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Civic Engagement in the Digitally-Mediated Political Debate: A Democratization Perspective

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Introduction

There is no shortage nowadays of research devoted to the spread and use of new digital technologies, especially the Internet. Many agree that the new media has created an entirely new interactive environment for human communication at many levels and in many ways. Increasingly, technology is viewed not as a distinctively external communicative tool-box used by society but as an integral part of a mutual co-evolution leading to new, not known before, forms of societal organizational and practices (Bach and Stark, 2003). Moreover, digitally interactive technologies have now become both available and affordable for personal, organizational, corporate and public use.

There is also a general agreement that fundamental societal changes facilitated by new technologies are underway, especially in terms of how we interact, communicate, produce and exchange knowledge through the medium of virtual environment. Manuel Castells (1996; 2000; 2001; 2002) and Jan van Dijk (1993, 1997, 2006) offer an explanation of how and why a modern post-industrial society is changing within the new notions of the Network Society and Information Age.

In parallel, an equally new conception of tele- and digital democracy has emerged (Arterton and McLean, 1989; van Dijk, 1996, 2000; Loader and Hague, 2002; Kamarck

and Nye (2002), with special focus on the impact of digital technologies on democratic practices, dividing commentators and audiences – according to Pippa Norris (2002) – into ‘cyber-optimists’ and ‘cyber-pessimists’.

Within the democratic theory and practice field, civic online activism pursuing social mobilization objectives of individual citizens and non-governmental organizations, and e-democracy initiatives at various levels addressing government transparency and popular participation have become two major domains of research inquiry. While there is a general consensus that digital information and communication technologies have potential to maximize democratic benefits, particularly in the area of greater participation, it is less clear what is the ‘mechanics’ of such impact and what are the roles of the main parties involved – citizens, the state, the market. It is also unclear who the chief beneficiaries are and how the interplay between technology and society (including civil society and the state) can be described and integrated into broader democratic theory. And, finally, there is a question mark as to whether the democratization potential of new media is universal enough to be applicable beyond the democratically mature Western societies, for example in the ex-Soviet transition societies with democratic deficit.

The paper proceeds first by looking at the contemporary liberal democratic theory through the lens of the democratizing ‘participation’ and ‘deliberation’ concepts, on the one hand, and by considering the role of civil society in democratization efforts, on the other. Second, it examines the innovative role of digital interactive technologies in relation to the non-governmental sector. Third, a specific nature of democratic transition and technology advancement are explained, as well as the popularity of online political debates in transitional socio-economic transitions in Eastern Europe is described with support of some evidence. Fourthly, the article proposes the Bakhtinian dialogically discursive methodology to analyze political debates online. And, fifthly, it outlines additional values of participation and deliberation in supporting civic political engagement online for improving political culture and increasing social capital.

Liberal democracy vis-a-vis participation and deliberation

Participatory democracy

The debate about the transformative potential of new digital technologies in changing the traditional breadth and scope of social interactions has intensified an older democratic theory discussion started some half a century ago by Joseph Schumpeter (1976) who criticized the 'classical' model of democracy for its vulnerability to political instability. His definition of democracy as 'political method' maximizes the role of institutional arrangements and minimizes that of citizens in political decision-making in order to ensure the stability of the liberal (representative) political system. In this context, political equality is viewed exclusively through the lens of the electoral process, i.e. 'one person – one vote'. As a result, citizens are left with just one type of 'electoral participation' with the help of which they ultimately control the ruling minority by periodically replacing them during elections; such elites, in turn, compete for people's votes. On one side, Schumpeter is skeptical about the ordinary citizen's capability to contribute to politics beyond electoral participation; on the other, he doubts the ordinary citizen's principle interest in national politics as opposed to local affairs that are close to his home.

In response, Carole Pateman argued that citizens should have an opportunity of direct participation in many political spheres, not only in elections, and provided a detailed critique of Schumpeter's approach, as well as those who were under his influence to a different degree (such as Dahl, Sartori, Berleson, Eckstein) and who similarly denied citizens any meaningful role of politics except elections on the ground of a too narrowly understood concept of political activity and a need for possessing a 'certain type of [democratic] character, or set of psychological qualities or attitudes' to guarantee political efficacy and democratic stability:

The argument from stability has only seemed as convincing as it has because the evidence relating to the psychological effects of participation has never been considered in relation to the issues of political, more specifically, democratic theory. Both sides in the current discussion of the role of participation in modern theory of democracy have grasped half of the theory of participatory democracy; the defenders of the earlier theorists have emphasized that their goal was the

production of an educated, active citizenry and the theorists of contemporary democracy have pointed to the importance of the structure of authority in non-governmental spheres of political socialization. But neither side has realized that the two aspects are connected... the socialization aspect of the participatory theory of democracy is also capable of being absorbed into the general framework of the contemporary theory, providing a foundation for a more soundly based theory of stable democracy (1970: 105).

Earlier, Bernard Crick also advocated a need to widen and diversify the scope of politics – including citizens' engagement in political processes – for exactly the same cause, i.e. to prevent instability and avoid totalitarianism (1962). He notes, for example, that 'The person who wishes not to be troubled by politics and to be left alone finds himself the unwitting ally of those to whom politics is a troublesome obstacle to their well-meant intentions to leave nothing alone' (1982: 16). In his view, the greatest value of politics is publicity through 'means of articulation' so as conflicting interests could be heard and conciliated. Thus, 'participation' and 'political equality' have become tantamount in many ways to democratization under the overall framework of liberal democracy in the Western context (however differently it could manifest itself in specific circumstances of different countries and cultures).

The economic prosperity associated with the liberal representative democracy model coupled with the collapse of the communist system of societal organization – as the West's major political competitor – have eliminated by and large the threat of social instability (though not economic) and totalitarianism but instead brought about a new challenge of legitimation and self-reassurance. First invoked by Jurgen Habermas (1975, 1979, 1987, 2005), the notion of legitimation has become a new important criterion of the political viability and democratization potential of the liberal democracy model. If anything, the rising power of government bureaucratic machinery, the growing competition for people's votes as convincingly demonstrated by James Fishkin (1991), and the strengthening of civil society have further exacerbated the issue of political equality and participation which eventually has led to political innovations aimed to

break in Held's words 'the vicious circle of limited or non-participation'. That reaffirms the point made by Beetham that '... there remains a large scope for further extending and equalizing the opportunities for popular control... The struggle for democratization both will, and should, continue' (1992: 52)

Deliberative democracy

In addition to the debate on political participation, James Fishkin (1991) designed a thorough conception to link deliberation and political equality into one whole (followed by further inputs made by Coleman, 2001, 2002, 2003; Gastil, 2000, 2008); Held, 2006; Mutz, 2006). Having studied the relationship between four key types of democracies (direct, representative, majoritarian, Madisonian), Fishkin concludes (generalizing American democratic experience) that an 'ideal image of democracy requires' (a) political equality so as count all votes equally, (b) non-tyranny so as to protect interest of other groups (such as minorities against the majority tyranny), and (c) deliberation in order to exercise democratic choices in a 'meaningful way', that is by striking the right balance between participation through representative institutions and political equality in order to adhere to majority rule. He is particularly concerned that election campaigns that are supposed to serve as the forum for political deliberations have become inaccessible for individual citizens to voice their issues; in his view 'deliberation is necessary if the claims of democracy are not to be de-legitimized' (Fishkin 1991: 29). His special – and successful – contribution to building the foundation of deliberative democracy has been the elaboration and implementing 'deliberate polls' to discuss various pressing issues of political and public importance (initiatives by AmericaSpeaks, CaliforniaSpeaks, European Parliament) when a sample of a few hundred individuals representing of the entire population gather together, discuss issues face-to-face, and at the end simultaneously vote to select the acceptable for all solutions and recommendations that then are sent to legislators. This approach has indeed managed to bring legislators and citizens together and increase participation and deliberation levels, even though the acceptance of the prepared recommendations by decision-makers was less successful.

Another deliberative democracy approach was demonstrated by the Listen to the City two-week campaign when citizens enrolled themselves in online small groups (up to 12-15 individuals) and discussed the future of the Ground Zero site in New York. John Gastil (2008) gives a good overview of the existing deliberation instruments that have been tested. Overall, it is fair to conclude today that deliberation as a way of democratization through increased participation will stay in politics. This thought is well summarized, though with some understandable hesitation, by Held:

Whether deliberative democracy constitutes a 'paradigm shift' in democratic theory and practice remains, at this stage, an open question. None the less, I think it can reasonably be claimed that it has moved democratic thinking along new paths. Although a concern with deliberation and public reasoning can be found in classical democracy, developmental republicanism and developmental democracy, it is moved centre-stage by deliberative theorists. Preoccupied by the quality of democratic reasoning and the justification for action, it places an innovative concept of legitimacy at the heart of political reflection. Whether in the end it enriches and adds to modern representative democracy, or transforms it in fundamental ways, remains to be seen (2006: 254).

Civil society and citizens' competence

There are objectively justified doubts about the average citizen's both interest to participate in and ability to contribute to a political debate on complex social-economic matters of public importance. This results in a dilemma '...that we must choose between the thoughtful but antidemocratic competence of elites on the one hand, and the superficialities of mass democracy on the other' (Fishkin, 1991:3). It is widely believed that average citizens, having delegated politics to professional (elected) politicians, are not only uninterested in greater engagement but have little to say due to lack of knowledge or specialized expertise. As a consequence, they willingly disconnect themselves from politics. For example, according to Bryan Kaplan (2007) they are 'rationally ignorant', especially in relation to voting, because they believe that their voice will not matter anyway and their ability to 'process information' is generally poor; he further notes, that 'voters are worse than ignorant' because they are irrational and vote

accordingly (2007: 2). This is not surprising, for the very (liberal) representative democratic model is based on the delegation of citizens' powers to elected representatives who should be protected from citizens to exercise politics impartiality; in addition, the liberal model of democracy presumes that one of the basic liberties is non-participation and therefore should be respected as well. Yet, as David Held points out

If people know opportunities exist for effective participation in decision-making, they are likely to believe that participation is worthwhile, likely to participate actively... On the other hand, if people are systematically marginalized and/or poorly represented, they are likely to believe that only rarely will their views and preferences will be taken seriously... (1987: 259).

This requires a closer look at the relationship between civil society and the state. Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato (1997) attempt to reconstruct the evolution of the third sector in order to explain its spectacular rise in recent decades, especially the impact on democracy and society at large. They explicitly name civil society as a source of more democracy defining it as a mediator capable of creating 'mediating spheres' for other actors (see chart below).

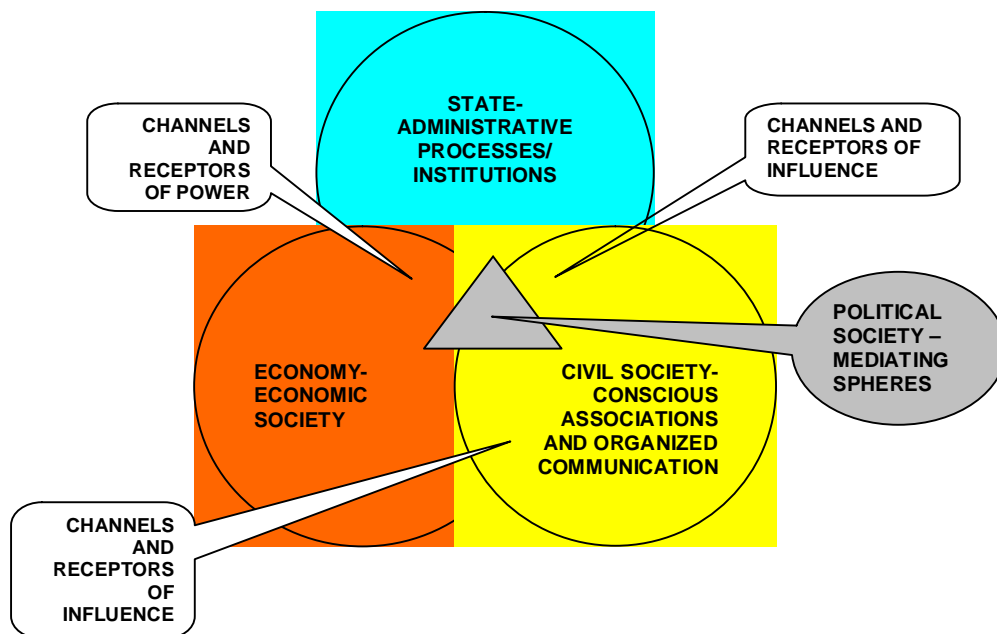


Chart 1. Three-part model of civil society reconstruction according to Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato (1997) *Civil Society and Political Theory*

According to this three-part model, the state, markets and civil society form bilateral spaces of mutual interaction. These spaces are as much about interaction as about power – the authors call them ‘the channels and receptors of power and influence’ which in a generalized form resemble Habermasian ‘public spheres’ where participants ideally exchange rational arguments through communicative action in political debate. In this model, relations between civil society and the state, on the one hand, and businesses and the state, on the other, differ fundamentally. For example, civil society does not intend to acquire power but wishes to influence the state and the market so that the political power gained by civil society is used wisely and democratically. In contrast, the economic actors representing the private sector wish to appropriate power from both the state and civil society.

A similar approach in describing the growth of civil society organizations, especially in Eastern Europe, is employed by Jonathan Bach and David Stark (2003, 2004). They believe that civil society has been able to expand its role through the use of interactive technologies acting often as ‘an information broker model’ by playing the role of ‘safety nets and safety valves’:

In both advanced and consolidating democracies, NGOs have development into major societal actors primarily because they meet real political and material needs: they serve as a source of political legitimacy for the system by providing voice beyond electoral participation. Since they allow dissent to find form and content rather than fester unproductively, NGOs can be considered a type of “safety valve” essential to the functioning of a democracy. Materially, NGOs provide services that seek to mitigate the effects of social inequalities that arise in the new market economies, acting as a “safety net”. Both these roles serve to stabilize and ideally balance the inherent tension between self-interest and the common good within a democratic free-market system.

In the above roles as safety nets and safety valves, NGOs are systematically desirable for democracies...The common perception of NGOs as oppositional to government and industry is often correct, for the bureaucratic machinery of the state and entrenched commercial interests rarely welcome criticism. Yet NGOs increasingly achieve change through partnership with government and the private sector. NGOs are therefore paradoxical creatures: by promoting change then both legitimize and challenge democratic society (2004: 3)

However, even more critically important, in their view, is the ability of NGOs to use ‘the recombinatory logic of interactive technology’ and ‘form incipient knowledge communities – communities that use a logic...’link, search, interact’ to sustain themselves and grow’ (Bach and Stark, 2003: 103). Technology is not viewed and used any longer as a mere tool for organizational transformation but instead as the equal factor of a mutually beneficial co-evolution; this is why, explain Bach and Stark, non-governmental organizations have assumed such an powerful role of transformation co-constituents in influencing the state and the market alike. In fact, they note, NGOs are able to nurture successful partnership with the market to accomplish their objectives through mutual collaboration and the use of ‘logics that are distributed and recombinatory’ (2003:103, 106-107, 108).

In the same vein, as James Bohman writes ‘... the [Internet] space opened up by computer-mediated communication supports a new sort of ‘distributive’ rather than unified public sphere with new forms of interaction...rather than simply entering into an existing public sphere, the Internet becomes a public sphere only through agents who engage in reflexive and democratic activity’ (2004, 139-140). It means in summary that there are two factors that can influence the future of deliberation and its relationship with liberal democracy. One is the ever-continuing growth of civil society which will be increasingly influencing the course of political processes in general and policy-makers in particular. And another is the spread of friendly digital technologies helping to find new ways and forms of the citizenry’s self-organization. What can be true in relation one individual, for example, his personal incompetence is certain issues, might well be false

in respect to a digitally interacting network or community of individuals who benefit from the collectively obtained, recycled and re- distributed knowledge. Thus the role of individual competences may be replaced by collective knowledge and expertise.

The above argumentation raises a number of questions the answer to which can have far-reaching consequences for the modern democratization project. Can the machinery of the use of collaborative, recombinatory and distributed logics of interactive digital technology (demonstrated by organized civil society organizations) be applied to non-organized masses of citizens (or their fluidly organized voluntary digital communities) to overcome their presumed irrationality and incompetence as individuals and thus eliminate the main impediment for their equal participation in political discourse? Is it possible to gain a desired level of competence among individuals through multiple interactions, information recycling and knowledge reproduction? Can citizens voluntarily and consciously collaborate to suppress disagreements – and selfishness – in order to become the state’s equal partner in making policies and decisions that are legitimately reflect public interest rather than group interests? And, finally, if civil society is indeed ‘a new terrain of democratization’, as Cohen and Arato argue, then should its ‘mediating’ role be formally legitimized extending thus Habermas’s ‘legitimation question’ to include explicitly civil society as well?

There is a large body of research into digital communities and political discourses on the Internet, especially the USENET-based discussion ranging from the issue of community informatics to virtual educational and discussion forums. There are many methods and approaches to chose from (Hill and Hughes, 1998; Wilhelm, 1999, 2003, 2004; Norris, 2001; Baym, 1998, 2006; Jones, 1998; Wilklund, 2005; Ogan and Cagiltay, 2006; Hlebec, Manfreda and Vehovar, 2006; Ibrahim, 2005, 2006; Miller and Slater, 2000; Coleman, 2002; Coleman and Gotze, 2001; Blumler and Coleman, 2003; Christiansen, 2004; Jankowski, 2007; Jankowski and van Selm, 2000; Malina, 2002; Smith (1999); Kelly, Fish and Smith, 2005; Loader and Keeble, 2001; van Dijk, 2006; Wellman, 2002).

However, such research is too often focused on political activism by select (pressure) groups for mobilization and protest purposes or resembles public opinion polling to investigate political and ideological preferences of discussion participants overlooking thereby the important details of a complex process of multiple deliberative interactions as one whole, i.e. the evolution of a debate from start to finish. Gastil (2008) notes that the research looking into the specific nature of the Internet-based discussion dynamics in the highly interactive Web 2.0 environment allowing the users easily generate their own content does not exist yet while there are certain advantages of discussing issues online:

A comparison of face-to-face and online groups found that in both cases persons in the minority were willing to speak their minds on ... controversial issues...From a standpoint of deliberation, what is more important than hearing every person's voice is hearing every perspective, and in this sense it appears that online discussions are at least as valuable as those that occur offline' (Gastil 2008: 30-31).

Democratization transition

The collapse in 1989-1991 of the Soviet totalitarianism changed the democratic theory discourse dramatically, with Fukuyama (1989, 1992) declaring 'The end of history' and announcing the victory of the Western liberal democracy model over Soviet communism. To describe the events, David Held wrote

The revolution which swept across Central and Eastern Europe ... stimulated an atmosphere of celebration. Liberal democracy was feted as an agent of progress, and capitalism as the only viable economic system... faith in democratic reason and market-oriented thinking could be fully restored... Has Western democracy won? Has liberal democracy finally displaced the legitimacy of all other forms of government? Is ideological conflict at an end? (2006: 217).

In spite of a clear defeat of the totalitarian communism, Held is concerned with the balance between 'liberal' and 'democratic' in liberal democracy, recognizing that 'Those who have written at length on this question have frequently resolved it in quite different directions' (Held, 2006: 223). According to Claude Lefort (2007), the failure of the

Soviet communism does not automatically mean the triumph of liberal democracy values, with many 'old' problems such as social inequality, justice, participation being left still unresolved. As a result, even though popular participation has been well advanced theoretically, there is still no agreement whether it constitutes part of liberal model or is something new and separate.

Assessing the difficulties of democratic transition, Fishkin was able to predict back in 1991 the dangers on the democratization path such as

...the dangers of the direct-majoritarian stranglehold on popular legitimacy. Unless representative institutions can be devised that offer legitimacy comparable to the direct-majoritarian voice of the people, transitions, particularly for the those countries attempting the two-fold movement to democracy and a market economy, have only dubious prospects of success. Innovations in representation... may be crucial not only for improvements in democracy in the United States but also for transitions to democracy around the world (1991: 67)

He was right asking 'How many of these states will be able to consolidate a lasting transition to democracy remains, however, and open question' (Fishkin, 1991: 68). As it appears, the evolution of democracy in almost all former Soviet republics in Eastern Europe and Eurasia has been highly uneven and often controversial. Moving from a combination of non-market and non-democracy towards a market-oriented democratic society seems to have been more difficult than moving from market-oriented non-democracies (for example, as those that existed in Latin America).

To give some justice, for many transition societies it has not been a twofold movement to democracy but a threefold transition taking account of a highly complicated and long process of nation state-building. Having weak representative institutions and the monopoly of the executive power excessively relying on elections and referenda, which in turn undermines representation further, the opportunity for democratic participation and deliberation has remained very modest over the past 15 years of transition (EBRD Life in Transition Report, 2006). Weak representative institutions and limited formal

avenues of participation and deliberation make the current political systems vulnerable to instability and frequent changes in policy directions, even in the condition of rapidly growing economic prosperity.

The advancement of democratization through greater participation and deliberation is essential for the legitimacy of the Western consolidated democracies. Yet for new immature transition societies that are still in the process of building the foundation of a representative democracy following the collapse of the communism in Eastern Europe and Eurasia, the new digital media's democratization potential may be even more useful in speeding up the transition instead of promoting democracy from outside (usually geopolitically motivated rather than freeing locally available demand). On surface, references to participation invoked in the context of former totalitarian societies may sound suspiciously dubious in view of the forced 'mass participation' in the past. However, on other side, it is reasonable to assume that there must be a high degree of universality for both consolidated democracies and those that are still on the path to become mature democracies in future.

Therefore, innovations in political deliberation are needed precisely because of the weak representative institutions – dominated by the executive (presidential as a rule) authorities – for two reasons. Firstly, because of the future of democracy which is the ultimate constitutional objective of all transition countries; or, in other words, to help avoid failures in democratization (which are not assured due to the low assessment ratings given by major democracy and human right watchdogs). Secondly, the spread of the Internet (as well as mobile telephony) in some former Soviet republics is among the highest in the world creating thereby an entirely new situation that can be more responsive to democracy, just as in the West.

Digital technologies and political discourse in transition: Some data and evidence

According to RU-CENTRE, a Russian leading institution which registers and monitors the Russian-language Internet Domain Names, the year 2006 was a turning point in the Internet digital infrastructure development – it was a record year in the registration of

websites ending with suffix “ru”; the total number of Russian domain names grew by 61% from 446,730 at the end of 2005 to 718,236 at the end of 2006; it was the third-fastest growth rate in Europe, according to VeriSign (2006). All in all, in 2006 Russia had the world’s fastest growing online audience, with a 23% annual increase in comparison with only 5% in Europe, as of November 2007 reaching 14.6 million unique visitors (15+ years of age), followed by Spain that grew 18% (ComScore, 2007).

Today, the Russian Internet offers plenty of opportunities for free political debate – often linked with offline actions for civic (rarer ideological) protest and mobilization, for example among motorists. And it has been generally free from government’s visibly restrictive interventions as is usually assumed (though there are periodic attempts to sue bloggers for libel who are critical towards local and regional authorities). Yet in spite of still significant intra-regional disparities and digital divides within transition societies, dozens of millions of people are now online and publicly discuss issues of political significance. As far as the Internet penetration is concerned, sooner rather later the transition societies will reach the level the West is enjoying today which raises the issue of whether it can facilitate democratizations through greater citizens’ engagement in politics, at least by publicly debating it?

In fact, the above-mentioned innovations (described by Bach and Stark) on the part of NGOs in using interactive technology for organizational development were first observed in Central Eastern Europe where the third sector had to innovate for survival and advance its cause in unfavorable conditions of operations. While very little research exists, at least in the Western academic literature, there is some empirical evidence that political debate is popular in transition societies.

For example, a Ukrainian leading political party *BYUT* implemented in 2007 an interesting, in reality bi-partisan (given the instability of political preferences), pilot e-Democracy project called *Ideal Country* during a relatively short general election campaign of few months, with 17,121 responses sent to 802 seed posts by a total of 2,040 contributors to discuss important pre-election political matters. Another city-wide

MediaPort forum of the city of Kharkiv in Eastern Ukraine contained (as of November 2007) 396,379 feedback posts sent as a reply to 13,387 seed postings under five political discussion threads (mostly during 2004-07); it also has such specialized and popular threads as Authorities On-line and Pro & Contra - Political education & Political ignorance.

In Belarus, the most popular discussion forums TUT.BY generated in 2004-2007 under the Politics rubric alone 9,244 seed postings followed-up with 796,944 replies; over 1,000 messages are being exchanged every day and over 200 new issues raised every month (under Politics) against a background of some half-a-million pages viewed each day on the entire Portal. Political discussion topics initiated by the discussants themselves seem to have been also more debatable (and dialogical) compared, for example, with the feedback generated by news media articles. If 46,258 of publicly important news articles on TUT led to 872,489 responses, that is on average 19 responses to one news article considered as a seed post, 8,988 of citizens' seed posts generated as many as 805,513 (almost the same volume of response as in the case of media news) which results in 89 feedback messages to one seed posting, or four times more in comparison with the media news case.

The dominance of political themes over other non-political topics is supported by another case of a small Russian industrial town of Kondopoga on the Republic of Karelia (West-North Russia). This town came to be known for the tragic events happened in August-September 2006 on allegedly inter-ethnic grounds that were widely discussed on a local discussion forum (also attracting a huge Internet audience across Russia, albeit for a relatively short period). Otherwise, the town might be like many other towns having its own digital space and virtual life closely linked with the real life, with active participation and vibrant discussions, which is due to the town's small size, is more than a traditionally pure online community. The independent Internet Portal CityK offers 18 thematic groups for discussion each of which contains numerous discussion topics (threads) proposed by citizens themselves. As of 4 June 2008, there were 77,812 posts grouped around 2,125 topics (cumulative data). Discussions under the rubric Politics

were by far the most popular (even though those tragic events might have increased the popularity more than usual by attracting additional visitors from outside the town). The charts below show the dominance of political content over non-political measured through the distribution among (a) seed posts, (b) replies, and (c) viewed pages. For example, two-thirds of all viewed pages and feedback messages posted in response to seed posts belong to political domain (partly includes other publicly important issues such as healthcare which in many ways is an important political issue for many citizens) whereas among all seed posts the share of the messages under Politics constitute less but still over 50%.

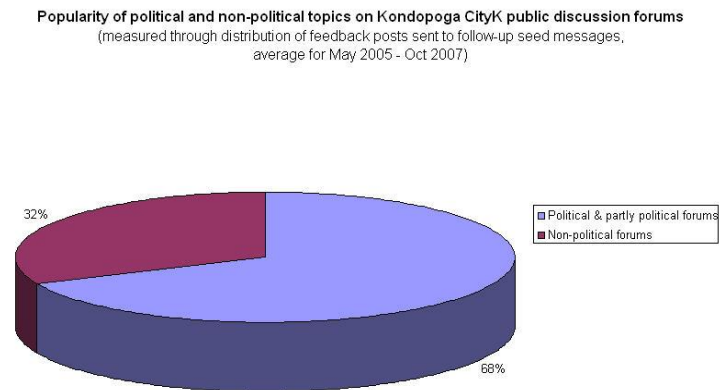


Chart 2. Political vs non-political discussion contents on Kondopoga’s CityK.Ru portal:
distribution of posts sent to follow-up seed posts

Popularity of political and non-political topics at Kondopoga CityK.Ru public discussion forums
(measured through distribution of seed posts,
average for May 2005 - Oct 2007)

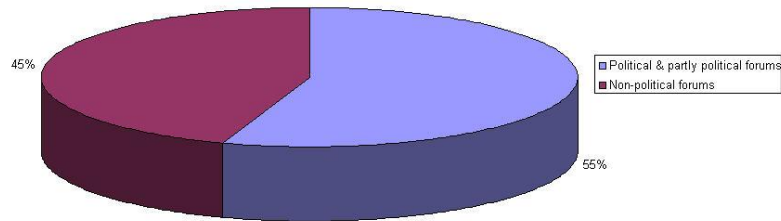


Chart 3. Political vs non-political discussion contents on Kondopoga’s CityK.Ru portal:
distribution of seed posts

Popularity of political and non-political topics at Kondopoga CityK.Ru public discussion forums
(measured through distribution of viewed pages,
average for May 2005 - Oct 2007)

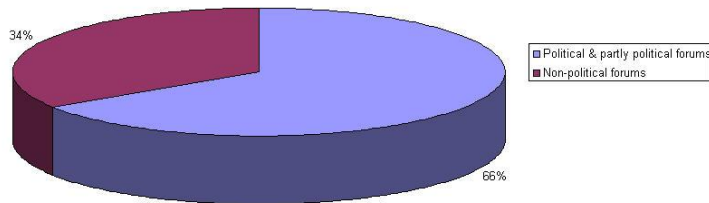


Chart 4. Political vs non-political discussion contents on Kondopoga’s CityK.Ru portal:
distribution of viewed pages

These observations are indicative about that ordinary people’s genuine interest in politics in transition (with no previous experience of democratic culture), which can be interpreted either as a peculiar compensatory reaction of a transition society when the general public can enjoy expressing themselves politically in the Internet free medium, or as a manifestation of a broader and universal feature without direct dependency on the

previous experience and democratic maturity, at least as far as political debate among ordinary individuals is concerned.

Understanding the interplay between democratization, civil society, political discourse and the role of interactive technology in transition should help understand broader prospects of liberal democracy outside the Western world. Gastil's proposition to decouple deliberation from decision-making may open particularly good opportunities to study the essence of citizen's political online activity when 'participants can orient themselves toward an open-ended dialogue', without necessarily a pressure to change policies (2008: 32). The interpretation of the public debate through the lens of a dialogically organized conversation bears significant consequences, both theoretically and methodologically, for the debate analysis and the understanding of its results.

Dialogical discourse online: Analytical method

As mentioned earlier, an in-depth research into the organization and content of the public debate online would help clarify some important sides of the active and educated citizenry among ordinary individuals, beyond mobilization activism and professional (partisan) politics interests.

The 'ideal speech situation' model suggested by Jurgen Habermas would be problematic to apply to a seemingly unpredictable exchange of textual (even in a multi-media form) messages to a non-decision situation. Rational argumentation could be equally hard to apply for the same reason – a free structure of the conversation may create methodological difficulties for revealing complex relationship between participants and content exchange. Instead, a dialogically-oriented approach towards speech and conversation developed by the Russian literary critic and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin may be more productive. Bakhtin's consistent assertion of a dialogue as the key method to understanding inter-personal interaction, with "...dialogue as the root condition of human being" (Bakhtin, 1994: xi) is of a particular interest for studying the use of computer-mediated communications in politically-loaded human interactions.

Bakhtin's understanding of speech (including written texts) offers both a method and meaning for a study into the communicative function of texts and speeches; his method singles out the 'utterance' as a communicative medium by means of which individuals do not only express themselves but – more importantly – connect to other individuals. The meaning ('bodies of meaning') reflects a multi-voice and endlessly continuous dialogic nature of human interaction. By defining the utterance as a distinctive communicative unit in a dialogue, Bakhtin links language and society, or rather its specific conditions that engender the use of particular utterances:

These utterances reflect the specific conditions and goals of each such area not only through their content (thematic) and linguistic style, that is, the selection of the lexical, phraseological, and grammatical resources. All three of these aspects – thematic content, style, and compositional structure-are inseparably linked to the whole of the utterance and are equally determined by the specific nature of the particular sphere of communication (1994: 60).

There can be no such thing as an isolated utterance. It always presupposes utterances that precede and follow it. No one utterance can be either the first or the last. Each is only a link in the chain and none can be studied outside its chain. Among utterances there exist relations that cannot be described in either mechanistic or linguistic categories. They have no analogues (1994:136).

Accordingly, in both offline and online public debate, every single message (utterance) is linked with all others reflecting simultaneously the past and anticipating the future. The acceptance of the Bakhtinian approach to what is considered as a dialogue puts the utterance as key to both identifying and understanding dialogical relationship among individuals; it also requires to accept, or at least to consider such acceptance, the Bakhtinian typology of dialogues – macro and micro dialogues. The dialogue-based approach, taking a fuller and deeper account of human interaction through related typologies, may help understand the online-based interactions in politics better.

A specific Bakhtinian dialogism occurs 'when two equally directed utterances confront each other on the same subject matter', revealing a strong semantic meaning within the

same context (Bakhtin, 1963:252). The relationship between agreement-disagreement, assertive-supplementary statements, question-answer are, according to Bakhtin, 'purely dialogical' but not between the words and sentences within one utterance but between the utterances. He specifically stresses that

Understanding is impossible without evaluation. Understanding cannot be separated from evaluation: they are simultaneous and constitute a unified integral act. The person who understands approaches the work from his own view point, from his own position. These positions determine the evaluation to a certain degree, but they themselves do not always stay the same.... The person who understands must not reject the possibility of changing or even abandoning his already prepared viewpoints and positions. Active agreement/ disagreement (if not dogmatically predetermined) stimulates and deepens understanding, a struggle occurs that results in mutual change and enrichment" (1994:142)

As mentioned, for Bakhtin, any word of any individual does never exist in isolation from the words expressed by another individual by default, in principle. It is always a response to something what has been already said and an anticipation of a future reaction to what is being said at this particular moment. According to Bakhtin, there is nothing that is the 'first' or the 'last' word. In a 'hidden dialogue' a second conversant is always invisibly present – even if there are no that person's words, their impact is deeply felt in everything as if 'we feel that this is a dialogue that involves the two even though only one speaks' (1963:264). His method suggests the use of meta-linguistics when a single 'text' is analyzed not in the system of a language and not in separation from the dialogical conversation but precisely in the very body of a dialogical interaction. In doing so, the word always carries the influence of those contexts and mediums that it has gone through.

Digitally-enabled deliberation: A democracy school

Thus, capturing the evolution of dialogical relations by detecting the change in understanding and measuring the degree of personal enrichment would be invaluable for the development of a political communicative culture through an endless chain of

interactions of meanings between citizens. Moreover, the importance of political discourse is not only in exerting influence over decision-making process but in the first place in the acquisition by citizens of a democratic political culture of tolerance and diversity through political experience of impersonal interaction through the online media; otherwise ‘without public spaces for the active participation of the citizenry in ruling and being ruled, without a decisive narrowing of the gap between rulers and ruled, to the point of its abolition, polities are democratic in name only (Cohen and Arato,1997: 7). Just as Robert Dahl (1956) stressed the importance of ‘social training’ for his polyarchical democratic model, Stephen Coleman (2002) emphasizes a special ‘educative’ value for democratic citizenship of both participation and deliberation in its own right. He argues that in order to encourage ‘political literacy’ there is a need to:

...embrace media literacy, including a closer pedagogical relationship between the teaching of IT skills and the study of politics. Specifically, teaching is needed in skills of discussion facilitation and ways of articulating arguments simply and convincingly... Public debate in adult society is now an eccentric hobby; the days of open meetings in pubs and parks and on street corners are over. It was within such arenas of debate that many people first relearned how to argue and form their own ideas... These skills need to be relearned in the new context of cyberspace.” (2002: 208-209).

The accomplishment of these objectives is essential for both new transition democracies and democratically mature western societies. While specifics will differ, there will be a commonly shared imperative to understand and support innovations in deliberative and participatory practices in politics among ordinary citizens, with the help of digital interactive technologies.

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