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Foreword

Book section

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Foreword

The spread of new media, including the use of the Internet, has persuaded some observers that power is shifting radically such that all stakeholders in society can now have a voice and their voices will be heard. The claim is made that democratic decision-making is being revitalised because citizens (individuals who can now create and distribute content and messages at very low cost) can participate fully alongside other stakeholders. Bart Cammaerts concludes this book with a chapter entitled 'does any of it make a difference'? His answer is that the use of new information and communication technologies (ICT) does make a difference, albeit in limited ways. This book offers a very measured assessment of whether there are signs of emergence of new configurations of power with substantial implications for democratic practice.

The empirical study focuses on two governmental institutions operating beyond the boundaries of nation states. The first is the effort by the United Nations hosts of the World Summit on the Information Society in Geneva to use ICT-based tools to facilitate debate admitting the views of non-governmental actors including businesses and non-governmental organisations as representatives of civil society. The second is the measures adopted by the European Commission in its bid to enable as many European citizens as possible to express their views about a new constitution during the Convention on the Future of Europe. The issue addressed in each case is whether the Internet is empowering citizens and fostering more effective social activism. In both cases, there was extensive online discussion, posting of messages, and compilations of the views expressed by civil society organisations and by individual citizens. Whether these new 'laboratories' enabled substantial change in democratic decision making is the core issue addressed in this book.

How and in what ways did online participation facilitate changes in the understanding of information societies, in the constitutional deliberations in the European Union, and in governance beyond the nation state? Were there signs of a consequential shift in power from elite producers of knowledge and decision-makers to the 'users', that is, to those claiming to represent individual citizen's views. Is there evidence here of a shift away from representational democracy and its conduct exclusively by elected representatives? Expectations of substantial change can be found in many of the enthusiastic accounts of the use of ICTs to empower citizens.

There are others, however, for whom the existence of new ICT platforms and the Internet is no guarantor of a power shift in terms of political or economic outcomes. Empirically grounded studies tend to highlight differentiated patterns and practices of control over the use of the Internet in various contexts, but most studies have focused on developments within nation states. Cammaerts' study is very instructive because its focus is on developments at the global and the European regional levels where some have argued that new forms of multistakeholder decision making hold the potential to empower civil society actors in new ways. Cammaerts demonstrates convincingly that any such empowerment is not only contested by the civil society actors themselves, but also very difficult to assess.

Making a difference is a key theme in Cammaerts' work. The empirical narrative about the two case studies is framed by an assessment of theoretical claims about the relationships between new technologies and democracy. The question is do new ICT-based instruments provide a foundation for a challenge to hegemonic models of representational democracy? Do procedures introduced by state-supported institutions aimed at collaboration with a wide range of stakeholders show signs of leading to substantial shifts in the relative power and influence of civil society actors? Discussion about 'multistakeholderism' is mainly concerned with new processes, practices and technologies, but attention does not generally focus on what 'full' participation in democratic practice actually means. Cammaerts offers us an assessment of the positioning of technical innovations within the wider framework of social activism and its consequences. In so doing he provides a critical assessment of many of the claims and counterclaims about the development of e-democracy.

In distinguishing between productive power and restrictive practices, Cammaerts shows us that the outcomes associated with online dialogue are ambiguous at best. Those surveyed by Cammaerts appear to find considerable benefit in terms of support by ICT-based tools to organise themselves. However, Cammaerts finds little evidence that tensions between competing models of democracy, between those included and those excluded, and between those in a strong position to exercise power and those who are not, are reduced as a result of the appropriation of these tools. His assessment of whether the use of these tools is helpful in ensuring that political passions and clashes of interest associated with the 'ineradicability of power and conflict' are brought more explicitly to the fore is of particular interest. On balance, his conclusion is negative. Nevertheless, he argues optimistically that 'adoption of innovative participatory practices by some actors may give rise to evaluation and assessment, develop into further practices, and become the seeds of socially constructed new understandings of interaction amongst actors'.

The World Summit on the Information Society arguably perpetuated the view that there is a relatively simple relationship between investment in the use of ICTs and positive development outcomes of all kinds. In that sense, the United Nations' effort to foster a multistakeholder dialogue changed very little. However, the processes initiated during the UN-sponsored Summit did enable some representatives of civil society to play a watchdog role and to mobilise an alternative and more equitable perspective on the information society. In the case of the European Commission's effort to consult civil society during the European Convention on the Future of Europe which aimed to generate a text for a new European constitution, Cammaerts finds that while some listening may have occurred, the constitutional drafting process reverted to an elite, behind closed doors, affair that was not conducive to anything resembling 'full' participation in the decision process.

In the case of the Summit, Cammaerts' results indicate a polarisation of views among civil society actors between those who were disappointed by the formal outcomes and those believing some progress had been made. They show also that many participants felt there were considerable benefits as a result of the networking that the use of ICTs facilitated. A similar polarisation is present in the results for the Convention on the Future of Europe. These results are interpreted in the light of realist and utopian stances with respect to civil society participation in democratic decision making. Cammaerts argues that multistakeholder processes, 'while not being participatory and

being burdened with many constraints and restrictions', do produce some positive effects'. In differentiating between generative, restrictive and resisting power mechanisms, however, he finds that, overall, the attempt to use the Internet to facilitate participation in both cases was 'deeply flawed'. Even partial participation does not capture the dynamics of the observed practices of multistakeholderism.

Nevertheless, small steps were taken towards greater inclusion. An interesting feature of the analysis is that it conveys insight into the dialectic of change. The dialectic is brought to life here between idealism and resistance and between new, albeit imperfect, opportunities for limited participation by civil society actors and exclusion and lack of representation. Cammaerts illustrates this through his detailed analysis of the small, and contradictory, shifts in political decision making processes that occurred. In exhorting us to 'mind the gap' he invites us to pay close attention to the gap between the discussions of those engaged in online politics and politics offline. The multistakeholder engagement in the cases examined here happened online. The contribution to democratisation and full participation by civil society was very limited in both instances. Decision making took place in the real corridors and halls of power. Representative democracy prevailed but Cammaerts suggests correctly that it is right to promote an ideal of full participation in the hope that small, incremental shifts in practice accumulate to yield a foundation for more equitable and inclusive decision making in the future. Online technologies will play a substantial role, though not always one consistent with the often divided voices of civil society actors or with the ideal of greater participation in democratic decision making.

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