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The Idea of Electronic Democracy: Origins, Visions and Questions

BY THIERRY VEDEL

WHEN the tenth anniversary of the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) was celebrated in 2004, visionaries and sceptics alike turned to reflect on what has been and what will be the reality and impact of the Internet in everyday life.¹ Since the early beginnings of the global network, one major focus of these reflections has been the potential to transform political processes and provide new solutions to old obstacles through advances popularly referred to as *electronic democracy*. This article aims at presenting a comprehensive analysis of the several origins, interpretations and open questions in this field. Electronic democracy, despite the young age of its *e*-coded name, has a standing history of several decades, of which the current discussion focusing on online media is only the most recent extension.

The three ages of the idea of electronic democracy

The idea of enhancing democratic processes with information technology did not appear with the Internet, but gradually developed since the end of the Second World War and the advent of computers. Depending on the state of technology on the one hand, and the political context and the public perception of the problems of democracy on the other hand, three stages can be distinguished (see Table 1).

The first age of e-democracy began in the 1950s with the emergence of cybernetics sciences under Norbert Wiener.² At this particular time, the beginnings of computing technology and automated systems met efforts to re-evaluate processes of political negotiation and conflict resolution in the aftermath of the Second World War. Not only did cybernetics provide an analytical framework to better understand the social reality, it also brought in a promise of social orthopedic. In this approach, as illustrated by the book of Karl Deutsch on the Nerves of government,³ the decision-making process is mapped to a cybernetic feedback loop, in which politics acts as a well-defined system that measures and responds to its environment. Computers were thereby conceived of as new potential mediators, capable of processing large amounts of information to arrive at more rational conclusions. This governing machine, it was thought, would dismiss human passions and overcome the bounded rationality of decision-makers pointed out by Herbert Simon.⁴

1. The Three Ages of Digital Democracy

Period (Leading Figures)	Socio-Political Context	Technical Context	Main Issues, Arenas and Actors
1950–60 The governing machine (Norbert Wiener)	Cold War Strong State intervention Emergence of public management	Computers are seen as powerful tools to process big amount of data Centralised systems	Efficient management of public administrations Rational and scientific approach of public policies The State as the central actor and coordinator of societies
1970–80 Teledemocracy to enhance social links (Benjamin Barber, Amitai Etzioni, Franck Arterton)	Social and political crisis in the late 1960s Political institutions are contested The local arena seen as the place to re-found politics	Cable TV networks, then telematics Local and independent systems Interactivity	Modernisation of representative democracy Better relationship between citizen and elected officials Local communities as a laboratory of a strong democracy
1990–2000 Cyber-democracy as a new polity (John Perry Barlow, Howard Reingold, Alvin Toffler, Esther Dyson)	Liberalisation and privatisation: the role of the State is challenged Globalisation: the future of nation states is questioned Development of individualism and commercialisation along with libertarian values	Computers networking Development of the Internet seen as an open, global, decentralised network which provides the potential for non-hierarchical communication	Virtual communities as a means to produce identity Citizen as an autonomous agent in a global public sphere (the global village) Cyberspace: as a metaphor and tool of political self-organisation

This approach, however, received continued criticism until it ultimately faded in the late 1960s. Its opponents rejected the over-simplification of politics into a *practical*, scientific system that can respond to the environment in predictable manners and achieve well-defined goals, and termed it as technocracy. For instance, Jean Meynaud argued that, otherwise considered a ‘black box’, the political process represented a complexity irreducible through technology, and conversely that technology could be politicised.⁵ Other critics, notably Jurgen Habermas, contested the confusion between political power (as the technical capacity

to master things) and political will (as resulting from a free deliberation among citizens).⁶

Despite this unsuccessful first exploration of electronic democracy, the use of computers as an aid for effectively managing and rationalising government practices evolved from this stage and finds its sophisticated applications later on, first in the 1960s with the introduction of management techniques such as the Planning Programming and Budgeting System (PPBS), then in the 1990s with the first plans for an electronic government, which would work better and cost less, as the Vice-President Al Gore put it.⁷

The second age of electronic democracy came with the advent and penetration of cable TV networks and private computers, during the 1970s and 1980s. These new technological devices emerged as new political concerns and visions were framed in the aftermath of the social crises that many industrialised countries experienced in the late 1960s. This led to the rise of so-called new social movements as well as to new conceptions of politics, according to which society would be better transformed from the bottom up and the coordination of local actions rather through the conquest of the state central apparatus. In this *active society*, as Amitai Etzioni termed it, local communities were to be the key political arena and the place where new forms of political participation could be experienced.⁸ Resulting from the conjunction of these changes in the technical and political contexts, the term *teledemocracy* arose and created interest for new initiatives in two major areas.

On one side, television began to be used for new points of connection and participation for constituencies by broadcasting public hearings and debates, citizen discussion, and enabling interactivity through telephone callbacks. Teledemocracy trials or projects were started in different cities including Minerva in New Jersey, Qube in Columbus, Televote in Hawa, Interactive cable TV in Milton Keynes.⁹

In contrast to this first group of initiatives, which sought to enhance communication between elected officials and citizens, another development was oriented towards promoting social links among citizens. In the vein of the views expressed by Ivan Illich,¹⁰ or of Ernst Schumacher,¹¹ and later of Benjamin Barber,¹² this second trend was aimed at fostering a decentralised, human-sized, convivial usage of information technologies. It saw the rise of local community networks, such as San Francisco's *Community Memory System*, which were produced to connect citizens within their localities. These networks were most prominent in the United States and saw an extension during the 1980s with so-called *free-nets* and the desire to enable peer-based and unmediated information exchanges.¹³

However, this second phase of electronic democracy faced technological limitations (e.g. lack of real interactivity of cable TV networks and interconnectivity problems for computers networks) as well as an increasing commercialisation of its medium. Hence, it failed to achieve

its goals of enlarging the public space of politics. Nonetheless, this period of experimentation was successful in generating active interest for the democratic potentials offered by ICTs, which set the stage for the third age of electronic democracy.

This most recent stage has commonly been the one most associated with the term *e*-democracy, and it provided the majority of dimensions now prevalent in the debate and understanding of the field. Not only did the emergence of the Internet in the 1990s bring about an entirely new communication medium that became inexpensive, instantaneous and user-friendly (in the context of industrialised countries), but it was also accompanied by a new ideology of information freedom and a declared political 'independence of cyberspace' and its 'citizens' from the physical, as elaborated by John Perry Barlow in 1996.¹⁴ These visions called for a new age of politics and civic engagement, and combine hedonist and creative individualism, social solidarity, political liberalism and ecological concerns into a world view sometimes termed as a 'Californian ideology'¹⁵ that has been intertwined with the cyberspace phenomenon. In these visions, the Internet is much more than an additional tool which provides new solutions to the problems of democracy; it creates a new way of being together and a novel polity, which no longer takes place within the bounded territories of nation states, but in an open, de-territorialised, non-hierarchical space.

While the visions of the cyberspace politics encompass many variations, two main currents can be identified. One is more communitarian and has been especially formulated by Howard Rheingold.¹⁶ Drawing from the experience of the community network WELL (Whole Earth eLectronic Link) in San Francisco, Rheingold sees virtual communities, defined as the 'social aggregations that emerge from the Internet when enough people carry on public discussions long enough and with sufficient human feeling to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace', as the basic cell of the new age of politics. Another current, more rooted in economics, has been notably expressed by Esther Dyson, George Gilder, George Keyworth and Alvin Toffler in their *Magna Carta for the Knowledge Age*.¹⁷ Since, in a knowledge age, power is no longer based on the material property of things but on the exchange of ideas, it calls for a flexible, customised government which encourages the ability of people to communicate with each other and to auto-organise through contractual arrangements. Hence, they argue:

As the gap between the knowledge rich and the knowledge poor is eliminated in this new era, the centralized power of the state with inevitably melt away. Cyberspace democracy will empower those closest to the decision.¹⁸

Altogether, these approaches define the cyberspace as the beginning of a new polity and, in this respect, they radically contrast with the views held in the first age of the electronic democracy (improving the machinery of the state), or in the second age (revitalising the social links among citizens).

The different visions of electronic democracy

For the past decade, a whole trend of the scholarship literature about electronic democracy has explored how this concept related to classical models of democracy. Most of this literature has dealt with the forms of political systems that the use of ICTs and of the Internet could trigger, based on the goals and values put forward by the proponents of e-democracy. Arthur Edwards, crossing two dimensions of democracy (individualism versus collectivist, epistemic versus deliberative), differentiated three versions of electronic democracy: a populist version, a liberal version and a republican one.¹⁹ Doug Schuller studied whether the political practices associated to the Internet met the criteria of democracy proposed by Dahl.²⁰ Jens Hoff, using traditional conceptions of citizenship (liberal, republican, communitarian, radical), suggested that four models of e-democracy could emerge from the use of the Internet (consumerist, plebiscitary, pluralist, participative).²¹ Jan van Dijk, after taking into account the purposes of the democracy (elites selection, opinion formation, decision-making) and the means used to achieve these (representative or direct), reached six potential models of e-democracy (legalist, competitive, plebiscitary, pluralist, participative, libertarian).²² From a somewhat different perspective, Thierry Vedel analysed how the three current dominant visions of democracy (elitist, pluralist, republican) shaped the political and governmental uses of the Internet.²³

This kind of approach is fruitful in that it refers to the fundamental issues that every political organisation has to address—the nature of the individual, what living together in a community means, the relationship between the citizens and the general will—and the range of arrangements that democracy offers to deal with these questions. Yet, it is likely too early to think in terms of models. The political uses of the Internet are still evolving and it is therefore difficult to anticipate how they will affect the existing political institutions. Many e-democracy projects have so far only concerned specific parts of current political systems, thus failing to have an overall impact. The very discourse on e-democracy is heterogeneous and built on varied, and sometimes contradictory, logics. This variety of usage and conceptions makes it difficult to draw pure forms of e-democracy.

This is why, rather than offering another typology of e-democracy models, it is preferable, in my view, to focus on the different core issues which structure the design and implementation of concrete e-democracy projects (as well as the discourse that accompany them). If we do so, we find that three dimensions, corresponding to different sequences of the democratic process (information, discussion, decision) and their related problems (the lack of transparency in political institutions, the narrowness of the public sphere, the insufficient participation of citizens in public decisions) are apparent in most e-democracy projects. In other words,

the idea of electronic, as it is implemented in field or pilot projects, can be mapped along three axes:²⁴

The first axis is *information*, starting with the citizen's instantaneous access to politically relevant content, including news, opinions, and factual data—in vast quantities. But in the context of information technology, this proclaimed right of access also ambivalently includes the democratic notion of *transparency*. Early optimists saw a future of more transparent governments and greater accountability as documentation on processes and decisions would become more easily accessible. However, many governments of industrialised countries still lack adequate information-access laws. Even in countries where such a legislation is in place (for instance the United States with the Freedom of Information Act of 1964), open information is subject to continued (political) obstacles and practical limitations even though ICTs seem to provide inexpensive ways of disseminating information.

Discussion is a second major axis in e-democracy. Significant attention has been given to the potential of this area with three main foci: the Internet is generally seen as a new medium that enables exchange across geographical, social and cultural boundaries and promotes free individual expression (notably because of the anonymity of participants); a large base of users would provide access and exposure to a variety of opinions and the self-organising nature of the medium could produce a self-regulated public space 'by the people, for the people'; taking part in public forums or discussion newsgroups would generate a greater sense of community and condense collective identities. Yet, these assumptions have to be evaluated on the basis of the actual practices which can be observed. Research findings in this domain are rather deceptive and contradict cyber-optimists' hopes: only a minority of participants are really active; self-expression is often preferred to the engagement in genuine discussion (which supposes an effort to understand the others points of views), so that many newsgroups can be likened to interactive monologues.^{25,26}

Finally, *online decision-making and participation* is a third major direction in electronic democracy. This space includes efforts to more actively involve constituents, especially in the setting of local communities. Examples have included online consultations and focus groups, opinion polling and surveys, and experiments with public referenda (see Wright in this volume). Electronic voting as a larger issue in e-democracy also falls into this category, and has generated significant interest in the potential of enabling direct democracy at large scales. The argument goes as follows: direct democracy, as exemplified by the Athenian agora, is the optimal form of democracy; yet, because it was not materially possible to gather all citizens in the same place, representative democracy was implemented; fortunately, by allowing to electronically consult millions of citizens, the Internet will allow to revive the direct democracy. Such an argument is seducing but suffers from a

serious misconception: representative democracy has not been implemented in modern democracies to solve a problem of numbers, but because it embodied the elitist conception of the ruling bourgeoisie, according to which most citizens are only able to select governing officials elected, but not to deliberate on public affairs.²⁷

The idea of electronic democracy put into question

The idea of electronic democracy is often evaluated by analysing its possible consequences on the political systems whether they are positive (e.g. greater political participation, enlargement of the public sphere) or negative (e.g. increasing inequalities among people in the form of a digital divide, extended social control over citizens). By contrast, the conditions that are required for it to be implemented are more seldom questioned. As Dieter Fuchs and Max Kaase²⁸ point out, ‘the proponents of digital democracy have made little efforts, both empirically and theoretically, to document the conditions which are required to transform the utopia of a strong democracy into an operational political system’.

Such a task implies internal criticism of the notion itself. Are the central assumptions on which the idea of electronic democracy rests valid or realistic? Does it deal systematically and thoroughly with the main issues and problems of politics that the theoreticians of democracy have raised for many centuries? Can the means suggested actually combine in a coherent way? In this respect, I would like to grasp—and challenge—four main assumptions on which the idea of electronic democracy is generally premised.

A VERY DEMANDING CONCEPTION OF CITIZENSHIP. In concordance with the traditional views on citizenship propagated by theoreticians of democracy such as Mill, Locke or de Tocqueville, the discourse on electronic democracy generally assumes that, in order to make rational decisions, citizens need to be fully informed. In the cyberspace, the “good citizen” would be hyperactive, and eager to acquire evermore information at their fingertips for their consumption. This can certainly be challenged in the light of all the research done on political participation, which has shown that only a minority of citizens desire to engage actively in politics (see di Gennaro and Dutton in this volume). Recent work in the field of political psychology has additionally demonstrated that citizens are able to make electoral choices with limited information obtained by using shortcuts, heuristics and other strategies.²⁹ Many citizens are cognitive misers who try to save their cognitive resources. Much of their effort is devoted not to search more information, but to filter, select and reduce information in personally meaningful ways. Moreover, it can be argued that the increasing burden of acquiring, absorbing and acting upon information would dramatically elevate the responsibilities of the citizens in trying to stay informed, thus increasing inequalities

among those citizens with high intellectual capital and a lot of free time and the others. Quite clearly, the relationship between information and democracy is both evident and complex. Citizens' decisions are not just data calculations; they also involve judgements and analytical frames to sort out the relevant information.³⁰ Here, the Internet does not provide any fancy solution, but can just make the task more complicated. Information overload can even inhibit citizens. Therefore, as Pippa Norris argues, rather than deploring the insufficient information of citizens (the civic fallacy) or their inability to process correctly the information at their disposal (the relativist fallacy), it is more important to determine what kind of political knowledge is practically needed to be a good citizen.³¹

THE MYTH OF POLITICAL TRANSPARENCY. The notion of transparency in politics is quite intricate. While everybody would agree that secrecy is a problem in a democracy, uncontrolled access to information coupled with excessive publicity might be equally damaging to the public welfare. In specific situations (e.g. negotiations), some protection from public scrutiny is necessary. As Doris Graber points out, ignorance may indeed be bliss in public organisations.³² Moreover, transparency can be used in tactical way to hamper the information of citizens, when for instance so much information is supplied that the receivers cannot digest it. Or it can be used in an opposite way to the one expected: not to have governments become more transparent to citizens but instead to control the citizens more closely by exposing them to increasing measures of electronic tracking, data mining and other challenges to personal privacy. More fundamentally, as Jean Leca stresses it, there is something naïve in claiming more transparency in politics, since this equates to require that social actors give up any strategic behavior.³³

A DEMOCRACY REDUCED TO DISCUSSION. The discourse on electronic democracy puts a strong emphasis on *discussion*, to such an extent that it seems that democracy is purely reduced to its aspects of debate, while decision-making processes are disregarded. Many proponents of electronic democracy subscribe to a very radical definition of the freedom of speech, by which there is no limitation to the expression of ideas. There are several problems with this conception. Debating implies some minimal shared codes and common referential. Besides the affirmation of a principle of equality, no real attention is given to what makes a discussion democratic or not. For instance, text-based discussion as found on the Internet, since it draws on the selected audience of those who master written language, may therefore be undemocratic in nature. Furthermore, exchanging ideas and opinions is only one step in the democratic process; it is then necessary to reach decisions, a question about which the discourse on electronic democracy is generally silent (although there are some attempts to use ICTs to improve decision-making procedures).

THE END OF INTERMEDIARY BODIES? Lastly, we can question one of the earliest ambitions in cyberspace democracy, namely the envisioned abolishment of intermediary bodies in public affairs. It was originally proclaimed by visionaries that entities like political parties and large-scale media would eventually become obsolete in an age when information could be exchanged without obstacle and active citizens could be involved directly in decision-making processes. However, it has to be wondered which capacity would replace the roles played by these intermediary bodies today. Political parties have been essential in national democratic systems to aggregate interests groups and collective opinion, and also to select and train elected officials. Media have traditionally played an important function for the public in channeling and contextualising information streams; not only can the citizen today rely on the filtering mechanisms of these media and be relieved of such burden, but the media also provide a common frame of reference and analysis for the vast amount of simultaneous issues and stories.

Conclusion

In untangling and reorganising these several notions that electronic democracy has produced in its history, it can be concluded that the Internet as the third stage has so far not been more radically transformative of democracy than the two previous ones. Despite its technically democratic nature, the reality of the Internet still faces major challenges in fulfilling the promises of its first visionaries (discriminating requirements of expertise, information overload, the reversal of transparency, demographic biases and others).

The idea of electronic democracy is still in its infancy. It looks like an explosive cocktail, blending a dose of Athenian agora, another of Rousseau, shaken with bits of Jefferson and Mill, plus a zest of Californian ideology. Instead of providing solutions, the recipe for electronic democracy on the Internet has in fact raised more open questions and underlined very old ones than it was able to provide solutions for. The medium certainly embodies unprecedented potential but the transformation of a utopian 'strong democracy' into practical systems remains a virtual vision waiting to materialise.

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