Internet and the Democratization of Civic Culture

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The starting point for my reflections here is a schematic distinction within a democracy between the formal political system, with its institutional structures, laws, parties, elections, etc., and a complex, multi-dimensional civic culture, anchored in everyday life and its horizons. Civic culture both reflects and makes possible this democratic system, while at the same time it is dependent upon the system for its institutional guarantees and parameters. In Habermasian terms, this notion of civic culture can thus be seen as an important region of the life-world, with its negotiation of norms and values. As such, it is certainly vulnerable to colonization from the system of politics and, yet can potentially also impact on the norms and values that guide those spheres. The political system (but to a lesser degree the economic system) and a civic culture are in principle mutually dependent; both evolve in relation to each other. A civic culture is thus both strong and vulnerable: it generates the normative and cultural resources required for a functioning democracy, yet it sits precariously in the face of political and economic power. It can be shaped by citizens, but can also shape them, since various 'technologies of citizenship', as Cruishank (1999) calls them, such as government and education – and I would add the media – can serve to empower or disempower citizens via the civic culture.

My intent here is to air a (renewed) concept of civic culture, consider its utility, and then relate this to the Internet, ending with a very brief sketch of a proposed empirical study.

Renewing an old concept

Civic culture is not a completely unproblematic concept. It contains both empirical and normative dimensions. It also has a past: since the ancient Greeks, reflection on the cultural preconditions of politics has been an integral part of political though. After the Second World War, American political scientists began to try to draw lessons about democracy's cultural variables. Based in the political climate of the Cold War, and using large-scale survey techniques coupled with Parsonian views on social integration, they launched the notion of the civic culture as the foundation of a major cross-national research effort (Almond and Verba, 1963; 1980). In my update, I would like avoid what I take to be elements of psychological reductionism and ethnocentrism. Also, my view of culture is constructionist and materialist, rather than systemic. In terms of disciplines, I am hovering in the border zone between Political Communication and Cultural Studies.

To further clear the conceptual terrain, civic culture obviously bears some relationship to what has been termed civil society. But this latter notion, itself slippery and multivalent, generally points to institutional structures and social processes. Civic culture underscores <u>culture,</u> i.e. collective meaning making. One could say that civic culture resides within civil society, but this is not the whole story, since civic culture shores up full-blown political participation as well, not just the pre- or proto-political activity normally gathered under the civil society label. Also, civic culture is not equivalent to the public sphere, though one could say that the public sphere is in part made possible by suitable features of a civic culture.

We would be more correct to think in terms of civic cultures, in the plural, given the patterns of diversity among citizens, though this would linguistically awkward in the long run. Normatively, a civic culture does not presuppose homogeneity among its citizens, but in the spirit off civic republicanism, does suggest minimal shared commitments to the vision and procedures of democracy. A functioning civic culture thus at some level entails a capacity to see beyond the immediate interests of one's own group. Needles to say, this may be a tricky balance to maintain at times. However, different social and cultural groups can express civic commonality in different ways, theoretically enhancing democracy's possibilities. Groups and their political positions are always to some extent in flux, and individuals can embody multiple group loyalties; the boundaries of 'we-ness' in heterogeneous modern democracies can shift. The tasks of making democracy work in societies characterized by pervasive social differentiation, not least along ethnic and

cultural lines, is perplexing (Kymlicka, 1995; Spinner, 1994), but a potentially fruitful way to frame the problems and strive for solutions could be precisely be via the concept of civic culture..

The notion of civic culture thus points to those features of the socio-cultural world that constitute everyday pre-conditions for all democratic participation: in the institutions of civil society, engagement in the public sphere, and involvement in political activity broadly understood. These preconditions involve cultural attributes prevalent among citizens that can in various ways facilitate democratic life, (including the processes whereby the definitions of democratic life are defined and translated into politics). As a concept, then, civic culture is not new, and even my reformulation carries over traditional elements from political science/political communication. It is the connection with cultural theory that in my view enhances its utility, connecting perspectives from constructionism and sense-making with the framework from traditional social science. We can distinguish between four dimensions – empirical elements – of civic culture. These can in turn serve as starting points for empirically interrogating the various media salient for modern democracy:

Four dimensions

<u>Relevant knowledge and competencies</u>. This is obvious, this is basic. People must have access to reliable reports, portrayals, analyses, discussions, debates and so forth about current affairs. Here the media's role is central, yet also problematic. Accessibility has to do not just with technical and economic aspects, but also with linguistic and cultural proximity. The sources of knowledge and the materials for the development of competencies must be comprehensible, cast in modes that communicate well with different collectivities. This of course reiterates the need for multiple public spheres – or a highly heterogeneous overarching one – characterized by sufficient autonomy and diversity to address and incorporate different groups. Some degree of literacy is essential; people must be able to make sense of that which circulates in the public sphere, and to understand the world they live in. They also have to have the ability to express their own ideas, if they are to partake in the public sphere's processes of opinion-formation and/or engage in other political activities; communicative competencies are indispensable for a democratic citizenry. Education, in its many forms, will thus always retain its relevance for democracy, even if its contents and goals often need to be critically examined.

Sociological realism tells us that it is unlikely that the necessary levels of knowledge and competence for all members of society can be attained; also, citizens certainly must have the right to not be engaged. However, the principle of universalism underscores that any systematic mechanisms of exclusion in this regard are antithetical to democracy, and must thus be challenged. Precisely what kinds of knowledge and competencies are required for the vitality of a civic culture can never be established once and for all, but must always be open for discussion. In terms of sense-making via the modern media today, especially if we look at young voters, many questions arise as to what constitutes relevant knowledge in a media milieu where many of the previous boundaries have become problematic (e.g., journalism vs. popular culture, the personal and the political, citizen and consumer; see for example Street, 1997; van Zoonen, 1998)

<u>Loyalty to democratic values and procedures</u>. Democracy will not function if such virtues as tolerance and willingness to follow democratic principles and procedures do not have grounding in everyday life. Even support for the legal system (assuming it is legitimate) is an expression of such virtue: democracy will not survive a situation of profound lawlessness. Just what are the best or real democratic values, and how they are to be applied, can of course be the grounds for serious dispute – and it is precisely in such situations that the procedural mechanisms take on extra importance. Resolution of conflict, striving for compromise in situations where consensus is impossible, is a key task for a democratic society and requires a commitment to the rules of the game. The media largely tend reinforce the commitment to democratic values (even by invoking them in sensationalist scandals), and in particular it can be argued that support for the democratic rights of individuals is something that is spreading globally via media representations. Schudson (1998) in his historical survey of citizenship in the US argues that particularly the cementation of the values of individual offers grounds for a qualified optimism regarding democracy's future.

<u>Practices, routines, traditions</u>. Democracy must be embodied in concrete, recurring practices – individual, group, and collective – relevant for diverse situations. Such practices help generate personal and social meaning in relation to the ideals of democracy, and they must have an element of the routine, of the taken for granted about them, if they are to be a part of a civic culture. Elections can be seen as a form of practice in this regard, but a civic culture requires many other practices, pertinent to many other circumstances in everyday life, to civil and political society. For example, how to hold a meeting, manage discussion, even how to argue, can be seen as important features of the life-world that have bearing on civic culture. The interaction among citizens is a cornerstone of the public sphere, and the kinds of established rules and etiquette that shape such interaction either promote the practices of public discussion or contribute to their evaporation. (In my view, Nina Eliasoph's 1998 study of various discursive practices inhibiting political talk is an excellent analysis of civic culture). Across time, practices become traditions, and experience becomes collective memory; today's democracy needs to be able to refer to a past, without being locked in it. New practices and traditions can and must evolve to ensure that democracy does not stagnate. Again, we can see how the lack of practices and traditions is an obstacle in many societies attempting to develop their democratic character. The media obviously contribute here by their representations of ongoing political life, including its rituals and symbols, yet increasingly also take on relevance as more people make use of the newer interactive possibilities and incorporate these as part of their civic culture practices.

<u>Identities as citizens</u>. Traditionally, citizenship is defined as a formal status, though at times questions about which rights (and obligations) are to be accorded may give rise political conflict. How we define citizenship is inseparable from how we define democracy and the good society. One can say that the formal status of citizenship conceptually frames much of political life in modern democraciess – for example the struggles to implement genuine universality and equality – and it thus remains contested.

From another perspective, , citizenship has increasingly become an object of social theory and social analysis (cf. Turner, 1993; 1994; Beiner, 1995; Janoski ,1998), not least from the standpoint of feminist horizons and the obstacles to women achieving equality and universalism (cf. Voet, 1998; Dean, 1997). Much of this literature casts citizenship in terms of social agency, as particular sets of practices, and the circumstances around them. Traditional social science research has already done this in some ways, emphasising the importance of certain values and norms being internalised as a prerequisite for citizenship. More recent work has taken a somewhat different, though largely complementary route. Based in cultural theory (e.g., Preston, 1997; Isin and Wood, 1999) as well as political philosophy (e.g. Clarke, 1996; Mouffe, 1993; Trend, 1996; Smith, 1998), these contributions have highlighted the dimension of identity as a key to understanding citizenship as a mode of social agency. In short, in order to be able to act as a citizen, it is necessary that one can see oneself as a citizen, as subjectively encompassing the attributes this social category may involve.

Just which attributes are relevant is a question that has become more and more complicated. Previously, for example, citizenship was defined by its relevance for the public realm. However, the neat boundaries between public and private have become increasingly problematic (cf. Weintraub and Kumar, 1997). Today, citizenship still generally evokes the notion of a subjectivity positioned publicly – even if a 'public' context can be very small scale – however, with the public and private having become intertwined, citizenship as an identity becomes interlaced with other dimensions of the self. Yet, if citizenship is a dimension of the self, this does not mean that people necessarily give the word 'citizen' a meaning that resonates with them; they may have other vocabularies. From the standpoint of research one has to be sensitive people's own discursive strategies for making sense of and participating in democracy.

One of the hallmarks of late modern society is the emergence of the self as a reflexive project, an ongoing process of the shaping and reshaping of identity, in response to the pluralized sets social forces, cultural currents and personal contexts encountered by individuals. Moreover, the identity is understood as plural: in our daily lives we operate in a multitude of different 'worlds' or realities; we carry within us different sets of knowledge, assumptions, rules and roles for different circumstances. Some of these elements reside more to the core of our identity, others more in the periphery. Yet, all of us are to varying degrees composite people. The idea of composite identities also pertains to citizenship. Democracy's health is seen as linked to citizenship understood as a significant element of the construction of our multiple selves; Gellner (1994)

uses the metaphor 'modular man' (sic) to capture this idea. People's identities as citizens (however defined), with their sense of belonging to – and perceived possibilities for participating in – societal development becomes a crucial element in the life of democracy. To see citizenship as one dimension of identity may also help us to avoid letting our democratic ideals generate a predefined, one-size-fits-all portrait of citizenship that is sociologically and psychologically unrealistic. If democracy were to presuppose that the majority of the population be turned into a corps of adult scouts, the prospects would be bleak, indeed.

These four dimensions of civic culture should be seen as a circuit of mutually reinforcing factors, not a list of separate items. For people to see themselves as citizens, and for a civic culture to flourish, involves thus the mutual interdependence of knowledge and competencies, loyalty to democratic values and procedures, as well as established practices and traditions. While a civic culture rests upon what citizens' ways of doing and thinking in everyday life, the media can foster or hinder this circuit.

Net links

The political trends in modern democracy articulate in complex ways with the evolution of the media. The dimensions of civic culture offer ways to organize analyses of how the media, via their modes of representation as well as the newer forms of interactivity that they offer, are possibly contributing to the decline of traditional political life and the emergence of newer forms of involvement. While empirical and normative ambivalence about these developments remain, we can choose to underscore that individuals and groups are finding new ways of doing – and imagining – democracy. The civic culture prism does not promise that we will get any easier answers, but it can help us to formulate questions and stake out research directions, while also possibly providing an enhanced conceptual toolkit.

The Internet has already become an object of intense theorizing and, more recently, of empirical analysis. Two currents are particularly relevant here: the theme of community on/via the (cf. Smith and Kollock, 1999; Jones, 1998) and the relevance of the Net for politics (e.g. Hague and Loader, 1999). These currents can provide a number of useful signposts, but the focus in this research would be angled specifically at the roles the Internet can play in regard to the four dimensions of civic culture. An important tendency I see emerging in current Net research is a declining emphasis on the on-line/off-line distinction. There is still certainly much to be investigates regarding the specific attributes of cyberspace and how it differs from the world beyond the screen. However, the rampant intermeshing of the Net with so many social institutions, organizations and everyday settings invites us to consider how this technology is concretely used and integrated in these various contexts, where people are repeatedly moving between on- and off-line activities within the practical circumstances they have at hand. So while one could conceivably analyze some aspects of civic culture by focusing purely on the Net, I would instead choose to see how the Net is utilized in conjunction with other, off-line activities.

In formulating a research project, I would begin by identifying a number of specific groups who are actively engaged in some way within civil or political society, and who reside at the forefront of the newer developments of civic culture (rather, than say, some sort of representative selection) – and who have a strong outward presence on the Net, or, alternatively, make considerable use of the Net for their own internal activities. The point is to see what is the 'value added' for civic culture that Net use carries with it. The number of groups selected would of course be dependent upon the resources available, but ideally I would like to see a comparative design where similarities and differences could be delineated. Among the many possible categories: a relatively new, place-bound local activist group, an organizations that has an orientation to a particular theme or issue and operate in a European or global context, such as an established NGO working with humanitarian relief, and a social movement within the area of environment or feminism.

Trying map the interplay of knowledge, competencies, values, practices and identities would involve individual and group interviews, observation, and not least analysis of Net texts. The material must be gathered in ways that capture both what citizens these citizens strategically do and the construction of

meaning that emerges in the process. The practical challenges such research pose should not be underestimated…

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