VIRTUAL DEMOCRACY AT THE CLINTON WHITE HOUSE: AN EXPERIMENT IN ELECTRONIC DEMOCRATISATION

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Conceptualising Electronic Democratisation

Essentially, electronic democratisation is the expansion of democracy and citizen participation in governance with computer-mediated communication (CMC) and affiliated new technologies of communication. Related concepts are "cyberdemocracy" and "virtual democracy." We derive our conceptualisation of democratisation from theoretical approaches to democracy which have two foundational assumptions: first, democracy involves continuous responsiveness of government and leaders to the concerns and preferences of its citizens; second, that leaders and citizens are political equals; and third, that citizen preferences are weighted with no discrimination by content or source of preference (Dahl 1971).

Efforts to create democratisation through CMC or other kinds of new communication technologies assume that the development of public policies are dependent upon communication processes such as debating issues, clarify the meanings of issues, and persuading people to take various political actions. As London (1994) argues, politics begins with a free exchange of ideas. Certainly, democracy depends on free discussion, whether in houses, pubs, streetcorners, TV shows, classrooms, or computer conferences. The town hall meeting is the chief metaphor of what is touted as more democratic political communication. One key aspect of the old-fashioned town hall meeting was purportedly a continuous dialogue between citizens and leaders (London 1994). As-

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suming this, advocates of electronic democracy generally argue that representative democracy alone leaves citizens out of contact with leaders.

What we will refer to here as electronic democratisation should be distinguished from the concept of electronic democracy. Advocates of electronic democracy generally argue that representative democracy, as opposed to direct democracy, leaves citizens out of contact with their leaders. Electronic democracy signifies a system of participation in which direct electronic expression and voting are seen as replacements for democracy by representation (elected representatives). Electronic democratisation, in contrast, is defined here as the enhancement of a democracy, already assumed to be initiated, with new communication technologies in ways that increase the political power of those whose role in key political processes is usually minimised. We assume that such democratisation brings more people into power rather than granting more power to those who already have it.

The Development of Democracy in the United States

As it was for Aristotle and Plutarch, democracy was only one part of a democratic political system for the Americans and English of the 1700s (Wood 1992). Something like Aristotle's polity was most accepted: a mixture of democracy with monarchy or aristocracy or both. The faith in polity was grounded in the Greeks' teachings that argued that monarchy could be perverted into the extreme of despotism and democracy could be perverted into the extreme of anarchy. A polity counterbalances these forces toward perversion and the result is stability (Wood 1992). Britain manifested the ancient Greek ideal with the king (monarchy), House of Lords (monarchy), and House of Commons (democracy). Even Montesquieu admired this system. According to Wood, the early American leaders also liked this architecture and created another form of one-few-many political systems, this time with governors, senates and houses of representatives (Wood 1992). Some colonials who were opposed to the single legislative body argued that they did not want a house of lords, but rather a body that will bring to government the wisdom of society's natural elite. Later, they shifted their rhetoric to one of bicameral government — that is, double representation of the people (Wood 1992).

The early political culture of the United States assumed that senates would be just another form of representing the people, and by implication, that other forms of government such as governors and judges, would also be representatives of the people, thus ending a practical distinction between republics where power is given to leaders by the people and democracies where people rule themselves (Wood 1992). Thus, the political system of American became a republic.

Elections were seen as part of a system of representation, not the starting point of representation. Consequently, when interests between the representatives and people are common or mutual, a good measure of representation is assumed. This was similar to the argument made by the English that the Americans were represented virtually in the House of Commons and therefore consented to the taxation that they were protesting (Wood 1992).

Virtual representation made sense to those who approved of a hierarchical society (Wood 1992) wherein those on the top sufficiently speak for those below them. Leaders thought the elites could transcend different interests and promote the common good. Still, there were opponents who argued for the need for actual representation.

Despite this conflict, a consensus developed that the right to vote was most central to being represented. While Americans realised that there were disparities of wealth in their society, they believed that they had a strong democracy since most people were allowed to pursue work, private happiness, and goods, which they could consume in ways of their own choosing. Notwithstanding this cultural faith in their system, Americans today, express concerns over the efficacy of their methods of representation.

The American Electorate in 1992 and 1996

Using focus groups to tap the attitudes and concerns of American voters in 1990 and 1991, the Kettering Foundation discovered the following: Americans were not apathetic about political issues, but were disappointed with convention political campaigning and governing. They were disappointed with what they perceived as a very limited role for most people in political decision-making. The focus group participants indicated that they wanted more input into government discussions about policy issues (Harwood 1992).

The study did not find that Americans perceived themselves as having a shortage of information. Instead, they felt alienated from key political processes, with the real power in the nation resting with political elites, lobbyists, and journalists. American citizens articulated a desire to have more voice in defining issues and determining policy choices. These people expressed desires to have more potential to act on their own interest. They also wanted more communication between citizens and leaders. They did not want more opinion measurement, as with public opinion polling, but rather more access to the system (Citizens and Politics 1991).

In early 1996, the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) conducted an opinion poll using a national random sample of 600 American citizens in which they found the following (PBS 1996). Over 80% of Americans today believe that they have opinions worthy of attention, but that about 44% feel left out of the political process. Additionally, about 77% perceive their leaders to be out of touch with public concerns in general. Also, about 60% indicate that they make a lower income than what they deserve. These data are especially relevant in light of the many claims made about CMC and democracy.

Rhetorical Claims about Electronic Democracy

As has been the case with new communication technologies before it, much has been written on how CMC is capable of reducing the barriers which separate many citizens from the democratic process. The telegraph, telephone, television and radio have all, at one point, been hailed as revolutionary new technologies which were going to help citizens become more involved in the political system (Crowley and Heyer 1991). Often referred to as electronic democracy or teledemocracy, many dubious claims have been made about the democratising benefits regarding CMC technology. Benjamin Barber (1984) argues that new communication technologies are necessary to fortify civic education, to provide more equal access to information, and to enhance discussions and debates that increase the participation of citizens in political communication. He likens CMC to a new form of town meetings. Like Barber, others see CMC as restoring the voice of American citizens in their political system by giving them feedback links to leaders.

One of the strongest claims about electronic democratisation is the one stating that

CMC will make direct democracy more possible, and thus end the limitations of representative democracy. In this world of cyberpolitics, citizens and leaders work together in a sustained stream of plebiscites to shape the best future. According to Patrick O'Sullivan (1995), proponents of this view believe that "electronic town halls" like those used by Ross Perot in the 1992 presidential election give citizens the ability to bypass traditional political institutions and become more directly involved in the political process. In this way, CMC acts as a direct feedback link to elected representatives though which they are able to voice their opinions about various legislative issues.

Some argue that political CMC could be an actual replacement for representative democracy, functioning as a form of direct democracy (London 1994). Michael Chamberlain (1994) has gone so far to say that these new types of media will make elected officials (and bureaucracies) both more accountable and accessible to American citizens. As with George Gallup's claims about the democratisation force of public opinion polling, these arguments assume that direct democracy is increased with new expressions of public attitudes.

The Sociological Context for CMC Usage

Nielsen Media Research findings indicate that World Wide Web (WWW) users have higher incomes than the rest of the population. The same research shows that about two-thirds of the WWW users are male, that males have the most access to the Internet, and that males account for about 77% of the time spent on the Internet (Internet World, October 30, 1995). Web users are far more affluent that the rest of the general population. For example, 25% of the users have an income over $80,000 per year and the general population has only 10% with that level of income.

The number of Americans engaged in CMC continues to increase dramatically. However, there is a social stratification of CMC use. Individuals who use CMC have more accurate information about political and professional matters than those who do not. Research also indicates that individuals who use CMC personally benefit from the strong and weak ties created through their network use (Anderson et al. 1995). Increased CMC could help many Americans become more informed about political affairs and to become more involved in political dialogues. In 1993, only about 7% of lowest income households had computers while 55% of the highest income households had computers. In the same year, only 3% of the lowest income individuals used CMC while 23% of the highest income individuals used CMC. Worse than this general picture of CMC disparity by income level is the fact that the gap between high-income and low-income CMC use has been widening. Higher-income Americans are adopting the new CMC technologies as a faster rate than lower income citizens. Approximately 13% of Americans without high school degrees have computers, while about 49% of college graduates have computers. The highest penetration rates for household computers are for Anglo and Asian Americans. Over 30% of Anglos and over 37% of Asians have computers in their households. Hispanics, African Americans, and Native Americans all have a penetration rate about 13%.

Confusing Connectivity with Interactivity

For those who believe that democracy will be inevitably enhanced by CMC, the only real issues are when and how. London (1994, 2), for example, who believes that

new communication technologies can extend democratisation, cautions that "... care must be taken to insure that it is developed more as a forum for genuine public dialogue than as a hi-tech Gallup poll for measuring the shifting currents of popular opinion."

Information retrieval technology, according to Rapaport (1991), does not provide interactive communication between parties. It only aids the obtaining of information or data that is important to a particular inquiry. Thus, data retrieval systems, such as document retrieval software, aids the knowledge of individual voters in the same way that the can inform themselves with newspapers and books.

Some believe that direct democracy is simply a bad idea. The objection is that representative democracy works better than direct democracy. In a representative democracy, citizens elect leaders to make decisions for them. This does not mean that they abandon participation, but rather that their participation in governance is not nearly as involving as in a direct democracy. It is not necessary to assume that a direct democracy is desirable in order to advocate electronic democratisation, but that appears to be assumed by those who sell the notion of electronic (direct) democracy.

Claimed advantages for electronic democratisation include creating political communities, building social consensus for various policies, and increasing both motivation and ability to be politically involved. Elgin (1982) argues that systematic dialogue and feedback between citizens and officials keeps both in touch with public judgements. While this is an interesting claim, we must recognise that an accurate conceptualisation of feedback is necessary to make it useful for electronic democratisation. Feedback is a continual process of input back from one's own behaviour as well as from the reactions of others in relation to one's actions. It is done in real-time and is simultaneous with message production. Within a feedback perspective, it is certain that citizens need feedback for their messages and leaders need feedback for their actions. In other words, electronic democratisation should involve feedback loops involving both leaders and citizens (Gonzales 1989; Hacker 1996). At this point, it is more likely that government officials are getting more feedback than are citizens. While some advocates of electronic democratisation assume that if citizens can voice their concerns more and if leaders can gauge public opinions more accurately, that democracy will be better served (London 1994). It is incumbent to clarify how their systems would be anything more than advanced public opinion measurement.

Political issues regarding CMC and the Internet may be concealed by discourse which makes democratisation a presumption and then simply focuses on technical issues of growth and expansion (Webster and Robins 1989). While information acquisition may be an privatised activity, it is often discussed as a social force that benefits everyone. What are called "revolutions" in communication and information are to some extent continuations of existing patterns of communication being used to create markets. What some might call a "global village" is more of a global marketplace. Webster and Robins (1989, 345) argue that communication and information networks constitute complex corporate structures and a "nervous system of the modern state..." In their views, the chief motivations and purposes for new CMC developments are the promotion of industrial competition and the expansion of economic growth. Their view denies conventional wisdom that improving information flow through computer networks brings about social progress.

John December (1995) takes issue with claims about democracy and global communities emerging from use of the Internet. He notes that the arrival of telephone communication was hailed as the dawning of a new era of democracy. December argues that the Internet will not democratise any more than the old media did and that "Sending e-mail to PRESIDENT@WHITEHOUSE.GOV won't get you the ear of the President any easier than if you called (202) 456-1414" (December 1995, 38). In December's view, White House information, if not serving the needs of its users, is simply costly public relations.

The dominant ideology of the Information Age tells us that there is social transformation, when, in fact, the many changes in technologies have brought few changes in social conditions. As computer scientist Tom Forester (1992, 134) argues, "Computers have infiltrated many areas of our social life, they have not transformed it." The dominant ideology regarding CMC and power begins with assumptions about massive social transformations, including democratisation and empowerment. Kling and Dunlop (1993) note how loosely the term "revolution" is applied to the new communication technologies. They point out that the effects which CMC has on social relationships are not clear and need more study.

The White House Visions of Electronic Democracy

The Clinton White House e-mail system is part of a vision for a National Information Infrastructure (NII). This vision sees the NII as a marketplace network that will enrich the social, economic, and political lives of most Americans (NRENAISSANCE Committee 1994). What was formerly conceived of as a noncommercial education and research network called the National Research and Education Network (NREN) collapsed into the concept of a larger information infrastructure that would include commerce and marketplace dynamics. The NII conceptually links commerce, public interests, education, and overall quality of life into one large integrated system.

As work progresses on more sophisticated extensions of Internet connectivity and bandwidth, such as the new National Science Foundation very high speed backbone network service (vBNS), supporters of the system argue that the computer networking already in place has changed how scientists and researchers do their work. For example, they note how much more common collaboration appears to be today (NRENAISSANCE Committee 1994). What began as Defense Department technology (DARPANET), is now seen as a flourishing technology that can benefit each person in American society. At present, the Internet has approximately 20,000 registered networks and 2 million host computers (NRENAISSANCE Committee 1994).

The official purpose of the Internet and NII is described as the formation of an information infrastructure that supports services, communication, and access to information. This appears to be consistent with the key functions of the White House e-mail system: contact and information retrieval. The Clinton-Gore vision for the NII and its component sub-systems like the White House e-mail system consists of a network that links all major institutions, that has access availability, that encourage free market investments, that makes information for citizens easy to find and retrieve, and which creates more citizen empowerment through facilitating better citizen-government communication (NRENAISSANCE Committee 1994). Some observers believe that the Clinton planners are assessing the potential for videophone technology for the system (London 1994).

While the Clinton administration is fully committed to a national communication infrastructure (the NII), it is not committed to making full access to advanced services available to all Americans at any particular time. In other words, its approach to the NII views the government as the enabler of NII technology but corporations and the private sector as the source of innovations and investments (Branscomb and Kahin 1995). Just as the telecommunications industry grew as "classic mass-market provider," with universal service as a means of expanding that market, so the NII has been shaped as a platform of value-added services for information consumers (Branscomb and Kahin 1995, 91). The Clinton NII is thus grounded in a vision of a unified and evolving network of interoperable economic, educational, national security, research, and commercial services.

Data on the White House System

While we were told that the 1995-1996 survey data are not yet analysed and available, the MIT Clinton E-mail system analysts still report the findings of their 1994 survey data (n=1,600). These are the most current statistics available at this time. The data indicate that approximately 30-40,000 people obtain government documents almost each day. The documents have wider circulation than only with the people who do the retrieval. Approximately 90,000 addition people are obtaining information from the original retrievers (Hurwitz and Mallery 1994). The distribution of government documents thus has two stages of dissemination: first is the original retrieval, next is further flow of data through e-mail, conversations, paper copies, and other forms of communication. Two-thirds of the users report using retrieved information discussions with others (Hurwitz and Mallery 1994).

Then there is the question of who actually uses the White House e-mail system. The data show that users are more educated than the general U.S. population. They include more males than females. Twenty percent of the users are female (Hurwitz and Mallery 1994). Of the users, 75% have a college education and half have graduate degrees. Organisation affiliations of users are mainly universities, colleges, government, military, high technology organisations, and political activist groups.

One interesting finding in the Hurwitz and Mallery (1994) data is that users of the system are more active politically than other Americans in general. One third of these users work for issue causes or candidates. User motivations are central to this analysis. Users of the system report that they use it to keep up on information, to keep abreast of issues, and to gain more insight on political processes. The latter motivation was one of the most frequently mentioned. Yet, the users do not appear highly motivated to spend substantial amounts of time with information. While 80% say they look at documents several times per week, only half spend 10 or more minutes daily in reading them.

We sent e-mail messages to numerous officials involved with planning or managing the Clinton system. One White House e-mail correspondence person ignored the inquiry. Another said he did not have time to discuss issues of democracy and White House e-mail. A third simply referred us to one of the other two. More importantly, several people involved in one way or another with the system did write. The first is Eric Loeb of MIT. Loeb was one of the developers of the Clinton campaign computer networking machine. Loeb told us the following: "I would say that the main importance of the current system is that it supplies the White House documents to citizens

and archives. The number of primary documents being distributed by the White House as a result of the link to the Internet (and providers such as AOL, where I understand the WH [White House] docs to receive fairly heavy traffic) is unprecedented. That being said, it is still a limited achievement relative to what could ultimately be done. The things that strike me as most important to work on in the near future, are not primarily centred on the white house or even the federal government, however. The most useful way to use the networks to facilitate democratic participation is to connect citizens more directly with their local representatives, because only the local representatives have small enough constituencies to enable any kind of sensible integration of their views. There is no particular weakness of the present system. It does what it does just fine. If there is a weakness here it is in our political culture, which expects the white house (and other agency) systems to be developed from the top-down, rather than by the citizenry."

Kimberly Jenkins, director of an organisation called "Highway 1" told us: "E-mail and home pages are a hot topic now on the Hill. We do a lot of work to help Members understand how these avenues of communication can change democracy (to provide information directly to the people without a media filter, to hear directly from the people about their concerns, to provide information—via pointers on a home page—to constituents so that they can assume more responsibility and obtain more control in getting the answers they need, to address new portions of the population that don't typically communicate with their representatives in the conventional channels, etc.)."

Promises of Democratisation through Computer Networks

Political issues regarding the Information Age and the Internet are often concealed in discussions about "communications revolutions" and technical innovations of the computer technologies. Because egalitarianism is assumed rather than demonstrated, numerous political issues are neglected. A knowledge gap existed before with antecedent communication technologies such as telephone, cable television, computers, etc. Only about 1/5 of the American population is able to afford the cellular telephones, computers, etc. that equip a true Information Age citizen (Dizard 1994). Reviews of teledemocracy experiments in the U.S. indicate that impacts on participation are marginal (Arterton 1987; Forester 1992). If such attempts fail to raise simple participation, how can they be expected to transform politics?

The origins of the word and notion of democracy include the assumption that democracies depend on active citizen participation (Bertelsen 1992). Concern for community above concern for individual privileges was part of ancient Greek democratic ideals. In light of the history of democracies, some communication scholars argue that new communication systems have enough interactive features to permit an informed citizenry and to allow them to express their political views. Others, however, note that these new means of political communication allow citizens to create political viewpoints while simultaneously removing them from actual participation in the governing. Bertelsen (1992) for example, notes that we may be confusing self-affirmation with political participation.

The Internet was not created as a tool of democratisation any more than television was. Television produces entertainment to sell advertising. The Internet began as military communication networks. It now opens doors for electronic shopping, banking at home, sound and video entertainment, etc. etc. Abrahamson et al (1988) provide a

stern warning about technological determinism. Such determinism attributes causal effects to new technologies. We see this now in pronouncements of a renaissance of democracy made possible by CMC.

Certainly, CMC technological advancements increase the range and possibilities of human contact. Communication is easier and faster. But fast communication is not required for democracy. It is arguable that slow communication is what the Greeks and the American colonials wished for in democratic debates. Abrahamson et al. (1988) argue that what really matters is not the technology itself, but the social and economic systems in which the technology functions.

Democratisation without Theory

Much of the current rhetoric about electronic democratisation implies a reliance on Athenian conceptions of democracy. Such reliance belies a naiveté regarding the democratic nature of ancient Greece. Despite dramatic progress in art, philosophy and other areas of human inquiry, the Greeks fought each other among city states, had a large population of slaves, and kept women in subservient social and political roles.

Like any political term or concept, the concept of democracy is a contested one. Ball and Dagger (1995, 24) note that different people may all want to promote democracy, but "...they disagree on how to do this because they disagree about what democracy truly is." Once we realise that democracy is a contested concept and term, we must acknowledge that mythologies about electronic democratisation are competing rhetorical visions.

As Ball and Dagger (1995) note a polity combines rule by the many with rule (democracy) by the few (oligarchy). Thus, discussions about electronic democratisation today lack precision when they do not define their terms or when they assume democracy when in fact they are referring to polity. Too much of the time, it appears, today's discourse about virtual democracy neglects the pre-eminence of polity over democracy in political practice, essentially "democratising" with no theory of democracy.

Political scientist Ian Shapiro (1994) notes that democratic movements often emerge in opposition to an existing order. They want more than participatory politics; they also want to limit or abolish unfair hierarchies of the past. Democracies therefore, depend on conflict and change. With such changes are suspicions of experts who lay out blueprints for the future or presume to able to impose reforms. Shapiro argues that expertise is important and valuable in a democracy, but should not be allowed to monopolise key decision-making processes.

Working with a theory of democracy mandates that we be vigilant at attempting to empower the disempowered, extend the boundaries of political debate, make enfranchisement into the systems of political discourse easier, make political discourse more rational and informative, and bring citizens close to interaction with centres of power. These efforts are related to the need to limit technical blueprints for a better society, in favour of using technologies to remove impediments to the natural inclinations of our citizens to participate in governance. We face some mundane work to start with, such as working against the correlations of money and access and the professionalisation of public service (Shapiro 1994). When the CEOs of the Forbes top 500 corporations pay themselves as much as 157 times more than their average workers, there are clear reasons why Americans attach economic concerns to their political involvement (Sanders 1994). Indeed, analysts working on a recent Times-Mirror survey, suggest that vot-

ers are angry today because of economic disappointment (Kohut 1994).

Bollen (1990) argues that one problem with measuring how much democracy there is in a nation involves the lack of conceptual clarity regarding democracy. For example, democracy is often confounded with other concepts such as voter turnout and political stability. Bollen argues that a definition of democracy that satisfies everyone is impossible. His own definition of democracy is that of a system where the degree of power for elites is minimised and the degree of power for nonelites is maximised. This view incorporates the concept of power into the concept of democracy. When elites are accountable to nonelites, democracy is present.

Public Spheres, Democracy, and Virtual Democracy

A public sphere in usually thought of as a place where communication occurs that stimulates debates about important issues and consensus is built through rational argumentation. John Keane (1995) argues that public spheres may be created with CMC at three levels — micro, mezzo, and macro. The micro are the smallest, most local; the mezzo are national, and the macro are transnational. There are key issues about the nature of public spheres in the age of increasing CMC. Keane argues that views of a unified singular public sphere are obsolete. As parties, associations, and unions lose influence, he argues that CMC offers small meeting places where citizens can create communities of political discussion and interests. Like coffee houses of the past, these micro-public spheres can provide bottom-up political communication.

In a public sphere, people can argue and debate about power and issues. The kind of spheres discussed by Keane (1995) are not integrated into any national whole; therefore, there is little indication of any American cyberspace political culture in his descriptions other than in small, micro-cultural senses. In his description, there are numerous micro-communities or spheres of political discussion. This is interesting and perhaps new, at least in format. However, there is, as of now, no political theory, theory of democracy, or theory of political communication with which we can explain the significance or role of these micro-communities within the larger systems of power in which they reside.

Keane offers a three-part classification of public spheres for today: micro, mezzo, and macro. The micro-spheres involve sub-national political communication. The mezzo-public spheres involve interaction within the nation state framework. Macro-spheres involve global levels of interaction. Keane observes that in history, we can see that coffee houses, town meetings, and other local spaces have provided bottom-up places of political interaction where citizens create political identities. Because national political power rests on the consent of the governed, these micro-spheres are important spheres of possible challenge, even dissent. Keane argues that social movements depend on organising done in small groups, local networks, and friendship. Within the micro-spheres, he says, political movements stress solidarity and as in local discussions, question realities and propose alternatives.

While it may appear that micro-spheres are atomised, fractured, and disconnected from any national forms of power, Keane (1995) argues that they are similar in effect to political small groups that meet face-to-face to challenge higher levels of power. Since any political movement must begin with leaders, Keane may have a strong point about the early organising impetus that electronic communication may have concerning early forms of consciousness raising.

Keane (1995) vociferously argues against attempting to apply any absolute principles of democracy to the new forms of political communication. The hard question is what will guide the democratisation of communication, empowerment through such democratisation, or simply the maintenance of democratic practices, if there are no first principles of democracy that can serve as policies. According to Keane, democracy is a kind of system that accommodates expression of solidarity or opposition to political ideas. A democracy, in his view, is healthy when it has various kinds of public spheres that thrive, with no single sphere monopolising conflicts about power. Reading the arguments made by Keane might remind us of the need to recall what Keane himself states, that is, on all political classes seek to increase their power with communication media by defining political spaces.

While Keane makes strong points about micro-level political communication, there are certain realities which must be faced. For example, so far, only about one third of American households have a personal computer. Less than 12% of American households have a modem. Worse yet, there is still about 6% of American households that cannot even afford telephone service (Schaefer 1995). Telephone penetration is about 93% at this time, leaving 6-7% without very basic communication access (Hanson 1994).

Necessary Conditions for Democracy

A democratic political system has the minimum requirements of free speech, freedom to organise, and ability to select leaders (Flanigan and Zingale 1994). Some see modern democracies as pure democracies which is really not possible in large societies. One might assume that citizens are informed and make rational calculations about their personal interests. Or, one might assume that citizens are easily manipulated and follow policies that serve the elites only. Keane (1995) makes the critical observation that democracy requires (a) mechanisms of representation, and (b) channels between various parts of society and government that allows them to co-define issues.

Generally, there are seven necessary conditions that most theorists discuss: 1. informed citizens; 2. channels of representation; 3. freedom of speech and dissent; 4. consent of the governed; 5. free elections; 6. tolerance of opposition; 7. competition for power. Examining these seven conditions if light what we know about CMC, it is apparent that CMC can add to democratic communication is minor ways and can also contribute to larger efforts of democratisation. The major means of democratisation involve structural changes in a political system, changes which move material governance away from plutocratic dominance more toward truly representative democracy. CMC does little to remedy the most significant impediments to democracy. Those impediments include wealthy men (exs. Ross Perot, Steve Forbes) being allowed to purchase their way into the competition of political agendas. They also include the practice of spending phenomenal sums of money on campaign advertising — a sure way of short-circuiting rational deliberation. Giving citizens more contacts and more information does not free them from forces of wealth and corporate privilege, as well as ideological commitment to marketplace liberalism as the motivator of government activity.

The White House E-mail Planning Logic

The people who design and manage the White House e-mail system appear sincere in their faith that American democracy can be enhanced with CMC. They argue

that it will take time, but the increasing use of the system will encourage greater participation (Hacker 1996). Hurwitz and Mallery (1995) have developed and are evaluating technical means of managing collaborative CMC. Communicators can discuss and make suggestion regarding policies while linking their utterances to points that are made in an ongoing hypertext of policy assertions. They believe this technical innovation allows participants to refine their participation in ways that increase the productivity of the discussions. The need for such technology is ostensibly the fact that participants can comprise a large number of physically separated individuals. An example for applying this is Vice President Al Gore's ideas about meetings of government agencies which could bring together thousands of workers from many organisations. The technology would allow them to retrieve texts relevant to their concerns easily and to connect their opinions to ongoing virtual conversations. MIT researchers also were interested in how this can help citizens in participating in governmental processes. One application could be having citizens append their opinions to policy proposal.

The MIT social scientists developing the Clinton system are part of what is known as the Intelligent Information Infrastructure Project. This project is working on means to distribute and obtain data and reports through the Internet as easily as possible. This includes designing automation technologies for handling increasingly large quantities of mail.

Thus far, it appears that the White House e-mail project is capable of: (a) providing easier access to documents related to the Presidency and to government policies and proposals, (b) making new contacts between citizens and government employees, (c) helping citizens locate new forums for political self-expression, (d) making it possible for everyone involved in politics to disseminate their ideas to ever widening audiences. MIT scholar and programmer Eric Loeb argues that democracy is built from the bottom up. However, we should realise that democracy building cannot stop at local levels; the top end must be more interactive also.

There are many problems which need to be addressed. These include: (a) the fact that most Americans are stratified by CMC access, (b) that many, if not most, Americans are not CMC literate and we have still have 10-20% that are functionally illiterate; (c) the fact that those people who now use political CMC are the same people who would use quills if that was the latest method of sending messages, (d) the fact that profit motivation narrows and does not expand the diversity of political views in political communication, and (e) that more fully informed consumers of political data remain consumers and are not transformed into citizens. Citizens want more involvement. It is essential that leaders see their desires for (a) more issue substance in political discussions, (b) more citizen-leader interaction, and (c) more interaction of citizens with each other about issues. The corporations who invest in Internet technology do so primarily for their profit-making ventures. Certainly there are benefits from the system and from its new innovations, but there is little initiative toward democratisation other than the kind that is used to describe market expansion and the prying open of formerly closed markets.

There is continuous fascination with how many new channels of political communication are created; today, the fascination concerns computer networks, video dial tone, fibre optics, satellite distribution, TV town meetings, etc. The same attribution error continues: more channels are assumed to add cumulatively to public knowl-

edge or individual citizen participation in the political system. If the claims about electronic democratisation, as they are now made, were sustainable, there would be empirical data indicating such an incline in knowledge and participation. Perhaps we have confused participation in mediated talk with involvement in governance.

In a system of representative democracy, citizens rely on leaders to make decisions for them while representing citizen concerns. Mass media replaced old political face-to-face campaign communication as the major contacts between leaders and citizens. As London (1994) observes, the presence of today's campaigns is created with TV images, radio messages, print media stories, sound bites, and rhetoric. Many scholars would agree with London that the effects of this are not positive. In effect, broadcasting has made politics a form of sport and entertainment. In turn, citizens have become spectators and fans. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) like the White House e-mail system offer alternatives to broadcast-era politics. Abrahamson et al. (1988) note that the new communication technologies remove limits on how much information citizens can retrieve, free information flow from time and geography barriers, increase control by citizens over what content they receive, and bring new two-way aspects to channels of political communication. These are certainly important improvements about mass-mediated politics.

From Virtual to Real Democracy

Just as there is nothing wrong with virtual reality, there is nothing wrong with virtual democracy **if** one recognises that the virtual is a training ground or an experimental space and not a substitute for the real. Virtual Democracy Utopias avoid issues of material human needs and lasting political domination. Lind (1996, 569) points out that the United States is "... democratic in form but plutocratic in substance." Lind draws attention to the fact that structural changes in the political system are necessary to break the domination of American government and society by the wealthy oligarchy that controls the U.S. Senate, credentialing of professions, and other key aspects of the society. He notes that America has a co-existence of "...dreadful squalor with plutocratic opulence." Without some confrontation of this coexistence by those who talk about democratisation with CMC, the books are closed on any meaningful social transformation. Certainly, poor people might be able to keep better informed, but will they be able to do anything about ending their poverty?

The kind of information infrastructure that is being constructed is not one based on theories of communication and theories of democracy. Instead, the foundation is the valuing of polity and capitalism. Nothing concrete is being done to implement what is given lipservice —"universal service." Ironically, universal service, whereby all citizens have access to the computer networks that make virtual democracy possible, is the most rudimentary requirement for electronic democratisation. While there is a great deal of talk about everyone's access to the Super Information Highway, the ratio of upstream to downstream bandwidths reveals that the engineering of the NII is toward higher downstream capacities (Schaefer 1995). This indicates that citizens will not have the originator role of communication that much of the NII rhetoric claims. In other words, the virtual citizen ends up as much of a receiver as the previous citizens. Rather than dialogue, as we are being sold, we will continue our political monologues in a virtual democracy.

An advanced free-marketplace infrastructure, like the ancient Greek Agora, is not

sufficient to ensure democracy. The pattern of use for the White House e-mail system appears consistent with patterns of computer use and CMC user in general. That is, there is a stratification in who uses the White House system despite the fact that it is open for all. The comments by designers of the system that it depends on time and that it must evolve from the bottom up are polemical statements. Yet, there is merit to their assertions that most political interactivity will be possible with local government systems. At the local levels, it is much more likely that citizens can create micro-CMC public spheres. These spheres, while not capable of social transformation, can provide active centres of political discussion which result in activism and solidarity for certain causes.

If we are going to say that CMC aids democracy, we must say specifically how this will be accomplished. Communication theory and theories of democratic communication must guide such analyses. At this time, such sophisticated analysis is rarely found. Instead, we have a morass of Utopian visions of an Age of Democracy made possible by computer lines and nodes connected by fibre optics. When we communicate, in general, we reduce uncertainties, produce knowledge, and form relationships. At the basic level of connectivity, which simply allows interaction, nothing happens that guarantees democracy. Giving more power to either senders or receivers over how they code or decode messages has no certain effect on power in their relationship. Increasing political interactivity, which means increasing how much citizens can interact with leaders about issues, with real feedback about citizen concerns, can move in incremental ways toward enhancing democratisation. As important, however, is the need to remove impediments to democracy such as oligarchic or plutocratic privileges. Such impediments have less to do with computer networks than with political economic realities.

Conclusions

The Clinton White House e-mail system makes a minimal contribution to democratisation in the United States because it functions within a system following a dominant ideology of market libertarianism. This ideology fundamentally confuses economic liberties with political democracy. Economic choice and input are not the same as political choice and input. A failure or an unwillingness to face this fact blocks the advancement of democracy as the technologies of communication advance as tools of data searching, conversation, and entertainment. For now, there are reasons to see electronic democratisation as an important goal and one effective at providing more data bases for active citizens, but also as a weak alternative to material changes in a political system premised on elites dominating nonelites. In the final analysis, we conclude that political CMC such as the White House e-mail system, enhances electronic democratisation, but that electronic democratisation is a necessary, but not sufficient condition of less virtual and more real democracy.

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