

Is Really the Civic Attitude on E-Participation Wise for the Current Information Society?

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Abstract

Discourses about democratizing Internet potential and social networks have proliferated. The theoretical spectrum on which these discourses are located range from consideration of the Internet and social networks as a complement to the procedures and techniques used by representative democracy (as a "digital democracy"), to their potential to generate new forms of citizenship as part of a move towards a new direct and participatory democracy of a horizontal nature. The analysis described here explores the extent to which the Internet and social networks are changing the relationship between governments and citizens, and whether they do in fact constitute another means of constructing citizenship and democratic political participation, through social mobilization, moving towards a sense of strong, direct democracy and even the possibility of participatory self-government. Aspects considered for the analysis of this research are: 1) internet, 2) digital democracy, 3) digital gap 4) social networks revolution; 5) civic attitude on democratic citizenship cybernetics, 6) civic socialization in social networks.

Key Words: Information society, Digital democracy, Civic attitudes, Participation.

Introduction

In recent years speeches about democratizing the potential of internet and social networks have been proliferating. The theoretical spectrum of all these speeches ranges from consideration of the Internet and social networks as complement of the procedures and techniques used by representative democracy (as "digital democracy") up to their potential to generate new forms of citizenship in the way towards new direct democracy. The analysis which takes place here explores to what extent the Internet and social networks are changing the relations and civic attitudes between governments and citizenship, even if, indeed, represent another form of constructing citizenship and democratic political participation through social mobilization, moving towards strong and direct sense of democracy and even the possibility of arriving at self-participatory government.

Or rather, we are faced with a certain idealization of the great potential of the Internet and social networking, where mythical speeches that anticipate the desirable uses of these tools in the field of social and political participation arise. Perhaps, we just deal with a digital activism, obsessed by the clicks made on the Internet and social networks in favor of a cause that you are introducing high doses of trivialization practice of civic commitment, delimited and domesticated commercially by the owners of this virtual cyberspace who control the possibilities and the limits of a captive *pseudo-citizenship* in the kingdom of the cyberspace. In short, we can say that Internet and social networks can lead to boom or to doom: they can lead to the materialization of the technological utopias of a more egalitarian world or conversely, they can reproduce and further exacerbate the imbalances of power that already exists in the social reality. This is the challenge, this is the defiance. The future is being built with the networks we are creating.

Methods

This paper is part of a larger study on the changing roles of information society and democracy which includes content analysis of blogs and papers. This paper is based on the analysis of more than 50 articles on civic and information society. The selected articles were coded and analyzed through a proposed framework.

Discussion

1. The Internet

The trivialization of civic engagement or local participation. –Here we will contemplate to what extent the Internet and social networks are changing the relationship between government and citizenship - whether they represent another way of building citizenship and democratic political participation through social mobilization, advancing towards strong, direct democracy and even the possibility of participatory self-government or if we rather have a certain idealization on the great potential of the Internet and social networks, where civic engagement is bounded and domesticated commercially by the owners of this virtual cyberspace that are those who control the possibilities and limits of a *pseudo-citizenship* captive in the realm of cyberspace(Hurtado/Naranjo, 2002).

2. Democracy digital

One of these is Democracy 4.0(2012), supported by Democracy Real Ya (DRY) initiative. This initiative proposes that citizens participate from home directly via the Internet in making decisions that affect them. The truth is that the participation on social networks is changing the landscape of the democratic practices from the role of political parties and their usage of the networks during their campaigns and in the subsequent political work up to the pressure through networks (e.g. the case of wikileaks) in favor of a greater transparency of governments, banks and major multinationals and their practices.

3. The digital gap

Not only of access to web 1.0 (access to the Internet - seniors, rural areas, countries of the South, etc.), but Web 2.0 (which produces content and relationships in cyberspace) requires us to ask ourselves if really the access to the network is democratized, and whether the content production has become democratized. *Click-activism* is digital activism that tends to embrace the ideology of marketing without too much criticism. Obsessed by the pursuit of the clicks made on the Internet for a cause or an ONG, accepts implicitly that the advertising and market research tactics used for selling toilet paper can also build citizenship. This practice shows an excessive faith in the power of metrics to measure success, 'typical' style of social networks that count the number of "friends" someone might have.

4. The revolution of social networks

In this context it is possible that collective action can flourish in the network. In case of flourishing, we must ask ourselves if it has been a "digital revolution". Let's analyze the example of the so-called "Arab spring". It is true that what happened in Egypt in February of 2011 and ended in the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak seems to point at the Internet and social networks, Facebook and Twitter, as well as the messages via mobile phones according to the information presented in the media. "A revolution of social networks, which makes it possible to advance democracy", it was said by many people who seem to consider the social networking sites as the new weapons that are possessed by the citizens in the streets to confront the power today. These are the cellular text messages (or the messages on Twitter and Facebook) spread by libertarians that transmit relevant information that the media serving the power normally hides".

5. The civic attitude of democratic citizenship cybernetics:

one might therefore wonder if despite all its limitations, the appearance of this type of virtual social spaces would decrease the interest in the social and political involvement of youth in Spain. Time will tell if the Internet and social networks will be converted into a tool for group empowerment and also on communities and social movements. If with their help the globalization of the environment and human rights is going to be possible in order to mobilize action, exert pressure, install issues and legitimize dissident voices in national and international agendas, it would be as effective as the globalization of capitalism has been as well as the one of the financial institutions and multinational companies that manage the economy and world politics using the new technologies.

6. Civic socialization in the social networks

The concept of citizenship responds to contemporary social responsibility in action (Hobsbawm, 1998), which is exercised by the right to effective decision-making participation in the social, economic and political areas (García Canclini, 1995).

We advocate the concept of participatory citizenship suggested by Suarez (2005) who founded the social membership and associated rights which are not so much a formal citizenship - and in many times passive - as in active involvement in the community where he lives. This approach questions the liberal model of citizenship, pointing at the necessary extension of citizenship to a true model of post-national and post-colonial citizenship (Suarez, Macia and Moreno, 2007) moving towards the forms of participatory democracy.

The Internet is often proclaimed a space in which democratic learning processes evolves. Experience on a relatively free flow of alternative information and consequently the possibility to access alternative information, particularly democratic values, from a transnational public sphere indicates the assumption of these learning processes. Kedzie explained these processes in his research into the “dictator’s dilemma” as “new communication technologies enable citizens of prospective democracies to learn more about how other societies operate. [...] they are inclined to seek more freedom and democracy for themselves. [...] this is precisely the reason that non - democratic regimes, from the Soviet Union to Singapore, deem it necessary to attempt to control communication and information. Theirs is a prophylactic measure against the infectious nature of freedom.”

Conclusions

In the final analysis, we can say that the Internet and social networks can lead to the boom or to the doom: on the one hand they can lead to the materialization of technological utopias of a more egalitarian world, on the other hand they can reproduce and further exacerbate the imbalance of power that already exists in the social reality. Networks can be used to entangle (for the construction of networks aimed at social change) or to clutter (for social fragmentation and the dispersion in respect of the strategies for change) (Mari, 2007). New possibilities for participation, access to multiple information sources and the horizontal model of communication generate the space for social interaction that goes beyond the classical cartography and the bodily limits, making it possible to overcome certain physical, social and even psychological and political barriers.

The above argument shows that the right to communicate is a “linchpin right;” without it, human rights cannot properly function. Information technologies, such as the earlier printing press and landline phone and the current Internet, provide people with greater capacities for communication, and, thus, improve their abilities to exercise their rights. And, as new technologies become the accepted means for spreading information and expressing ideas, anyone without access to such technologies is at a serious disadvantage as a rights’ holder. Thus, states’ obligations to protect the human rights of their citizens places a duty on them to see to it that people have meaningful access to currently essential information technologies, such as the Internet.

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