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Chapter V

ICTs and the Communicative Conditions for Democracy: A Local Experiment with Web-Mediated Civic Publicness

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the contribution of new information and communication technologies to enhancing democracy at the local level is articulated as a practical and empirical question that pertains to the locally established patterns and practices of public communication. It is suggested that in order to realize the democratic potential inherent in ICTs, the compartmentalized, hierarchical and one-way practices of both administrative-political machinery and the mainstream media must be exposed and challenged through concrete action. The article draws upon a participatory action research project in which alternative, dialogical and citizen-oriented forms of web-mediated public communication were created and maintained in close collaboration with grass-roots civic actors and groups. In the experimental project, specific efforts

were made to enable and encourage online encounters between those local stakeholders that rarely meet in the discursive public spaces of mainstream media.

PUBLIC COMMUNICATION, ICTS AND DEMOCRACY

It can be argued, following the American pragmatist philosopher John Dewey (1927), that society exists in communication. In other words, organized social and communal life is not possible without communication. At the same time, the ways in which communication is structured materially and functions socioculturally reveal what kind of society we are talking about. There thus is, as formulated by Lewis Friedland (1996) a “fundamental relationship between communication and democracy” (p. 187).

Starting from this view, a prerequisite for a democratic society is the existence of communicative “spaces,” which enable people not only to get relevant information about the social world but also to participate openly and on equal terms in the public definition, discussion, consultation, and debate on commonly shared but often controversial and problematic issues. Ideally, these public spaces of communication also allow for and foster interaction between “normally” separate social actors. Currently, the prime (re)producer of the public sphere, the media, and especially the professional institution of journalism, perform poorly in enabling and arranging dialogical relationships in their spaces of publicness.

The new information and communication technologies (ICTs), and above all, the Internet have been endowed with high hopes and deep fears as regards the democratic reinvigoration of the public sphere (see, e.g., Tsagarousianou, 1999; Tsagarousianou et al., 1998). Optimists see the Net as remedy to the elitist and monological ills of mass-mediated public communication. The pessimists, in contrast, fear the Net will annihilate any possibilities of open and equal public sphere. What is problematic in the utopias and dystopias of the digitally mediated public sphere is that they are often not only abstract and normative but also at least implicitly deterministic, explaining sociocultural issues with positive or negative technological causality.

Rather than speculating with ICTs’ impact on the future development of the public sphere, it is more useful to approach the new technologies’ contribution as an empirical question. We should examine, for example, whether ICTs allow citizens to behave and engage publicly in ways that the traditional media do not enable (Coleman, 2001, p. 118); or assess how ICT applications are utilized in electronic democracy projects to promote two-way communication between citizens, public officials, and politicians (Tsagarousianou, 1999, p. 202).

From a pragmatic starting point, one cannot separate ICTs’ public potential from the issue of material democracy. It is hard to imagine how digitally mediated communication could function democratically unless everybody, regardless of his or her material wealth, social status, and cultural competencies, has access to new communication and information technologies as well as opportunities to obtain adequate computer literacy and navigating skills (cf., Wilhelm, 2000). The challenge of material equality is made even more pressing by the fact that computers are becoming basic tools of daily life. This intensifies the disconnection from the rest of society for those without access to new technologies.

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