Chapter 81

Issues of Digital Disempowerment and New Media Networking (NMN) in Relation to E–Government

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ABSTRACT

Emerging media technologies are increasingly reconfiguring the public sphere by creating new spaces for political dialogue. E-democracy (digital democracy) and e-government can be usefully served by these emerging technologies; however, their existence does not automatically equate to increased political participation. There is still a need to develop specific and theoretically-oriented approaches to a newly reconfigured public sphere. Employing a structurational perspective, this essay addresses the relationship between political participation, emerging media, new media networking, and e-democracy. While new media networking increases the potential for political participation, depending on various factors such as access, usage and skills, the potential exists for increasing disempowerment as well. The chapter concludes with recommendations for the use of new media networking in ways that enhance e-democracy.

INTRODUCTION

Emerging media technologies are increasingly important for people as they connect with others in a variety of contexts including politics and government. As this occurs, the public sphere becomes reconfigured, opening up new spaces for discourse while possibly obscuring others. The concept of the public sphere has been subjected to many decades of debate. With new media and new media networks offering new potential for citizens to engage each other and various levels of government in political dialogue, the concept

of public sphere is once again susceptible to new conceptualizations. This is particularly true in intellectual writings concerning e-democracy and e-government. While e-democracy (digital democracy) and e-government can be served well by the new media, there is no automatic improvement from previous means of political interaction. There is a need to develop specific and theoretically-oriented views of new public sphere potential. In this way, it will be possible to relate new forms of political participation to issues of how to use e-government to maximize participation for as many citizens as possible.

The purpose of this chapter is to address the concerns of e-government and disempowerment since new media networking (NMN) can both increase and decrease the abilities of citizens to substantially increase their voice and input into democratic politics. Of particular concern here is the persistent problem of the Digital Divide and its gaps which sometimes narrow and other times open depending on what aspect of digital access, usage, or skills is being examined. The most significant problem with the Digital Divide is the possible exclusion from valuable networks for many people who do not have the networking abilities to well position themselves in new media networks. A related problem concerns the various forms of political skills that are related to creating, expanding, and modifying networks of communication that generate political influence.

From its beginning, the Internet has been about interconnection. While it is common to hear how new media networks empower individuals by giving them access to information which they have previously had little access to, there are difficult realities about those who are not so empowered. When examining the potential of new media networking for digital democracy and electronic government (e-government), scholars and practitioners need to take stock of how the new media and networking technologies are being used to create new personal and social networks. This focus forces a shift away from old ideas of computer-mediated communication (CMC) and toward newer concepts like emerging media, social media, social software, and social computing. It also encourages us to examine the irony that the same technologies which empower individuals to create more networking than at any time before, can function to minimize their role in significant and meaningful political communication.

A guiding assumption of this chapter is that NMN is replacing the one-dimensional concepts associated with computer-mediated communication. The latter refers to predominantly single channeled genres of communication such as email alone, cell phone alone or any other singularly purposed communication device. Email alone or Twitter alone are less important from a networking perspective than the use of email with Twitter and other channels of communication that form a technological network that facilitates a social network. NMN is based on converging communication technologies with shared electronic (Internet) networks. With NMN, we see that cell phones become smart phones, and smart phones become major hubs of personal communication technology intersections that are capable of affecting political communication.

The study of NMN is therefore the study of social behavior as opposed to individual behavior. Shirky (2008) argues that the study of human communication must focus more on networks because human behavior and communication involve linkages with other people. In his view, "Bees make hives, we make mobile phones." (Shirkey, 2008, p. 17). NMN allows us to expand cooperation and collective action and this increase can be done outside of traditional and institutional frameworks. Increasing amounts of former professional-only types of communication are moving into general public uses in what Tim O'Reilly calls an "architecture of participation[1]." Features of single communication technologies such as email become less important and less interesting than technologies used in networking. This is because communication technologies aid

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