

Chapter 36

Emerging Online Democracy

The Dynamics of Formal and Informal Control in Digitally Mediated Social Structures

Todd Kelshaw

Montclair State University, USA

Christine A. Lemesianou

Montclair State University, USA

ABSTRACT

The emergence and development of Web 2.0 has enabled new modes of social interaction that are potentially democratic, both within and across digitally mediated venues. Web-based interaction offers unlimited opportunities for organizing across geographic, demographic, and contextual boundaries, with ramifications in professional networking, political action, friendships, romances, learning, recreation, and entertainment. The authors conceptualize the democratization of Web-based social structures, defining online democracy as an imperfect balance of formal and informal modes of discursive control. The wrangling between formal and informal modes of discursive control ensures perpetual dynamism and innovation; the wrangling also offers the promise that diverse voices are not only welcome but also potentially responsive and responsible. The conclusion advocated is the importance of paying attention to these tendencies since they demonstrate that the Web's proclivities for decentralization and pluralism do not necessarily lead to relativistic and nihilistic hypertextuality but to potentially novel forms of shared social control.

INTRODUCTION

With the advent of web-based social interaction technologies, new opportunities have arisen for user control and interactivity. These opportunities range widely in their relational complexities, span-

ning information gathering and opinion sharing, the formation of interpersonal relationships and online communities, and the development and maintenance of sophisticated organizational and global networks. Across these varied modes of interactivity, control of the technology, the media, and the communicative content is becoming increasingly decentralized and populist. It is necessary, therefore, to address

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what is commonly called the “democratization” of the web.

Democracy, as conceived here, is not characterized by wholly unregulated chaos, despite the relativistic potential of hypertextual communication. Whereas interactivity in digitally mediated venues may range in quality from “anything goes” anarchy to rigid authoritarianism, this chapter addresses the emergence of democratic moderation, in which online participants “concertively” regulate their communication. Here we identify some past research and thoughts on the Internet’s democratic qualities;¹ describe and illustrate online contexts as potentially democratic social structures that experience interplay between formal and informal communicative forces; and anticipate future trends of theory, empirical research, and practice.

BACKGROUND

The introduction of a new generation of social interaction technologies opens a possibility of the transformation of structural and social reality (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967; Ong, 1982). Since its emergence, the Internet¹ has been approached, theoretically and empirically, as a momentous and consequential social, cultural, economic, and political force (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, & Robinson, 2001; Wilson & Peterson, 2002). Some have theorized that the Internet might drastically transform the self, interaction, and social order and serve as a catalyst for social justice, empowering individuals to find spaces within which their voices may count (Negroponte, 1995). Others have cautioned that the Internet constrains and disempowers individuals within structured routines and cultural norms. They have argued that in the new virtual world some would emerge as winners (e.g., transnational corporations and interests) and others as losers (Beniger, 1996). Castells (1996), for instance, proposed that the Internet would follow the commercial path of its media

predecessors and predicted a web “populated by two essentially distinct populations, *the interacting* and *the interacted*” (p. 371): the first group exemplifying the web’s fragmentation potential and, the second, its reproduction of traditional media’s massification patterns; and both groups reflecting the divide between the information rich and poor.

Studies on the Internet’s potential to rearrange social, cultural, economic, and political life have focused on such issues as access to open information flows across national and global systems (Bimber, 2000; Norris, 2001; Schiller, 1995), identity construction (Cutler, 1996; Morse, 1998; Turkle, 1995), community formation and mobilization (Foster, 1997; Rheingold, 1993; Zappen, Gurak, & Doheny-Farina, 1997), and civic and political participation and deliberation (Putnam, 2000). The potential of the Internet to promote civic engagement and political democracy have also gained attention (e.g., Agre, 2002), especially since the 1990s when United States’ congressional, state, and presidential candidates began deploying campaign websites (Hurwiz, 1999). The increased opportunities for interactivity among citizenries through blogs, chat rooms, and Internet forums are now being investigated (e.g., Best & Krueger, 2005; Dahlgreen, 2000; Endres & Warnick, 2004) as are the perceived public risks posed by such online participation (Andrejevic, 2006; Best, Krueger, & Ladewig, 2007). While some suggest that the Internet has the potential to mobilize “netizens” in new ways and to support democratic processes (Carpini, 2000; Deuze, 2006; Min, 2007), at times lending authorial voice to marginalized constituents and concerns, there is also increased support for the polarization of the public and the unfulfilled potential of deliberative democracy (Noveck, 2000; Selnow, 1998; Streck, 1998; White, 1997; Wilhelm, 2000). Still others point out that online deliberative democracy can be actualized, but its impact is greatly diminished when positioned within a dominant commercialized and individualized culture (Dahlberg, 2001).

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