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The Information Society- introduction to vol. 3

Book section

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The Information Society

Critical Concepts in Sociology

Editor's Introduction
Volume 3: Information Societies: Democracy, Governance and Regulation

> Ideally, the role of the media should precisely be to contribute to the creation of an agonistic public space in which there is the possibility for dissensus to be expressed or different alternatives to be put forward.
> Interview with Chantal Mouffe in
> Carpentier and Cammaerts (2006: 11)

Democracy, Networks, and Power

The literature on the relationship between democratic processes, governance and regulatory practice – both formal and informal – is enormous. It is informed by those more persuaded by a pluralist approach and those whose orientation gives more emphasis to enduring conflict. In the context of 'The Information Society' vision, the former tends to predominate, while those who argue in support of diverse information societies are more likely to undertake research from a critical perspective and to focus on conflict and the ways in which it may or may not be resolved.

James Danziger and William Dutton's (1977) early analysis of the use of computers to support local government services showed the importance of empirical research to understand the functional needs of government, the limitations of technology, and the values and interests that might be served politically – those both of service providers within government and of citizens. This research was an example of efforts to develop an understanding of the social shaping of technology, which was in contrast to work that assumed that technology provides solutions and is inherently democratic,

prominent in much of the literature on 'teledemocracy' in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s, such as Becker (1981).

Voice and Decision-making

Dutton's (1992) analysis of the literature on teledemocracy demonstrated how speculative these early idealistic claims had been. The introduction of information and communication technologies (ICT) provided no guarantees that citizens would have a voice that would be listened to by political authorities. Dutton (1996: 270) argued that 'the technical features and normative frameworks tied to computer-based communication networks could have a systematic influence on the content of interpersonal and group communication, which therefore might merit unique regulatory approaches'. His case studies indicated that the normative framework would inevitably include very different political views - ranging from civil libertarian to communitarian, to the views of those advocating protection of property rights.

This work, nevertheless, contains an optimism that 'real world' democracy could translate into online democracy: 'the public should be able to conduct meetings in cyberspace in ways that are as civil and democratic as in the real world' (Dutton, 1996: 288). To achieve this, Dutton suggested that there might be a need for moderated public discussion accompanied by the imposition of norms and regulations to enable citizen's voices to be heard. Dutton's perspective on the democratizing potential of ICT was echoed in Lawrence Lessig's (1999, 2006) argument that software code, embedded in networks, sets limits and constrains the norms established for information exchange and communication.

A more cautious and limited set of expectations about the implications of The

Information Society is evident in Graham Murdock and Peter Golding's (1989) work.

In the case of Britain, they pointed out that more market-oriented communication and

information systems were being developed, with the promise to the public that this

would enlarge the space for people to make choices about their lives and to exercise

control in ways that would be both liberating and empowering. Murdock and

Golding's critical perspective was grounded in political economy and they provided

convincing evidence that the information and communication system was unlikely to

be liberating or empowering unless commercial forces could be held at bay. Similarly,

in the context of the United States, Andrew Feenberg (1992) suggested that these

technologies embodied a 'subversive rationalization', a view reached by drawing on

constructivist and hermeneutic theories of technology.

Public Spheres of Participation

Much of the debate over the implications of digital technologies for democracy is

informed by an understanding of the conditions required for rational debate in the

'public sphere', as represented by Jürgen Habermas (1962) as an elite space for

dialogue, and developed by other scholars in modified form. In Britain, Nicholas

Garnham (1993) analysed the role of the media in creating an informed citizenry,

while acknowledging the limits to this aspiration within a capitalist economy.

Feenberg (1992: 319) argued that:

individuals who are incorporated into new types of technical networks have learned to resist through the net itself in order to influence the powers that control it. This is not a contest for wealth or administrative power, but a struggle to subvert the technical practices, procedures, and designs structuring everyday life.

Phil Agre's (2002) synthesis of research on the contribution of network technologies to participation in democratic decision making suggests that they are more likely to amplify existing tendencies and opportunities for political action and participation than to give rise to wholly new ones.

Some contributors to debates about e-democracy emphasize the potential of online deliberation. For example, Stephen Coleman's (2005: 177) concern has been to seek ways in which 'digitally-mediated direct representation could provide a basis for a more dialogical and deliberative democracy in place of the dialogue of the deaf which tends to characterize contemporary political representation'. And Peter Dahlgren's (2001, 2005) work on the public sphere suggests that while the Internet is destabilizing for some aspects of democratic practice, it opens up new opportunities for public debate because it encourages diversity in the viewpoints expressed. This is particularly evident with the growth in online communities such as Facebook, MySpace, and many others. Although some have claimed that online networking, may undermine the authoritative status of professional journalism, my work with Charlie Beckett (2008) suggests that this is not necessarily so. Dahlgren distances himself from idealist searches for deliberative democracy, suggesting that it is much more important to understand the new forms of online civic cultures. Susan Herbst's (2003)

work attends to the implications of technologically mediated discourse for the authoritative status of political actors, while another line of research developed by Maria Bakardjieva and Andrew Feenberg (2002) focuses on the possibilities for dialogue at the local community level and the implications for democracy.

Dialogue and Political Action

Cees Hamelink locates the debates about ICT and democracy in the context of a concern for the human condition: 'In the spirit of a discursive process, all stakeholders should design visions for possible futures that either enlarge dependence, increase vulnerability and expand uncertainty or *diminish these human features and strengthen human autonomy, integrity and security*' (Hamelink, 2006: 394, emphasis added).

Contributors to debates about the need for multiple stakeholders to envisage new online spaces for democratic dialogue and to act to ensure that they develop, vacillate between optimism and pessimism. Optimism about the potential of ICT to be used to reduce poverty by enabling new online forms of entrepreneurial wealth creation in ways that respect human rights, led to the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in 2003 and 2005. Following initial hope that this United Nations sponsored forum might result in action to alleviate human suffering and inequality, after its first phase in 2003 scholars, such as Hamelink (2004), warned that exclusion of civil society representatives and critical scholars meant that the processes and spaces for dialogue that had been created were unlikely to achieve such action. Other scholars such as Andrew Calabrese (1997, 2005), were more optimistic, but many are sceptical

about the democratic potential of online sites as suggested by the work of Slavko Splichal (2006) and Chris Ogbondah (1997). The history of the debates in intergovernmental fora, and especially UNESCO, is not represented in this collection. Interested readers could refer to Mansell and Nordenstreng (2006) for an account of the political tensions which were resolved mainly in the interests of those promoting The Information Society vision.

Academic discussion about whether the democratic potential of The Information Society, that is, a society envisaged and promoted within the wealthy countries, is consistent with a Habermasian or a quasi-Habermasian view of the public sphere as the venue for rational debate and consensus formation, is challenged by the work of Chantal Mouffe (2005). She understands democracy as an agonistic, conflictual process. Apart from the citation at the beginning of this introduction, she has not specifically discussed The Information Society or analysed the role of media or ICT in detail. Nevertheless, her understanding of the workings of democracy offers a rich theoretical framework that is helpful in making sense of the mediated environment. Phil Graham's (2000) work also challenges the idealism of much research in this area.

Governing Information Societies

Information societies are malleable insofar as their characteristics are established by human choices. As a result the governance of their networks (technical and social) is crucial to their future shape. Governance is concerned with formal and informal norms and practices. A substantial amount of scholarship focuses specifically on

Internet governance – in terms of the control, structure and functioning of the electronic spaces that the Internet protocol enables.

Internet Governance

Following the 2005 WSIS, an Internet Governance Forum (IGF) was established to support the United Nations mandate for action resulting from the Summit.[1] The IGF is intended to offer an opportunity for multi-stakeholder dialogue on governance issues related to fostering sustainability of the Internet and a range of other issues relating to its security, robustness and future development, which are very controversial. All these issues affect the costs of access, and control over the Internet in different geographical locations and many are related to whether the right to communicate should be enshrined in international laws and conventions.[2]

Controversies at global level are replicated within countries. These partly reflect ongoing debate, such as David Johnson and David Post's (1996) argument that the Internet should not be regulated, in order to give free reign to innovators and the suggestions of Lawrence Lessig (1996) and others that the architecture of the Internet governs how it can be used and biases its future development. Insofar as values are embedded in the technological design of the Internet, there is a need for governance to enable the generative, open features of the Internet to remain in place as its protocol develops. Jonathan Zittrain (2008: 246) takes this argument further, suggesting that we need to rely mainly on 'technically skilled people of goodwill to keep them going

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[1] See http://www.intgovforum.org/ (accessed 22.8.08).
[2] Information on this topic is available at:
http://www.waccglobal.org/wacc/programmes/recognising_and_building_communication_rights
(accessed 22.8.08).

… as true alternatives to a centralized, industrialized information economy'. Others, such as Wolfgang Kleinwächter (2006), are more favourable to the idea that multiple stakeholders should participate in the regime of global governance for the Internet.

Governance issues involving the Internet are also central to discussions about the ownership and rights associated with digital information (from scientific papers to digital music). This is a major area of tension even among proponents of the singular vision of The Information Society. There are those who are committed to the view that information is a commodity, which, to secure incentives for creative expression, is best bought and sold in the market. For instance, Stan Liebowitz and Stephen Margolis (2005) argue that, while economists do not have the full information necessary to definitively comment on the continuing expansion of copyright reach, there is good reason to enforce and extend it in the information age. Their position contrasts with those of scholars, such as Paul A. David (1993, 2004), who argue that incentives for creative expression are also fostered by an open environment. Ronald Bettig (1992, 1997) envisages a progressive narrowing of the open spaces of the Internet through the extension of the intellectual property rights regime encompassing increasing amounts of digital culture. James Boyle (1992) provides an overview of the position of the liberal state on these issues, pointing out that those who seek to extend the protections available to creators through copyright often assume that authors are always writing as independent individuals, rather than under contracts with corporations.

Lawrence Lessig (2001, 2004) has championed the need for an open information commons to promote innovative activities, and Yochai Benkler and Helen

Nissenbaum (2006: 394-395) support what has come to be known as 'commons-based peer production', suggesting that this serves both as a medium for producing information goods which is very effective, and as 'a context for positive character formation' consistent with an ethical position.[3] Christopher May (2002) examines the way the intellectual property regime governs the global division of labour in information production markets and in Mansell and Steinmueller (1998, 2000), Edward Steinmueller and I examined the competing interests in traditional and new means of protecting intellectual property. The ethical issues have been addressed by Gian Greco and Luciano Floridi (2004) who raise concerns about the decline of the digital commons in the absence of counter-measures to prevent its overuse.

Regulatory Challenges

Liberalization of the markets for telecommunication and broadcasting has been a major site of controversy, beginning with debates in the United States about how best to limit monopoly power and to ensure that public interest considerations are not neglected in the face of corporate interest in profits.[4] The spread of legal and regulatory initiatives designed to introduce competition in the telecommunication and broadcasting industries has had different outcomes in Europe and in other regions, especially with respect to the consequences of commercialization for the build-out of infrastructure networks and for the sustainability of public service broadcasting. Jill Hills (1990, 1998) and Heather Hudson (1997)[5] documented global developments,

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[3] See also Benkler (2003, 2004).
[4] The contribution of the academic community to US policy making in the communication field is reviewed by (Braman, 2003).
[5] Hudson also examined the application of ICT in rural contexts in developing countries.

and Hills and Maria Michalis (2000) examined liberalization pressures in the light of Internet developments.

With the move towards market liberalization and privatization, William Melody (1989: 29) raised a crucial question about what would become of 'public interest' considerations in information societies governed principally by market forces saying that: 'to begin the process of redefining the public interest in the information society, it is necessary to return to the essential functions of information and communication in modern participatory democracy, that is, to provide opportunities for citizens to be informed and to be heard'.

The results of his analysis of regulation in the United States, Canada, South Africa and various European and Asian countries, suggested to him that many regulatory regimes, however constituted within political structures, were becoming too detached from citizens' concerns. His more recent work (Melody 2005) provides a framework for analysing regulation in the network environment of the 21st century. In market-driven environments, he argues, regulators are likely to favour corporate interests. Nicholas Garnham (1997) turned to the economist Amartya Sen's (1999) work on people's capabilities and the choices they exercise in their lives, as the basis for decisions about whether to intervene in the marketplace. He suggested that as connectivity to networks and equitable access are becoming more essential to individuals' abilities to conduct their lives, there will often be a requirement for regulatory intervention in the interest of fairness and equity. This argument was developed with respect to telecommunication networks, not to the question of whether the Internet should be regulated.

The possibility of formal regulation of the Internet in western countries is rarely seen as attractive because of the view that development of the Internet requires that it should flourish in an unrestricted way. The regulatory literature in this area is dominated by claims about the importance of 'Net neutrality', rather than by a concern for the public's interest, discussed by François Bar et al. (2000) and by Bruce Owen (2007) in the context of the United States. Net neutrality refers to the idea that the Internet should be available to all on a uniform, non-discriminatory basis without differentiation in terms of quality of service; that is, it should remain a transparent, end-to-end network. Owen takes issue with this view, observing that it is reminiscent of the argument that telecommunication companies should serve as common carriers without interest in content. Robert McChesney (1996) has argued that the Internet is not neutral and that indeed there is a need for regulatory intervention to ensure it is not overly commercialized. Robert Horwitz and William Currie (2007) focus on the less than salutary results of liberalization in South Africa, and Dal Jin (2005) demonstrates the varying implications of the last few decades of liberalization measures, on a global scale.

A major development since the World Wide Web was launched for public use in 1991 has been the growth of the search engine market where Google and other popular search engines, such as Baidu in China, dominate. As Lucas Introna and Helen Nissenbaum (2000: 169) argue:

> search engines raise not merely technical issues but also political ones. Our
> study of search engines suggests that they systematically exclude (in some

cases by design and in some, accidentally) certain sites and certain types of sites in favor of others, systematically giving prominence to some at the expense of others.

The economic models leading to the promotion of new online applications through 3-D and mobile advertising and advergames, and netvertising images, as well as banner ads and pop-ups, are increasingly sophisticated (Stafford and Faber, 2005) and may also give rise to distortions in information markets that create the need for protection of the public interest. As in the case of search engines, however, there are few supporters of formal regulation to mitigate potential abuses of market power in these areas. There is interest in self-regulation by Internet service providers, such as those encouraged by the United Kingdom's Internet Watch Foundation[6] which aims to reduce illegal child abuse images and other threats.[7] There also is research on the powers of states to control the Internet, as in a study by Shanthi Kalathil and Taylor Boas (2003), and the geographical reach and effectiveness of the law with respect to free speech and security online are addressed in Mathias Klang and Andrew Murray's (2005) work on human rights protection in the information age.

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Conclusion

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[6] See http://www.iwf.org.uk/ (accessed 22.08.08).

[7] See also results of a study on Internet Self Regulation conducted by by the Programme in Comparative Media Law and Policy at Oxford University, funded by the European Commission (EC) under the Internet Action Plan, which examined self-regulatory codes of conduct across national, European Union and international boundaries covering a wide range of media including Internet, film, video games, digital television, mobile communications, at http://pcmlp.socleg.ox.ac.uk/selfregulation/iapcoda/030329-selfreg-global-report.htm (accessed 22.08.08). In 2008 the EC adopted a proposal continuing its Safer Internet Programme (2009-2013), which addresses communications services from Web 2.0 such as social networking, and is aimed at fighting illegal content and harmful conduct such as grooming and bullying, at http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/activities/sip/programme/index_en.htm, (accessed 22.08.08).

This volume includes papers that offer assessments of the way information societies are implicated in changing power relationships with respect to individuals in their roles as citizens and consumers. It also includes papers that address the governance and regulatory measures that are being devised to create incentives to ensure that various conceptions of the public interest are upheld.

For some, a major goal is the creation and maintenance of a public sphere or spheres for rational discourse and democratic decision making. For others, the goal is to extend the spaces for the negotiation of conflictual issues that have a substantial bearing on the way people experience their lives in mediated societies. Included in this section are papers illustrating research advancing the claim that information societies are underpinned by technologies that empower social movements, and papers providing critical assessments of these claims.

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