this system as a sign of things to come:

. . . this is only the first, most primitive indication of tomorrow's potential for direct democracy. Using advanced computers, satellites, telephones, cable, polling techniques and other tools, an educated citizenry can, for the first time in history, begin making many of its own political decisions.

Qube provided the basic technology for one of teledemocracy's main ideas, the 'electronic town meeting'. These meetings generally combine cable television coverage of public meetings with televoting (normally via telephone). A central criticism of this model is that people are not able to make informed decisions simply by viewing a telecast meeting. To overcome this problem, Becker (1981) and Slaton (1992) have promoted a model of the electronic town meeting that they call 'Televote', or 'scientific random informed public opinion polling'.³ Rather than instant voting on issues raised via cable television, this model supplies information on the topic concerned to a 'scientifically' produced sample of the population well before the televote. In this way, it is argued, voters are provided with the necessary time and resources to make 'informed' decisions.

Computer networks have only been used to a limited extent in teledemocracy projects. These networks offer the two-way, instantaneous communications that teledemocrats desire but they have yet to match cable television and other mass media in audience numbers. As a result, they have generally been used in tandem with other teledemocracy tools. Becker, for instance, is involved in the Electronic Town Meeting Company, which incorporates computer conferencing into the Televote model, alongside television, radio, newspaper, telephone and face-to-face interaction (see TAN+N).

The rapid expansion of internet access may mean that computer networking takes a more central role in future teledemocratic projects. Internet-based teleconferencing and choice aggregation software have already been successfully tested in teledemocratic decision-making experiments (see, for example, Bullinga, 1996; Koen, 1996). 'The same intelligent agents that steer airplanes', Bullinga declares, 'can be built to steer government' (quoted in Lehmann-Haupt, 1997: 57).

Teledemocracy emphasizes the potential of new technologies for individual empowerment. Keskinen (1999), for instance, argues that individuals can

. . . gain more and more information on various social and democratic issues by having access to the ICT. . . [L]arge segments of the population are now, and more so in the future, able to form *personal educated opinions* on common issues. . . . In modern societies, many people want to shift from being 'the

governed' into having 'self government.' . . . They want to have more power and control to *conduct their own life as they want*. The ubiquitous information networks and ICT of the future will be a readily available *tool by which people can easily empower themselves*. (emphasis added)

Teledemocracy, as defined here, draws directly upon liberal individualism. I am using the term liberal individualism to embrace all those democratic traditions which posit the individual as a rational, autonomous subject who knows and can express their own best interests. This knowing subject is assumed by a diversity of liberal democratic theories, from classic liberalism to libertarianism.⁴ Even moderate liberals like Rawls (1971: 560) see the self as prior to its social roles and relationships and 'to the ends which are affirmed by it'. The liberal individualist subject parallels the classic economic agent. It is, as Schumpeter (1976: 269) argues, a self-seeking utility maximizer. In line with the liberal sense of self, 'citizenship becomes less a collective, political activity than an individual, economic activity – the right to pursue one's interests, without hindrance, in the marketplace' (Dietz, 1992: 67). Democratic interaction is encouraged in order to foster a vibrant 'market place of ideas' (London, 1995: 45). Discourse helps ensure that maximum information is available for private individuals to make their best possible strategic choices between competing positions.

This liberal individualist conception stands behind many seemingly divergent electronic democracy projects. This can be illustrated by comparing teledemocracy and liberal pluralist projects.⁵ Liberal pluralist projects encourage negotiation and bargaining among interest groups through a representative system of government. Teledemocratic efforts, on the other hand, aim for direct input into decision making by individuals. Despite these major differences, both teledemocracy and liberal pluralist projects draw upon a similar conception of political legitimacy. They accept a competitive political world in which democracy is ensured when individual freedom of expression (whether directly or through interest groups) is maximized. As such, they can both be classified as liberal individualist.

The liberal individualism behind teledemocracy may help explain why it has been so readily embraced by many mainstream and even conservative liberal individualists, persons who would normally be expected to reject models of direct democracy. Teledemocracy was widely popularized in the early 1980s by the information society theories of futurologist gurus such as Naisbett (1982), Masuda (1981) and Toffler (1981). It was subsequently taken up in the United States by technophile politicians including Ross Perot and Newt Gingrich (Friedland, 1996: 187). These politicians have run electronic town halls and utilized 'interactive satellite hook-ups, radio and television call-in programs, and live computer conferencing' (London, 1995: 36). More recently, the Clinton Administration has applied teledemocracy

models to the internet, holding the first online 'presidential town hall meeting' in November 1999.⁶ These politicians promote teledemocracy as a system in which representatives can go directly to the people without the 'distortion' of the media. Other advocates of teledemocracy have protested that these uses undermine direct expression and put the technology in the service of elitist politics (see TAN+N). Such 'events' do indeed pervert classic teledemocracy. The participatory model is turned into a publicity stunt. We are left with electronically mediated political staging and selective interaction. Yet, behind all these 'distortions' lies the liberal individualist ethos that enables the teledemocratic model to be adopted by, and adapted to, liberal representative politics.

The internet has now become a central component in liberal individualist visions of electronic democracy. The net offers the most powerful communications medium yet for maximizing information flows and thereby the competition of interests. It enables the efficient promotion of political options and provides individuals with access to a huge amount of up-to-date information by which to make their choices. Further, the internet promises a means by which to register these choices. Software to enable internet voting is already available (see, for example, Bullinga, 1996; Steeds, 1998).

Many democracy advocacy organizations are rallying behind this liberal individualist vision, accumulating political information on web sites in order to help inform individual voters in local and national elections. In the USA, for instance, 'independent' online democracy projects such as Democracy Network (democracynet.org), Project Vote Smart (vote-smart.org), The California Online Voter Guide (calvoter.org), and Politics.com are using the internet to increase the amount of information available to the individual voter so that they can make the best possible election choice. Some of these projects also enable direct interaction between individuals and politicians. For example, Vote.com offers users the chance to vote on a topic listed on its site. Votes are sent to congressional representatives, Senators and the President and subsequently users are sent reports on how their representatives voted on each issue. These projects all promote a liberal individualist model, attempting to provide individuals with both the information necessary to make the best choices for themselves on all available political options and the means of registering these choices.

The liberal individualist ethos is also influencing local and national government internet-democracy initiatives. I have already mentioned President Clinton's 'virtual town hall meeting'. Hacker and Todino's (1996) study of the White House citizen email communication system shows that liberal individualist assumptions are used as a blueprint for US Government online initiatives.⁷ The same is true for most other online government efforts. Despite the unique qualities of the internet for facilitating dialogue, it is largely being employed by government as a way to improve the

efficiency of liberal individualist systems already in place. Most governments are merely providing the electronic equivalents of their offline services: information provision, electronic forms for making submissions and completing transactions, formula replies to email enquires, and electronic voting.⁸

Wired cities and nations have been a particularly dramatic response to the demand to link individuals into the so-called information society. For instance, Wellington is attempting to build itself as an 'Info-City', wiring public places, schools and businesses (McDonald, 1997). Singapore is developing itself as an 'intelligent Island', attempting to link every household to the internet (Wong, 1997). The US Government has had its own grand schemes, most notably its National Information Infrastructure initiative and Global Information Infrastructure vision. These 'information highways' are, among other things, seen as spreading liberal individualist democratic values across the globe (Gore, 1994). Yet many liberal individualists, particularly those whom I will call cyber-libertarians, have opposed these initiatives because they threaten to allow state interference of cyberspace.⁹ Moreover, cyber-libertarians believe that the internet is already a medium par excellence for the global spread of liberal individualism. George Keyworth (1997), of the libertarian Progress and Freedom Foundation, explains the difference between the 'superhighway' vision of liberal governments and the cyber-libertarian understanding of cyberspace:

Superhighways tend to be government owned, operated by bureaucracies, and with limited access. Cyberspace, with the Internet as its initial manifestation, has a vast array of ownerships, is operated by empowered individuals, and with virtually unlimited access. . . . [C]yberspace is the culture and society of people who are individually empowered by digital connection.

This cyber-libertarianism, which largely hails from the United States, has been a powerful force promoting the liberal individualist conception of democratic cyberspace: 'life in cyberspace', Mitchell Kapor (1993) proclaims, is (or should be) 'founded on the primacy of individual liberty'. Rejecting government attempts to 'ward off the virus of liberty', John Perry Barlow (1996) declares cyberspace a place of undistorted expression where 'we are forming our own Social Contract' based on 'enlightened self-interest'. This equation of individual liberty and democracy through cyberspace can be seen in the charter of another libertarian 'public interest' advocacy organization, the American-based Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) of which Kapor is director. The EFF champions individual rights and civil liberties as the basis of a healthy 'cyber-democracy'. As Kapor and Weitzner (1993: 299–300) explain, the EFF is an organization that intends 'to educate the public about the democratic potential of new computer and communications technologies'. It aims

. . . to develop and implement public policies to maximise civil liberties and competitiveness in the electronic social environments being created by new computer and communications technologies. Our primary mission is to ensure that the new electronic highways . . . enhance First and Fourth Amendment rights and other laws that protect freedom of speech and limit the scope of searches and seizures, encourage new entrepreneurial activity, and are open and accessible to all segments of society.

Democracy is once more seen as complementary (and often conflated) with consumer capitalism. Cyber-democracy means that consumers are at liberty to freely move around cyberspace and make the choices they desire without the restrictions found in 'real' space, whether bodily, geographical, cultural or political.

Cyber-libertarianism, the 'purist' form of liberal individualism found in the electronic democracy rhetoric, is strongly adhered to by many participants of cyber-politics.¹⁰ However, along with other liberal individualist-based electronic democracy positions, it does not go unopposed. Liberal individualist models are increasingly being challenged by electronic democracy visions inspired by communitarianism.

THE COMMUNITARIAN CAMP

In the 1980s new 'technological possibilities' (particularly portable video and cable television) combined with the 'festering sentiments' of past radical democracy movements to stimulate community-oriented media projects (Tehrani, 1990: 98–101). However, rather than social revolution, these projects have generally been more interested in the use of new information and communications technologies to foster local community development in the face of rampant individualism, commercialization and bureaucratization. Communitarian ideas have been particularly influential in this effort to revive community.

Communitarianism argues that sustainable democracy must be based upon the shared values and conceptions of 'the good' that bind people into community.¹¹ Unlike the unencumbered self of liberalism, the communitarian self is understood to be constituted within relationships structured by social roles and shared subjectivity. The community comes before and enables individual freedom, expression and democracy. Democratic dialogue serves the common life of the group, rather than the interests of a private individual. It enables members of a community to discover their shared identity and purpose.

New interactive media are celebrated as a means of fostering these communitarian ideals. As against the centralizing force of the mass media, small media offer the two-way, decentralized communication necessary for building community (Tehrani, 1990: 235–6).¹² Eschewing the techno-determinism of much cyber-libertarian rhetoric, communitarian electronic

democrats emphasize that media structures need to be developed to support local rather than commercial, government, or 'public' interests.¹³ As communitarian media enthusiast Majid Tehranian (1990: 236) argues, for 'community media to serve community interests, we need to invent structures that put the ownership, management and operation of the media in the hands of people themselves'.

These communitarian ideals have been particularly prominent within community access television initiatives in North America (Abramson et al., 1988: 25).¹⁴ Cable television has promised much. It can be locally owned and operated. It also allows participation by members of a community in their own programme making. By enabling individuals and groups to share their values, commitments and visions, cable television provides the means for a community to discover, reinforce and celebrate its common good. Yet cable television has not realized communitarian ideals. Community access television has been undermined by pressures toward professionalization and commercialism (Tehranian, 1990: 236).

Just as hopes for cable television began to fade, yet another technology arrived on the scene to reinvigorate communitarian-based electronic democracy. This new technology was computer networking. Computer networks promise to be the best medium yet for community building, given that they offer cheap, decentralized, two-way, communication. They began to be utilized by communitarian-oriented media activists in the 1980s. Basic bulletin boards or specially designed networking systems, as used by 'FreeNets', were employed to create community computer networks.¹⁵ The purpose of such a network is explained by the self-definition of the National Capital FreeNet in Ottawa:

The National Capital FreeNet is a free, computer-based information sharing network. It links people and organizations of this region, provides useful information, and enables an open exchange of ideas with the world. Community involvement makes FreeNet an important and accessible meeting place, and prepares people for full participation in a rapidly changing communication environment. (cited in Navarro, 1997)

Community networks have increasingly turned to the internet to facilitate this virtual meeting place (Kanfer, 1997).¹⁶ The internet is often cheaper to utilize and provides more advanced interactive conferencing tools than other computer networks. However, moving to the internet may have major implications for community networking given that one's potential community is no longer confined to one's physical locality. With 'the advent of the Internet', Navarro (1997) speculates, we may be entering a new 'phase of Community Networking', one in which 'your local community can become global'.

Communities networked through the internet add to a myriad of other groups that are already based in cyberspace, flourishing through email lists, electronic bulletin boards, online chat groups and role-playing domains.¹⁷ Although geographically dispersed, participants of these virtual groups gain a strong sense of belonging (Navarro, 1997). They become bound by shared problems, interests, ideologies and values, rather than by geography (Watson, 1997; Wellman and Gulia, 1999). As such, these virtual groups are often referred to as 'virtual communities'. Most virtual communities, unlike community networks, do not explicitly attempt to build offline, geographically located community. Instead, virtual communities can be seen as providing a replacement for the degraded public spaces of modern urban life, enabling people to interact and form meaningful relationships online (Heim, 1991: 73; Stone, 1991: 11). Cyberspace is seen as providing what Ray Oldenburg (1989) has called 'third places', informal associational spaces between home and work essential to forming community. Although these traditional 'third places' of communal life may have been eroded in modernity, there is the possibility, according to the likes of Rheingold (1993: 25–6), that they can be developed through cyberspace.

When the automobile-centric, suburban, fast-food, shopping mall way of life eliminated many of these 'third places' from traditional towns and cities around the world, the social fabric of existing communities started shredding. . . . Perhaps cyberspace is one of the informal public places where people can rebuild the aspects of community that were lost when the malt shop became a mall.

However, many communitarians have resisted the idea that virtual communities can stand in the place of geographically located, face-to-face communities. Doheny-Farina (1996: 72) doubts whether virtual groups can embody community. Virtual worlds, he argues, lack the necessary elements to be third places:

. . . a third place cannot exist separate from a locality because it exists only in comparison to its neighbourhoods, to local work, play, and family life, to the institutions and formal rituals that encompass daily life.

So-called virtual communities, Doheny-Farina (1996: 47–50) argues, lure us into a false sense of collectivity. They provide only an appearance of community because they are based on no more than shared interests. They do not involve the deeper community bonds and values that are shared in the places one *physically* lives. Virtual communities actually individuate because 'they encourage us to ignore, forget, or become blind to our sense of geographic place and community' (Doheny-Farina 1996: 14). Other communitarian-oriented commentators agree, warning of the hazards to our moral, psychological and social welfare that may accompany the move from

real, embodied community to de-materialized, geographically dispersed, and mediated, virtual association (see, for example, Sclove, 1995; Slouka, 1995; Stoll, 1995). This does not mean, they argue, abandoning online interaction. Rather, such interaction must be aimed at fostering geographically located relationships.

If the prospect of telecommunity replacing spatially localized community ought to evoke skepticism or opposition, one can nevertheless remain open to the possibility of democratically managing the evolution of telecommunications systems in ways that instead supplement more traditional forms of democratic community. (Sclove, 1995: 81)

Community or civic networks are seen as being able to manage cyberspace in order to enhance located community.

Civic networking describes limited, focused, carefully applied efforts that attempt not to move us into cyberspace but to use communication technologies to help reintegrate people within their placed communities. (Doheny-Farina, 1996: xxiii)

According to Doheny-Farina (1996: 54–5), the internet ‘can either enhance communities by enabling a new kind of local public space or it can undermine communities by pulling people away from local enclaves and toward global, virtual ones.’ Virtual community enthusiasts disagree. They emphasize the reality of online community.¹⁸ Yet, they do tend to agree with the importance of an ongoing interplay between offline and online interactions. Virtual interactions are seen as complementary to face-to-face relations. Virtual communities can be both ‘places people meet’ and ‘tools’ for real-world projects (Rheingold, 1993: 56).

This debate about how the internet can facilitate ‘real’ community shows the increasing maturity of communitarian-oriented electronic democracy positions. Continuing to unite these positions is the belief that the internet will only enhance democratic participation to the degree that it strengthens community by bringing people together to discover and build upon what they have in common. This stands in stark contrast to liberal individualism which promotes the expression of individual wills. Internet-democracy rhetoric and practice generally draw upon one of these two camps. However, there is also a third position being drawn upon, one that posits a different notion of democratic legitimacy from both liberal individualism and communitarianism. This third position is deliberative democracy.

THE DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY CAMP

The idea of building third places online is associated in electronic democracy literature not only with virtual community but with the notion of a virtual public sphere (see, for example, Hauben and Hauben, 1997;

Rheingold, 1993; Surman, 1994). This latter notion points to the existence of a third electronic democracy camp, one that is based upon the deliberative model of democracy.

Benjamin Barber's (1984) call for the use of new information technology to foster 'strong democracy' is an early and influential example of electronic democracy rhetoric inspired by deliberative ideals.¹⁹ Barber rejects both the unitary politics of communitarianism and the 'weak democracy' of liberalism. For Barber, democracy demands the transformation of private individuals into active citizens through the institution of 'strong democratic talk'. In similar vein, Abramson et al. (1988) argue for the development of a form of electronic democracy based on rational dialogue. They promote 'the democratic art of persuading or being persuaded in turn' and the idea that people should 'justify individual opinions in terms of the common good' (Abramson et al., 1988: 276). Moreover, they argue for the use of 'the congregating and conferencing capacity of the new media' to 'involve more citizens than ever in meetings and debates, discussion, and dialogue' (1988: 295).

An emphasis upon rational public deliberation has continued to be a prominent aspect in electronic democracy rhetoric referring to the internet (London, 1995; Street, 1997). The development of this deliberative strand of cyber-democracy will be discussed further below. First I want to define the notion of deliberative democracy by contrasting it with both liberal individualism and communitarianism.²⁰

Deliberative democracy conceives of political interaction very differently from liberal individualism. The latter's marketplace conception of politics sees the expression (and subsequent clash) of private interests as important for enabling individuals to arrive at 'informed' choices about the issues at hand. Deliberative democracy demands more of democratic interaction. In free and open dialogue, participants put forward and challenge claims and arguments about common problems, not resting until satisfied that the best reasons have been given and fully defended. Participants attempt to come to an understanding of their interlocutors and to reflexively modify their pre-discursive positions in response to better arguments. In the process, private individuals become public-oriented citizens. Rather than the self-seeking utility maximizer of liberal individualism, the deliberative model relies 'upon a person's capacity to be swayed by rational arguments and to lay aside particular interests and opinions in deference to overall fairness and the common interest of the collectivity' (Miller, 1992: 56).

At the same time, the deliberative model can be distinguished from the communitarian conception. In the latter, dialogue is intended to help discover an already existing common good. In contrast, deliberation democracy sees dialogue as helping participants move towards understanding and agreement despite their differences. Deliberation, as Bohman (1996: 8)

asserts, is a 'public' rather than 'collective' activity. While communitarianism assumes a subject that is always already community focused, deliberative democracy posits a subject that becomes oriented towards a larger public purpose only through rational deliberation.

For both liberal individualism and communitarianism, the source of democratic legitimacy (and rationality), is based upon the will of all, which is derived from the expression of already formed wills, either pre-discursive interests or pre-given values. Both positions are rooted in notions of a self-determining subject, individual or collective (Habermas, 1996: 103). In contrast, deliberative democracy relies upon *intersubjectivity*. All pre-discursive interests and values are up for grabs. A legitimate (and rational) decision rests not upon the expression of pre-given wills but upon the deliberative process by which everyone's will is formed (Manin, 1987: 351–2).

The public sphere is the institutional arena in which this rational deliberation and the making of public citizens takes place. It stands between the private individual and the state, allowing the ongoing critical scrutiny of official decision making. Communitarian and liberal individualist positions sometimes refer to the public sphere, but their interpretations give it a much less significant role than in the deliberative model. The public sphere for communitarianism is conflated with spaces of interaction that reinforce, rather than critique, the values that bind community. In the case of liberal individualism, a separation of spheres is first and foremost demanded to protect private interests. The public sphere is simply an arena in which these private interests can be strategically pursued.²¹

Deliberative democracy's rational public sphere relies upon discursive spaces which are largely constituted in modern society through communications media (Habermas, 1989). The internet is now seen by some deliberative democracy proponents as an exemplary medium for facilitating such spaces.²² They point to the many informal deliberations on usenet groups, email lists, and web forums that go beyond the mutual support of virtual communities and involve the type of rational-critical discourse expected by the deliberative model. There are also a number of internet-democracy initiatives explicitly attempting to facilitate rational deliberation online. Since 1994, Minnesota E-Democracy has helped foster an 'online interactive public sphere' where people can go to rationally deliberate upon issues relating Minnesota politics.²³ The Minnesota model has been replicated by the Iowa E-Democracy project.²⁴ It has also influenced the United Kingdom Citizen's Online Democracy project and the Nova Scotia Electronic Democracy Forum.²⁵ Other online deliberative democracy projects are developing independent of Minnesota E-Democracy. One very promising deliberative effort, still in its early stages of

construction, is the CivicExchange: Strong Democracy in Cyberspace project driven by Benjamin Barber's Walt Whitman Center for Culture and Democracy at Rutgers University and the Information Society Project at Yale Law School. The project is being designed with the belief that 'cyberspace is the new public space of the next century'. It 'aims to build a deliberative web site that will facilitate lively and self-governing political discourse . . . [that] assure[s] ongoing deliberative, thoughtful dialogue where citizens can think and rethink issues, confront new ideas and people, and change their minds in the course of the discussion' (quoted from CivicExchange home page).²⁶ Such online deliberative initiatives are not confined to Western democracies. For example, Malaysia.net offers a space for discourse on Malaysian political issues in a context where tight controls exist over political discussion in the mass media. In addition to these projects, deliberative forums are a central aspect of many community networks and a number of CityNet projects such as Santa Monica's Public Electronic Network (PEN), Amsterdam's Digital City, and the IperBoLE project of Bologna (see Tsagarousianou et al., 1998).²⁷

There is growing interest from academic commentators in whether these informal and more organized online deliberations can actually enhance the public sphere. According to internet researchers Michael Hauben and Rhonda Hauben (1997), the emergence of a deliberative sphere through cyberspace is clearly evident from the thousands of diverse conversations that can be found taking place online at any time. Douglas Kellner (1999) agrees, emphasizing the expansion of the public sphere through the online communications of civil society. On the other hand, Mark Poster (1997) strongly contests the claim that such a sphere can be facilitated through cyberspace. This debate promises to develop further given that both cyber-discourse and the deliberative model of democracy have been steadily gaining academic attention. As this happens, the deliberative position promises to become an increasingly prominent alternative to both liberal individualism and communitarianism in electronic democracy rhetoric and practice.

CONCLUSION

I have outlined three electronic democracy camps that can be identified in internet-democracy rhetoric and practice. My purpose here has not been to offer a critical evaluation of the positions. I have aimed instead to provide some background observations and demarcations that will aid further research. A considerable amount of research (and promotion) is already being undertaken with regards to the liberal individualist camp.

Governments, universities and research institutes throughout the world are conducting pilot projects and looking at ways of enhancing liberal

individualist systems through the use of the internet. Communitarian-oriented cyber-democracy is also being paid considerable attention. A substantial literature analysing community on and through the internet is being produced by community network activists, communitarian critics of liberalism, and especially by social researchers who have found this to be a rich ethnographic field. There has also been much commentary and debate on the possibility of the internet facilitating deliberative democracy. However, actual research into this prospect has been sketchy (see, for example, Roper, 1999; Wilhelm, 1999). Attempts to develop in-depth research have largely been limited to graduate student thesis work (see, for example, the dissertations by Abe, 1998; Nien-Hsuan Fang, 1995; Schneider, 1997; Thornton, 1996). This is despite the claim that the deliberative model not only has an affinity with the communicative spaces proliferating through the internet but offers a powerful vision of democracy that is in step with the needs of contemporary pluralist society: the deliberative model recognizes difference between individuals and the importance of rational deliberation to build strong citizens. I find this to be a provocative argument deserving greater attention. More extensive analysis of the intersection between the internet and deliberative democracy may not only be sociologically fruitful but could provide interesting possibilities for enhancing contemporary democratic practices.

Notes

- 1 An earlier version of this article was presented in June 1999 at the *Exploring Cyber Society Conference*, University of Northumbria at Newcastle, UK.
- 2 I use the term 'electronic democracy' to encompass all those rhetorics and practices that refer to the use and impact of electronic media technologies (from the telegraph to the satellite) in democratic processes. I use the term 'internet-democracy' specifically in relation to those rhetorics and practices that refer to the role of the internet in democratic processes.
- 3 See Becker and Slaton (2000) for a reflection on past teledemocracy efforts and a vision of where they see their model heading in the 21st century.
- 4 Liberal individualism underpins the diverse positions of, among others, direct democrats (such as the teledemocrats), liberal pluralists (Dahl), egalitarian liberals (Rawls), elite democrats (Schumpeter), and libertarians (Nozick). Although these traditions may disagree on the problems facing democracy (state power, majoritarianism, poverty, elites, etc.) and may suggest divergent solutions (the free market, representation, division of powers, distributive justice, direct democracy, negative rights, etc.), they all assume a similar liberal individualist notion of the subject. This subject is what communitarian critic Michael Sandel (1992) describes as the 'unencumbered self', a self-knowing subject individuated antecedently to its choice of ends. It is the form of political subject also referred to in C.B. MacPherson's (1962) analysis of possessive individualism, Jane Mansbridge's (1993) discussion of self interest in 'adversary democracy' and Iris Marion Young's (1990) critique of the interest-based conception of democracy.

- 5 For a comparison of the theoretical differences between the democratic positions underpinning teledemocracy and liberal pluralist projects see Abramson et al. (1988: 28–9).
- 6 Selected questions from computer users were answered by the US President via webcast. See <http://www.excite.com/townhall/> (consulted July 2000).
- 7 On 24 June 2000, President Clinton and Vice President Gore announced via webcast major new ‘E-Government initiatives’. These new initiatives remain driven by the goal of providing an array of government information online in order to maximize individual choice. See <http://www.whitehouse.gov/WH/New/html/e-government.html> (consulted July 2000).
- 8 The internet is increasingly being used to enhance political voting systems. For instance, in the US, VoteHere.net ran a straw poll in Alaska for the Republican Party in January 2000, Election.com helped run the Arizona Democratic Primary in March 2000, and eBallot.net has enabled internet voting in the Reform Party’s August 2000 Presidential nominations.
- 9 For a selection of electronic democracy rhetoric from influential cyber-libertarians see Barlow (1996), Dyson et al. (1994), Gates (1999), Grossman (1995), Keyworth (1997), and Toffler and Toffler (1994). A celebratory look at many such figures is offered by Brockman (1997). For more critical analysis see Barbrook and Cameron (1995) and Rowe (1996).
- 10 Katz (1997) reports research that shows that online politics tend to be dominated by libertarians committed to free-market style politics.
- 11 Communitarian theorists tend to put forward a more sophisticated version than the crude communitarianism advocated in the popular literature and that I have described here. For further insight into the communitarian position see The Communitarian Network, <http://www.gwu.edu/~ccps/catel.html> (consulted July 2000) or refer to communitarian theorists such as Etzioni (1993), MacIntyre (1981), and Sandel (1982).
- 12 These ‘small media’ include ‘posters, small press, transistor radio, mimeograph machines, copying facilities, public phones, portaback video, audio and video cassette recorders, and personal computers’ (Tehrani, 1990: 235–6).
- 13 ‘Public’ systems are seen as dominated by cultural elites with little community participation, let alone community ownership and control (Tehrani, 1990: 107–10).
- 14 For examples of electronic democracy projects influenced by communitarian ideals see Abramson et al. (1988) and Tehrani (1990).
- 15 Community networks are sometimes set up using basic bulletin board systems, but more often employ specially developed software. For instance, most so called Free-Nets use FreePort software developed at Case Western Reserve University for the Cleveland Free-Net (Beamish, 1995). The term Free-Net is a service mark of the National Public Telecomputing Network (NPTN), an umbrella organization that helped sustain community member networks before it went bankrupt in September 1996 (Kanfer, 1997; Schuler, 1996: 26).
- 16 For instance, in Britain the BBC (<http://www.partnerships.org.uk/bol/>) and Partnership Online (<http://www.partnerships.org.uk/index.htm>) both offer online links to community networks and support for those wanting to build local community through the internet (both consulted July 2000).
- 17 Many virtual communities are linked to mega-communities – web sites that host literally thousands of online communities. The OneList (www.onelist.com) mega-

community at last count boasted 280,000 communities while Six Degrees (www.sixdegrees.com/invite.asp) boasted over three million members. Geocities (geocities.yahoo.com) offers web space where tens of thousands of individuals and groups 'build' their home pages around 'themed communities' or 'clusters of interests' – 'communities of like-minded pages'. Geocities is now part of Yahoo which also hosts thousands of online 'clubs' (clubs.yahoo.com/). Other mega-communities include Microsoft communities (communities.msn.com/home), Excite's community boards (boards.excite.com/communities/directory), Lycos clubs (clubs.lycos.com/libe/Directory/welcome.asp), and Talk City (talkcity.com). These mega-community sites tend to be profit oriented. They offer free space to public (i.e. non-profit) virtual communities but sell space to advertisers attempting to target certain communities of interest. (All web sites consulted May 2000.)

- 18 The 'reality' of online community is supported by social research including Turkle (1995), Watson (1997) and Wellman and Gulia (1999).
- 19 Barber (1998a, 1998b) continues to provide persuasive arguments for his deliberative vision for democracy and the use of new communications technologies to do this.
- 20 Some of the strongest formulations of deliberative democracy can be found in Bohman (1996), Chambers (1996), Cohen (1989), Dryzek (1990), Habermas (1996), Manin (1987) and Miller (1992). Recently a number of useful collections discussing deliberative democracy have appeared. One of the most interesting of these is Benhabib (1996). See also Bohman and Rheg (1997) and Elster (1998). See Bohman (1998) for a survey of the developing deliberative position.
- 21 There are large variations between different liberal individualist conceptions of the public sphere. Liberal pluralism sees it as an arena for maintaining a vibrant marketplace of ideas. The concept becomes subsumed within parliamentary and party deliberations in elite theories of democracy. Direct democrats (such as teledemocrats) tend to ignore the public sphere altogether, arguing that individuals' pre-discursive interests should be expressed free from any intermediary institutions.
- 22 Proponents of the idea that cyberspace may (given the right social conditions) offer a renewed public sphere include Aikens (1997), Barber (1998a and 1998b), Clift (1999), Fernback (1997), Hauben and Hauben (1997), Kellner (1999), Moore (1999) and Noveck (1999).
- 23 See Minnesota E-Democracy's home page at <http://www.e-democracy.org/> (consulted July 2000).
- 24 See <http://www.e-democracy.org/ia/> (consulted July 2000).
- 25 Neither of these projects were operating online at the time of writing (as at July 2000).
- 26 See <http://www.law.yale.edu/infosociety/civicechange.html> (consulted July 2000).
- 27 The British Government internet site is a rare example of a national government providing discussion forums as well as the more standard information and feedback facilities. See <http://www.number-10.gov.uk/default.asp?pageid=7> (consulted July 2000). Discussion forums are more likely to be provided by city council online initiatives. However, as Hale et al. (1999) show, city and municipal networks do not often *actively* encourage citizen deliberation. Even the much celebrated deliberative aspects of Santa Monica's PEN are now being down-played by officials and not being taken up by councils emulating PEN (Doctor and Dutton, 1998: 147). For further discussion of various government initiatives see Ostberg and Clift (1999). Refer to Tsagarousianou et al. (1998) for a number of excellent evaluations of city networks.

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