



# *Digital* DEMOCRACY

Discourse and Decision Making  
in the Information Age

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Edited by  
**BARRY N. HAGUE AND BRIAN D. LOADER**



# Digital Democracy

The exponential growth of new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) such as the Internet, alongside growing concerns about the failure of advanced societies to live up to the democratic idea, has produced much interest in the prospects for a 'digital democracy'.

On one side, evangelists of the emancipatory potential of ICTs describe the emergence of an electronic social commons in which citizens can deliberate in an informed manner on matters of collective concern. However, on the other side there are those who present a vision of the death of democracy and the emergence of a 'Big Brother' state based upon electronic surveillance of citizens. By drawing together empirical evidence from Europe, the US and Canada, *Digital Democracy* attempts to separate the rhetoric from the reality concerning the actual and potential impacts of ICTs on democratic institutions and practice.

*Digital Democracy* considers how technological developments might combine with underlying social, economic and political conditions to produce new vehicles for democratic practice. It will provide invaluable reading for those studying social policy, politics and sociology, as well as for policy analysts, social scientists and computer scientists.

**Barry N. Hague** is Research Co-ordinator of the Community Informatics Research and Applications Unit (CIRA) based at the University of Teesside. **Brian D. Loader** is Co-director of CIRA and editor of the international journal *Information, Communication and Society* (Routledge), *The Governance of Cyberspace* (Routledge, 1997) and *The Cyberspace Divide* (Routledge, 1998).



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Brian D. Loader



PUSTAKA PERDANA



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# Preface

The focus for this book is a critical exploration of the potential for new information and communications technologies (ICTs), such as the internet, to contribute to 'strong democracy' based around citizen-to-citizen deliberation and strengthened links between governments and the governed. The book is premised on the belief that an understanding of the dialectical relationship between technology and society is essential to a critical understanding of 'digital democracy' initiatives. Further, the majority of the book's contributors lend weight to the argument that, if ICTs are to play a significant role in the achievement of strong democracy, then they must be grounded in community networks. Finally, this volume, by drawing upon empirical evidence from a number of countries, seeks to contribute to the separation of the rhetoric from the reality concerning experiments in, and prospects for, digital democracy.

These concerns formed the basis for a conference organised by the Community Informatics Research and Applications Unit (CIRA) based at the University of Teesside, from which the majority of chapters in this volume originate. All the chapters have been substantially reviewed in the light of the lively and productive debate during the conference, and additional contributions have been sought to enhance that debate further.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank the participants in the original conference for their contributions to what was a stimulating and enjoyable event. The fact that it was so enjoyable was, in no small part, down to the professional way in which the event was organised by members of the CIRA team. Particular thanks are due in this regard to Jo Brudenell (who also has our deepest appreciation for her efforts in dealing with the administrative obstacles to pulling this collection together), June Ions and Paul Haslock.



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Barry N. Hague and  
Brian D. Loader

Part I

# Digital democracy: concepts and issues





# 1 Digital democracy: an introduction

*Barry N. Hague and  
Brian D. Loader*

There exists a growing body of thought that articulates the belief that recent developments in information and communications technologies (ICTs) contain within them the potential to facilitate ‘quantum leaps in the field of democratic politics’ (Becker 1998: 343). For Becker, these amount to no less than a paradigm shift in the process of the understanding of democratic governance.

A variety of models, experiments and initiatives are emerging in response to the challenge of (re)invigorating democratic institutions and practice by utilising ICTs. These initiatives are variously grouped in the literature under the umbrella of ‘electronic democracy’, ‘tele-democracy’ and ‘cyberdemocracy’. The term ‘digital democracy’ is preferred here since it is the bringing together of existing electronic technologies through developments in digital data transfer that unleashes the potential of ICTs.<sup>1</sup> At present, the notion of digital democracy can refer to a fairly wide range of technological applications including televised ‘people’s parliaments’ or citizens’ juries, e-mail access to electronic discussion groups, and public information kiosks (DEMOS 1997). It is not the aim of this collection to provide a comprehensive coverage of such initiatives; this task is left to other authors. Neither is it intended to provide detailed accounts of competing models of democracy, their relative merits and the underlying conditions required for their realisation (see Held 1987). Still less is the collection intended to join arms with either the cyber-libertarian vision of a digital utopia (Barlow 1996) or the technophobic dystopian nightmares of a surveillance society (Davies 1996). Both of these scenarios lean too much towards technological determinism. It is important to recognise that new ICT applications, whether directed at enhancing democracy or not, emerge out of the ‘dialectical interaction between technology and society’ (Castells 1997: 5); they are subject to ‘social shaping’ (Kubicek *et al.* 1997)

and, as such, they will be influenced by such factors as technological precedent, culture (political or otherwise), legal frameworks, etc., and will emerge through the activities of human agents, constrained as they are by existing power relations.

The aims of this book, then, are as follows. First, to address the question of what a 'strong democracy' based on extensive use of ICTs might look like. Second, to explore the likely effects of alternative underlying social, economic and political conditions on the 'digital democracy' we actually achieve. Third, to draw together international case study material with a view to separating the rhetoric from the reality concerning the current impacts of ICTs on democratic practice. Fourth, to draw lessons from this case study material concerning barriers to the realisation of 'digital democracy', the pursuit of alternative 'agendas', and the emergence of unintended consequences from the application of ICTs. Before elaborating upon these aims, let us briefly rehearse the justifications for such a project.

### **Digital democracy: why the interest?**

The major justifications for (re)visiting democratic practice in the light of an emergent Information Age are twofold. The first concerns a growing perception that current political institutions, actors and practice in advanced liberal democracies are in a frail condition and are held in poor public regard. The second concerns a belief that the current period of rapid social, economic and political change, which may signal an emergent Information Age, provides opportunities hitherto unavailable to rethink and, if necessary, radically overhaul or replace those institutions, actors and practice.

Representative models of democracy have come to characterise many twentieth-century societies. It is only by conceding a great deal of their power, runs the argument, to a smaller number of politicians whose job it is to represent their common interests that citizens can live in a democratic society at all. Conversely, its opponents have argued that elected representatives often do not represent the 'will of the people' and are prone to elitism (Mitchels 1962). More recently, politicians have become tarnished with allegations of sleaze, corruption, self-seeking behaviour and sound-bite politics that may have produced widespread disillusionment and apathy amongst citizens and particularly the young (Wilkinson and Mulgan 1995). It is against this background that we have to assess where the notion of digital democracy fits in.

The second reason why a focus on 'digital democracy' is apposite concerns the notion that society is undergoing a paradigmatic shift. Castells quotes palaeontologist Stephen J. Gould thus:

The history of life, as I read it, is a series of stable states, punctuated at rare intervals by major events that occur with great rapidity and help to establish the next stable era . . . [A]t the end of the twentieth century, we are living through one of these rare intervals in history. An interval characterised by transformation of our 'material culture' by the works of a new technological paradigm organised around information technologies.

(Castells 1997: 29)

It is the assumption here that such an interval may indeed be in progress and, furthermore, that it is during such periods of upheaval that the potential for human agency in the shaping of our collective future is at its greatest (cf. Hoggett 1990). It is for this reason that deliberation on the likely and desired future shape of our political institutions and practice, and the potential role of ICTs therein, is paramount. Contributions to the debate are to be sought from and between various academic disciplines and fields (including political science, sociology, public administration, economics, law, information management and computer science) as well as from public servants, ICT professionals and lay enthusiasts, and the wider citizenry. It is hoped that this edited collection makes an important, if modest, contribution to this end.

### A vision of 'strong democracy'

There are already a number of competing conceptions of democracy, and it is not entirely clear whether electronic democracy is being put forward as a different variant. Typically, debate in recent years has tended to focus upon a kind of continuum, with participatory democracy (Pateman 1970) at one end of the scale and representative democratic models at the other. Participatory democracy has been seen to be the closest approximation to direct democracy, with its exhortation to involve the public in decision-making processes. Its critics have pointed out that examples of such participatory behaviour tend to be rather limited to a few instances of local politics and workplace groups. Furthermore, its advocates have often paid less attention to those who do not wish constantly to embrace

political debate and action. Moreover, the size and complexity of modern nation-states has meant that the citizen has little realistic opportunity (or perhaps desire) to influence their environment beyond the village pump.

Is there something qualitatively different about digital democracy that gives it a new conceptual status? As we have seen, at present the notion of digital democracy is used to refer to a range of technological applications and experiments. Whilst such experiments are useful for improving existing representative democratic institutions, and the huge increase in local, regional and state government web-sites should be welcomed as attempts to improve the citizen–government interface, they do not seem to us to constitute an entirely new democratic system. As is frequently the case, ICTs are often used to augment existing practice rather than revolutionise institutions.

It is assumed here, however, that the evangelists of the internet have something more in mind when they extol the virtues of digital democracy, which suggests that power will transfer to the *demos* once they are armed with ICTs. In its extreme form, the internet is conceived as an electronic forum comprising a vast network of liberated and equal citizens of the world capable of debating all facets of their existence without fear of control from national sovereign authorities (Barlow 1996). The limitations of this cyber-libertarian approach have been dealt with elsewhere (Loader 1997). It is worth reminding ourselves, however, of the key features of interactive media that are claimed to offer the potential for the development of a new variety of democracy:

- Interactivity – users may communicate on a many-to-many reciprocal basis.
- Global network – communication is not fettered by nation-state boundaries.
- Free speech – net users may express their opinions with limited state censorship.
- Free association – net users may join virtual communities of common interest.
- Construction and dissemination of information – net users may produce and share information that is not subject to official review or sanction.
- Challenge to professional and official perspectives – state and professional information may be challenged.
- Breakdown of nation-state identity – users may begin to adopt global and local identities.

Whilst all of these features raise important questions for empirical study and debate, their existence seems somewhat restricted at the present time. Welcome though existing initiatives are, democracy is about more than voting or providing better public information to the citizen: electronic plebiscites and public information kiosks are simply not sufficient conditions to affirm the existence of digital democracy. Democracy has at its heart self-determination, participation, voice and autonomy. It is a political culture that includes a wide range of realms for self-development and mutual collective expression.

If an enhanced form of digital democracy is to emerge, it would seem reasonable to speculate, on the basis of the foregoing discussion, that it is likely to be a hybrid democratic model containing elements of both participatory and representative forms of democracy. The concept of 'democratic autonomy' developed by David Held (1996) is useful in developing this line of argument. Held's model, like the argument presented in this chapter, is predicated upon an inclusive definition of politics:

politics is a phenomenon found in and between all groups, institutions and societies, cutting across public and private life. It is expressed in all the activities of co-operation, negotiation and struggle over the use and distribution of resources. It is involved in all the relations, institutions and structures which are implicated in the activities of production and reproduction in the life of societies.

(Held 1996: 310)

If we accept this inclusive definition of politics, then 'strong democracy' must offer the opportunity for the 'participation of citizens in all those decisions concerning issues which impinge upon and are important to them (i.e. us)' (ibid.). The practical achievement of such a state must involve a symbiotic relationship between both representative and participatory democratic forms and, for Held, requires that democracy be 'reconceived as a double-sided phenomenon: concerned on the one hand, with the *re*-form of state power and, on the other hand, with the restructuring of civil society' (ibid.: 316).

Held's 'principle of autonomy' requires the protection of individual rights and, hence, makes some form of constitutional government, overseen by elected representatives, necessary. The challenge is to reform such government so as to circumscribe its power to

impinge upon individual autonomy whilst retaining the authority to uphold it, and to make its business accountable to all citizens. At the same time, the ‘principle of autonomy’ requires that ‘[people] should be able to participate in a process of debate and deliberation, open to all on a free and equal basis, about matters of pressing public concern’ (ibid.: 302).

From the foregoing discussion, certain questions, which are open to empirical investigation, begin to emerge in relation to the role of ICTs in the creation of ‘strong democracy’:

- To what extent might ICTs facilitate more accountable government (national and local)?
- To what extent might ICTs be used to create a more informed (about the business of government) citizenry?
- To what extent might ICTs facilitate citizen participation in decision making concerning affairs of state?
- To what extent might ICTs facilitate participation by citizens in ‘debate and deliberation’, on a ‘free and equal basis’, concerning affairs of state?
- To what extent might ICTs facilitate participation by citizens in ‘debate and deliberation’, on a ‘free and equal basis’, within civil society?
- To what extent might ICTs facilitate citizen participation, on a ‘free and equal basis’, in collective decision making concerning issues that impinge upon them within civil society?

Each of the contributors to this book addresses one or more of the above questions. The chapters in Part II are concerned primarily with developments relating to the democratisation of the state. Those in Part III focus upon developments in civil society. A common theme for each of the chapters is a concern with the potential for ICTs, often but not exclusively focused upon the interactive characteristics of the internet, to foster more deliberative, discursive, democratic forms. This reflects, we feel, a mutual recognition of the centrality of what Robert Putnam (1993a) calls ‘social capital’, which promotes civic engagement and interaction between citizens concerning matters of common concern – to any notion of ‘strong democracy’.

Two further themes that emerge throughout the book, and which are central to the prospects for ‘strong democracy’, are those concerning access to and ownership and control of those ICTs holding potential for democratic reform, and it is to these that we now turn.

## The question of access

Consideration of the potential of ICTs to facilitate the creation of 'strong democracy' inevitably raises concerns over access. Typically, such concerns, particularly as expressed by governments, have focused on broadening access to ICT hardware and software and providing widely available basic training in their use (the British government-sponsored 'IT for All' and 'Computers Don't Bite' initiatives provide good examples). As important and welcome as these considerations and the initiatives that flow from them are, we feel that the question of access raises a range of issues that move beyond a concern with physical access to ICTs

### *Access to ICTs*

Naturally, the question of who has access to the latest ICTs, and who does not, is an important one. The potential of ICTs to facilitate 'strong democracy' must be seriously questioned if people are systematically denied access on the basis of economic status, gender, geographic location, educational attainment, and so on. Advocates of the emancipatory potential of the internet, for example, would do well to remember that it remains the domain of a relatively elite association of mainly white, male, professional people from advanced societies (Holderness 1998). Of course, it might be argued that the exponential growth of connectivity means that the unconnected 'information poor' will become an increasingly small group that can be targeted and prioritised through state-sponsored initiatives. This would, however, be somewhat to miss the point. It is highly likely that the achievement of mass connectivity will coincide with the creation of a commercially dominated (and owned?) 'global digital high-bandwidth network'. By the time such a network is in place, the technological paradigm that will both constrain the types of activity and interactivity that are possible in cyberspace and, more fundamentally, provide the conceptual tools with which we seek to understand and shape cyberspace, may already be entrenched. Traffic around this network may bear little resemblance to the anarchic, global commons so beloved of internet enthusiasts today (see Chapter 3). As Castells states with his usual perceptiveness, 'while governments and futurologists speak of wiring classrooms, doing surgery at a distance and tele-consulting the Encyclopaedia Britannica, most of the actual construction of the new system focuses on "video-on-demand", tele-gambling and VR theme parks' (1997: 366).

Accepting our previous argument that the potential for human agency in the shaping of tomorrow's technologies is at present relatively strong, it becomes of paramount importance, to anyone genuinely concerned with 'strong democracy', that all citizens are exposed to the current capabilities of ICTs and are encouraged to consider whether and how they might be utilised to the betterment of their individual and collective lives. This is where state-sponsored initiatives to broaden access, like those mentioned earlier, can be found wanting. Such initiatives have been conceived and implemented in a very 'top down' manner. The underlying logic would appear to run along the following lines: ICTs are a good thing *per se* and those who can access and have the skills to utilise these ICTs will gain obvious advantages (primarily economic) for themselves and will be more useful (primarily economically) to society; better drag as many people as possible along to their nearest training provider, overcome their groundless fears and equip them with some basic computing skills. What is missing here is any attempt to ground awareness raising and training regarding ICTs in the everyday experience of individuals and communities and to allow them to decide for themselves what use ICTs may be to them.

It is this latter concern that underpins our work with CIRAH (Community Informatics Research and Applications Unit) at the University of Teesside. It is our belief that the achievement of 'strong democracy' may be fundamentally dependent upon embedding ICTs within community networks and, at the same time, fostering remote connectivity. Market forces alone, however, are unlikely to ensure the necessary awareness, access and education for any but the most privileged members of advanced societies without financial inducement and regulation (Loader 1998). Furthermore, it may be too much to expect politicians and professionals to cede power to people through facilitating electronic interactivity. It must be remembered that much community empowerment frequently manifests itself as community action against the local and nation-state.

The extent to which the appropriate social and economic conditions may emerge to foster the development of 'strong democracy' may depend upon a negotiated outcome between service providers and communications industries, politicians and the action of communities themselves. Community Informatics, which is concerned with the study of the effects of ICTs on community development, restructuring and the confluence of social networks and electronic networks is still too much in its infancy to cast much light on these still embryonic developments. Nonetheless, a number of communities

the USA and Europe are experimenting with the development of their own information systems which may act as early pointers to future developments.<sup>2</sup>

Some may argue that much of the use being made of ICTs within local communities has little bearing on the goals of (re)engaging people in politics and strengthening the democratic process. Such an argument is, however, inextricably linked to the notion that politics is 'what governments do'. Taking the inclusive definition of politics adopted earlier, any and all community use of ICTs to enhance self-determination and promote collective endeavour is central to the achievement of 'strong democracy'.

### *Access to information*

Providing physical access to ICTs is one thing; giving citizens good reason to want to make use of them is quite another. This requires that we move away from Information Age rhetoric about the value of ICTs *per se*, and scare tactics concerning the social and economic exclusion awaiting individuals and communities that do not 'get wired'. To risk stating the obvious, the value of ICTs to citizens is heavily contingent upon the type and quality of 'content' to which they provide access. If ICTs are to promote 'strong democracy', then attention must be paid to providing relevant information, in a user-friendly format, at times, in locations and at a cost that do not present barriers to access. Following the approach to Community Informatics that is advocated here, the initial focus of such attention should not be upon ICTs but rather upon existing information needs, patterns of information retrieval, and barriers to accessing information. From here, communities themselves can be involved in considering how ICTs might be applied to meet their information needs (which may, quite legitimately, range from accessing news about the local football team to finding out about current government policy proposals). Furthermore, armed with knowledge concerning the potential of ICTs to meet their information needs, communities are empowered to apply pressure on the relevant information providers (across public, private and voluntary sectors) if the required information is not forthcoming. Perhaps the most exciting development of all, however, is that the 'many-to-many' nature of communications facilitated by the latest ICTs, means that citizens and communities can become information providers themselves, sharing information about themselves and shaping an identity for dissemination within the local community and beyond to the wired world.

## What are the prospects for democracy in the Information Age?

The exponential growth of new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) such as the Internet, alongside growing concerns about the failure of advanced societies to live up to the democratic ideal, has produced much interest in the prospects for a 'digital democracy'. On one side, evangelists of the emancipatory potential of ICTs describe the emergence of an electronic social commons in which citizens can deliberate in an informed manner on matters of collective concern. On the other side there are those who present a vision of the death of democracy and the emergence of a 'Big Brother' state based upon electronic surveillance of citizens. By drawing together empirical evidence from Europe, the US and Canada, *Digital Democracy* attempts to separate the rhetoric from the reality concerning the actual and potential impacts of ICTs on democratic institutions and practice.

*Digital Democracy* will provide invaluable reading for those studying social policy, politics and sociology as well as for policy analysts, social scientists and computer scientists.

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