Chapter 6

Power and Identity among Citizens in Networked Societies:
Towards a Critical Study of Cultural E-Governance

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ABSTRACT

A classic question within studies of governance concerns what appears to be a paradox of being free and governed at the same time. In this chapter, the author addresses this question departing from contemporary Western society, a society to which he attaches labels such as digital, late modern, and networked. This is a theoretical chapter addressing political participation, citizenship practices, and power. How do people enter into citizenship through political participation online, and what governs these processes? The contribution to the academic discussion is to highlight the expressive as an increasingly important rationale for political participation in networked and digital late modernity. The author arrives at this conclusion departing from the intersections between technology, society, and culture. In these intersections, expressive processes of identification are keys. Therefore citizenship practices also need to be approached from an axis of individualism, creating even more intersections when combined with technology, society, and culture.

INTRODUCTION

The objective of this chapter is to understand political participation among both free, but also governed, individuals in an increasingly digitalized media landscape. This is a chapter based on social theory and transdisciplinarity, aiming to clarify concepts across academic disciplines for better understanding and analyses of contemporary governance. The chapter will attend to complex ideas of citizenship, society, power, governance, the political, the individual and their interconnections. This constitutes a broad approach on some core issues in the Social and Political Sciences

and as such the chapter is inevitably incomplete. But the aim here is not to enter into detail on encompassing socio-political concepts and their specific interrelations. The contribution to the academic discussion is on a meta-level, putting forward a transdisciplinary approach and as such will hopefully be useful as a theoretical frame for empirical research, to identify entry points for embarking on studies of contemporary political participation(s) online.

In this chapter, I will draw my argument from theories across the socio-political spectrum, including such as theories of governance, late modernity, networks and rationality. The issue at stake - understanding political participation among free and governed individual citizens in contemporary digital media landscapes - takes us back to the Social Sciences' classic dichotomy between society and the individual. In academia we have attempted to outline transdisciplinary concepts in order to transcend this dichotomy. First and foremost I think of citizenship, a concept combining normative macro-perspectives of a good society and how it should be structured, with behavioral understandings of individual participation (for an overview on citizenship see Isin & Turner, 2002). Citizenship rights for example are attached to individuals, but the argument for having those rights has an important collective dimension (Bellamy, 2008, pp. 14-15). They appeal to certain qualities for human beings leading a life together with others, they appeal to how society should be structured in an equal and just manner. It is a political community of members who can grant rights, in which individual members (citizens) seek fair terms of association to secure those goods necessary for them to pursue their doings on just and equal terms with fellow members (Bellamy, 2008, p. 16). In this way, citizens are free rights holding individuals, but at the same time governed by normative discourses of democratic membership with duties such as participation and collective mindedness attached.

Theoretical transcendence does not stop here by bridging imagined borders between the individual and society. There is another boundary we need to transcend in order to better understand political participation today. I am thinking of academic discussions of digital communication where authors tend to lean on determinist positions of either technology or culture. On the one side we have cyber optimists, trusting in the technological aspects of the Internet to solve all kinds of problems in contemporary democracies (see for example Benkler, 2006; Shirky, 2009). On the other hand we have more pessimistic views on digital technology, framed within existing power structures and societal organizations only to reinforce these, hence not bringing about any changes (see Hindman, 2009). I believe it is important not take on a determinist standpoint on either technology or culture. Instead more effort should be put into exploring mutual co-construction of culture and technology (see also Ekelin, 2007; Frau-Meigs, 2007; Roberts, 2009). As Castells (2000) puts it, "technology is society and society cannot be understood or be represented without its technological tools" (p. 29). Technology is thus neither good, nor bad, but it should not be considered neutral either, or untouched by power relations in society.

In this context of transcending theoretical borders, the idea of a network could be used as a mental image to bridge imagined causalities between society and individuals, and between technology and culture. The network concept has become increasingly prominent for understanding governance in a society characterized by multiple nodes and their multilayered interconnections (Castells, 2000; Sörensen & Torfing, 2008). The network concept is also used for understanding individual evolution and fosterage where individuality is rendered useless without network visibility and references to other nodes and their supposed connotations (Castells, 2001, pp. 129-133; Donath & boyd, 2004, p. 72; Walther, Van Der Heide, Kim, Westerman & Tong, 2008).

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