

New Media and Democracy: 3 Competing Visions from Cyber-Optimism and Cyber-Pessimism

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Introduction

Recent years have witnessed both the critical improvement of new forms of media and their proliferation; from their emergence as the obscure and arcane province of an elite few, they have spread and are now used by millions. Not surprisingly, scholars and experts are increasingly interested in evaluating the benefits and drawbacks of new media technologies for political purposes, and a range of approaches are being employed to investigate the topic. This paper will explore the theme by focusing on the question of whether or not new media technologies have enhanced digital democracy. Generally, the discussion of this issue is dominated by the competing views of cyber-optimists and cyber-pessimists.

The main body of this paper has been divided into two sections. The first section outlines the development of cyber-optimistic and cyber-pessimistic perspectives, as a first step towards identifying the issues upon which any evaluation of the influences of new media on politics must be based. The second section analyses the respective accounts given by supporters of these two positions in relation to the practice of politics through new media. In general, the purpose of this paper is to critically evaluate whether or not new media enhances digital democracy by exploring both sides of the argument, with reference to specific examples.

How Did Cyber-Optimism and Cyber-Pessimism Emerge?

Three main factors have contributed to the emergence of the positions referred to as cyber-optimism and cyber-pessimism. First of all, the last two decades have witnessed the opening up, through new media, of a new arena for grassroots political debate among individuals from across the political spectrum. This has broken down the boundaries to define the audiences between mass media and new media, and the channels for communication—one to one, one to many then many to many—have both increased the complexity and intensified the proliferation of information. According to Lievrout and Livingstone [1], new media is 'those digital media that are interactive, incorporate two-way communication, and involve some form of computing as opposed to old media such as telephone, radio and TV', then Socha [2] further defined 'new media' as a term embracing 'all that is related to the internet and the interplay between technology, images and sound'. Interactivity is the core feature of new media, which could be defined as new model for communication, relying on digital technology; the 'new' component of the title highlighting a contrast with traditional forms of media such as television and printing newspapers. Secondly, according to media experts Voltmer, Negrine and Stanyer, as far as political communication is concerned, the interactions between social actors (media, citizens and political organizations) 'are frequently characterized by conflicts and disruptions, but equally by the compromises and cooperation that are required to maintain the relationship' [3,4]. New media has an effect, for instance, on the shifting of relationships between parties and voters, typically including the voices of citizens in party decision-making, although there is

ongoing discussion about whether this is happening in practice [5,4]. Thirdly, scholars have interpreted the dialectical interactions between technology and society in widely differing ways, from Barlow's cyber-libertarian vision of a digital utopia of the future, to the dystopian nightmare envisioned by Davies, who believes that technology will lead to ubiquitous surveillance. In other words, different people are evaluating the benefits and drawbacks of new media upon politics from radically different perspectives, the interrelationships between actors involved in political communication through new media warrant close scrutiny. That is to say, the emergence of conflicting views between cyber-optimism and cyber-pessimism is inevitable. To better explore these competing notions about the benefits and limitations new media technologies may bring to political participation, this paper will look broadly at how democracy might be improved or not via political participation by new media in the following section.

New Media and Democracy

Political communication scholars are keenly concerned with the extent to which new media is affecting politics. This question can be explored by examining the current debate over whether the new interactive media are strengthening or undermining politics through the creation of a 'digital democracy'. Digital democracy could be understood as 'a collection of attempts to practice democracy without the limits of time, space and other physical conditions, using ICT (Information and communications technology) instead, as an addition, not a replacement for traditional analogue political practices' [6]. Aström's view is consistent with that of Hacker and Dijk; he also states that digital democracy could be used as 'a title for programmes of democratic renewal based on new ICTs', and grounded in various dimensions of democracy—direct, interactive and indirect [7]. Accordingly, the following sections present the respective positions of cyber-optimists and cyber-pessimists in relation to three key areas of the debate: how new media enable minor parties to have greater presence, yet are controlled by major parties; how the political participation of citizens is limited and their freedom of expression restricted whilst how new media could make possible to strengthen citizens' attempts in political participation; how citizens are using (micro) blogs to participate in political communication whilst politicians are using new media to manipulate the citizens rather than

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reinforce their communication. These debates and analyses aim to demonstrate how and to what extent the new media could be used for political communication from different points of views.

'Minor Party Access' Vs 'Major Party Control'

The first area of debate to be considered here is to what extent new media are able to put minor parties on a par with their larger counterparts, in terms of exposure. Minor parties are able to make use of new media technologies to disseminate information and promote themselves; typically, these new technologies not only provide broader exposure for minor parties but also act as additional channels through which to challenge major opponents and break into the political debate. For example, according to data analysis undertaken by Gibson and Ward, some of the fringe parties, such as the Progressive Party or the Socialist Equality Party, 'barely regist[e]r outside of cyberspace [yet] share equal billing with Labour and Conservative on major party link sites' [8]. Overall, the widespread use of new media has opened up many more opportunities for minor parties; they have started to challenge major parties and have undergone rapid changes themselves.

However, cyber-pessimists argue that a higher number of communication channels does not equate with more democracy. Both minor and major parties tend to approach the Internet in utilitarian terms, using it as a tool to provide information about policies rather than as a new platform for the promotion of interaction and inter-organizational links. In this sense, they serve themselves rather than citizens, their approach bordering on manipulation. It has been suggested, for example, that simulation technologies could help both minor and major parties persuade citizens to engage with political issues. As early as 1997, 'visualization techniques' employed by the California Transportation Department convinced San Francisco residents of the need for expenditure on the new Bay Bridge; they subsequently accepted a rise in taxes [9]. Additionally, Ward and Gibson themselves acknowledge that there is a considerable gap between major and minor parties in terms of the quality of their web design, and claim that as long as visual attraction remains a core criterion for voters deciding whether or not to scrutinize a party's web site, the World Wide Web will only serve to strengthen the dominance of parties with access to better resources [8].

'Cyber power' vs 'Access'

Cyber-pessimists disagree with cyber-optimistic commentators, arguing that the potential of new media to facilitate democracy will inevitably be limited by the question of 'accesses. Scholars such as Hague, Loader and David express concern over the fact that individuals are prevented from accessing the field of political communication via new media technologies for at least three reasons: 'economic status; geographic location; educational attainment' [10]. Lelia [11] also demonstrated that Internet access is restricted to 'the richer, better educated, younger, males in the community' in most parts of the world. Cyber-pessimists have further criticized the use of new media for political participation due to the serious Internet censorship exerted by major parties in some countries, such as China. The Chinese Communist Party has implemented an intricate system of information restriction known as the Great Firewall of China to control the content of Internet communications. For instance, YouTube, Facebook, and Google are blocked by the Golden Shield's web filtering mechanism. As a result, even though a large number of Internet users have started to participate in blogging activities, they confine their output to casual lifestyle-related posts rather than writing political content. According to a study conducted in 2007, not one of the top 100 bloggers in China

engaged in explicit debate centered on political change or the current political system in China [12]. Thus, censorship of political online discourse certainly exists and, so far, has its influence. Digital democracy is limited by strict censorship which severely restrains the creativity and freedom of speech of netizens. Scholars like Watts, Graham-Harrison and Le have indeed criticized the Firewall for its negative impact on citizen participation, both in China and further afield. Watts has argued that the censorship applied to these social networking tools is an act of conscious political manipulation [13], while Graham-Harrison and Le demonstrated that Weibo's political function has become increasingly weakened under the Chinese government's strict control, given that the government sometimes blocks social networking sites at crucial moments. To sum up, in the debate over whether or not new media are enhancing democracy by fostering the growth of democratic movements as well as limiting political citizen participation online, the cyber-pessimists maintain that rather than leading to a new democratic future, new media are only providing a platform for the few-for the majority, it is still 'politics as usual'.

However, political cyber-optimists have criticized cyber-pessimists for being too extreme and maintain that new media might be the decisive element in pushing the democratic agenda of elections nowadays. For instance, based on data published by the Pew Research Center, sixty-six percentage of social media users have participated in at least eight online political activities, such as encouraging people to vote or posting their comments on politics through social media [14]. Thus, Internet voters may shape election campaign agendas to some extent. Internet voters are also able to reach out to nominees at the individual level; according to Michael Chin, Marketing Director of social media platform KickApps, new media is 'a highly interactive and cost effective channel' which offers politicians a valuable opportunity to make direct contact with potential voters. The fact that Barack Obama obtained an electoral victory following a triumphant grassroots campaign and successful use of social media such as Facebook and My Space [15] is a case in point. Moreover, more than 69 percentages of Internets users who are using social networking sites and Twitter come from Republicans, Independents, and Democrats [14]. In the election of 2012, thirty percentages of registered voters were encouraged to vote for candidates Mitt Romney or Barack Obama through Facebook and Twitter (ibid.). Overall, as the evidence above suggests, new media have dramatically influenced the political lives of both voters and candidates in terms of strengthening the interactivity of their communication. This communication, and most significantly the power of the public to scrutinize and criticize the election system, is considered crucial to the functioning of the democratic political order. Cyber-optimists such as Gibson and Ward respond to criticism from cyber-pessimists by arguing that citizens can promote or even organize democratic social movements via new media, thereby pushing the democratic agenda [8]. During the Jasmine Revolution, in 2010, Tunisians made use of social networking tools such as Twitter to spread and accelerate the democracy movement, even social media did not cause the revolution but did enable to counter official propaganda, which subsequently achieved the reshuffling of the government. It might be argued that the reshuffling of the government was evidence that the leadership was indeed interested in and tried to approach the netizens via new media. Furthermore, Sassi has shown that the self-reflexive, self-organizing, non-governmental activities of individuals via the Internet are a core element of civic society [16]. In China, social media pioneers started to challenge the Party-State through new media; the increasing online activities of these young people signal a 'revolutionary impulse' in the Chinese society, thereby strengthening, or perhaps achieving, democracy. Chinese Cyber-optimists [17-19] also responded to

the cyber-pessimists' negative views of Chinese online censorship, claiming that regulating the Internet is difficult but necessary. In their view, providing access to all communication channels without filtering and censoring information threatens the stability of the State. One example given to sustain this argument is a group of online paid posters called the Internet Water Army, a Chinese organization paid by individual politicians or political organizations to spread negative or fake information online [20]; their aim is to manipulate the netizens' opinions towards certain social or political events. This group of people makes negative contributions to online opinion dissemination (*ibid.*). Moreover, the strategy of China's Communist Party with regards to online censorship is quite simple: they would like to strictly restrict the Internet's content and simultaneously expect to improve China's economy through market transactions by the Internet. Cyber-optimists maintain that new media could enhance the digital democracy even though there is a limitation of 'access' by according to the information from a researcher at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, who suggested that China could benefit both economically and politically from the Internet even though control is exerted by the CCP upon the content of internet [17].

'Citizen (micro) Blogging' vs 'Unresponsive Government'

The third area of the debate to be considered here is the phenomenon of citizen (micro) blogging. Citizens are using social media, such as blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and Weibo, as a channel for participation in political discussions, aiming to directly or indirectly influence public concerns or even reshape the public agenda, promoting the democratic public sphere. Voltmer [3], in his empirical study of political communication, revealed the interdependencies between politicians, citizens and the media, and highlighted why some media are more successful channels for democratic public communication than others. Voltmer cites the example of a Chinese blogger named Lixiaode, who was the first successful case of using a blog as a 'watchdog' to expose numerous official corruptions in China in 2004 and 2005 [21], thereby broadening the channel of political participation through blogs. This example illustrates the potential power of new media, which has already started to challenge the existing political system. The spread of citizen political participation via new media (typically social media) has led many scholars to claim that network communications have enhanced citizens' democratic participation and strengthened direct relations between citizens and politicians [22-24], thereby promoting digital democracy. They argue that new media provide a platform for citizens to get more politically involved and to engage in the journalistic process. Typically, citizen journalists and bloggers are both producers and consumers of political reportage [25]. The mutually beneficial cooperation between citizen journalists, bloggers and professional newspeople taking place has given these citizens the chance to take on the role of gatekeepers and become more engaged in political debates. It was a citizen journalist, for example, who was able to report Barack Obama's 'lament that small-town Americans clung to God and guns in times of hardship' [25]. The status of citizen journalists is best exemplified by the fact that some bloggers have become accredited members of the Washington press corps [25]. Citizen participation also extends to the reporting of natural disasters: in more than twenty percent of China's top one hundred emergency cases in 2012, information was initially spread by citizens through social media. News of the 2012 Sichuan Earthquake, for example, was relayed via Weibo six minutes earlier than in any other news platform's posts. From the evidence above, there is no doubt that democracy is being enhanced not only by the fact of equal participation in politics or freedom from

political oppression but also by the fact that increasing numbers of bloggers or citizen journalists are posting diverse political articles, analyzing government reports, and participating on an equal par with professional journalists in the broadcasting of events. This supports the views of Schudson, who maintains that democracy could be measured by citizens who contribute to more widely disseminating information and completing information [26]. News and political information are spread faster and public topic agendas are even being shifted by citizens rather than by news organizations or the government. These examples would imply that citizens are playing a significant role in an ongoing process of democratization.

However, although new media provide a platform for some bloggers and citizen journalists, Siapera maintains that 'the Internet is mainly used for efficiency rather than to add to accountability, transparency and participation' [27], which mean the Internet is not used to broaden democracy. Cyber-pessimists point out that politicians, who have already ceded much of their leadership role, are not interested in providing new platforms for democratic participation. They argue that this interaction between politicians and citizens is really an illusion, and that it is more important to observe what does not happen. David, for example, asserts that both candidates and elected officials utilize the Internet for the dissemination of information rather than to gather feedback from citizens [5]. According to Hague and Loader, whilst digital democracy might appeal to politicians vying for leadership, new media is just a way of contacting individuals directly, and as such political figures mainly utilize it to manipulate voters; they require little feedback from participants [10]. Most significantly, political commentators also claim that governments are rarely interested in permitting citizens to engage in what they consider to be 'their business', as they have no wish to lose control of the political agenda [5]. The cyber-pessimists' scepticism is corroborated by Schuler, who described how 'at a Massachusetts Institute of Technology conference, devoted to Democracy and the Internet, Ira Magaziner, the White House's head internet advisor, extolled the virtues of e-commerce; not a single word was wasted on democracy' [28]. Whether or not governments are actively using new media as a channel through which to communicate with citizens during election campaigns is, open to dispute. According to Negrine and Stanyer, the utilization of new media by citizen journalists or bloggers has not led to significant changes in the exercise of power at a global level, and the Internet remains dominated by the traditional players [4]. Cyber-pessimists have cited Hague and Loader's arguments to support the criticism that is commonly levelled at advanced liberal democracies: that politicians too often become isolated from or unresponsive to the individuals on whose behalf they ostensibly act.

Looking at the three key areas of debate outlined above, it is apparent that there is nothing inherently democratic about the new media; the extent to which they are being used to enhance democracy depends on who is using them and why. Schuler wrote, 'Only if large numbers of people are involved in the movement is there any realistic hope for increased democratization, and only if there is a heightened awareness and a sense of necessity and opportunity can any major change and reorientation occur' [28]. Whether or not new media technologies are enhancing democracy, they are the driving force behind some radical shifts which are taking place in politics, and these changes are inevitably bringing with them both benefits and limitations. The discussion between cyber-optimists and cyber-pessimists on these three issues has informed the debate over whether democracy should be considered a double-sided concept, serving both to re-form national power and restructure civil society [29]. Whether the ultimate assessment of the

impact of new media on politics is positive or negative, the discussion itself is beneficial in that it fosters a basic sense of belonging to, and sharing in, a democratic society.

Conclusion

This paper started by identifying the factors which led to the development of the cyber-optimistic and cyber-pessimistic perspectives. Three specific issues related to democratic communication via new media were then discussed, with the arguments put forward by cyber-optimists and cyber-pessimists being used to illustrate the perceived benefits and limitations of new media respectively. On the question of citizen blogging, cyber-optimists hold the view that it allows citizens to challenge the traditional journalistic process, shape the news directly and communicate with politicians interactively via new media, while cyber-pessimists respond that political actors are interested in the dissemination of information rather than democratic interaction. As far as democratic movements—or the expansion there of—are concerned, cyber-optimists assert that citizens can utilize new media to self-organize, whereas cyber-pessimists argue that the development of the democratic agenda is constrained by the issue of access. While cyber-optimists claim that voters can control the election agenda using new media, cyber-pessimists maintain that candidates are still the dominant force in the election process. Finally, although cyber-optimists have demonstrated that new media open up more space for minor parties to gain exposure and challenge major parties, the cyber-pessimists have shown that major parties still hold the advantage. To sum up, pushing the democratic agenda via new media technologies is an ambitious aim. Widespread consultation is needed; the more perspectives are gathered from all areas of society, the more advances there will be.

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