

**Democracy and the Internet:**  
**Emerging Lessons for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Public Sphere**

**Roman Gerodimos**  
*Centre for Public Communication Research*  
*University of Bournemouth*

© PSA 2004

Roman Gerodimos is associate lecturer and research student in political communication at Bournemouth Media School. He is currently researching the impact of new ICTs on democracy and in particular the relationship between the Internet and citizenship. Other academic interests include public administration, democratic theory and international governance.

This is a working draft. Please do not cite without permission. Comments from delegates are welcome. Contact details:

*tel* +44-(0)7949-371-714

*postal address*  
R305, Royal London House  
Christchurch Road  
Bournemouth BH1 3LT  
Dorset

*online*  
email: [rgerodimos@bournemouth.ac.uk](mailto:rgerodimos@bournemouth.ac.uk)

homepage:  
[www.geocities.com/roman\\_gerodimos](http://www.geocities.com/roman_gerodimos)

**Abstract:**

The discussion on new media and democracy has traditionally taken place within two binary oppositions: between 'optimists' and 'pessimists', and between the paradigm of technological determinism as a whole and the model of 'reinforcement'. Despite their contributions, these paradigms make an artificial distinction between technology and human agency in an attempt to calculate the net effect of the Internet on democracy. In so doing, they either reduce reality to the means or they completely strip politics of the means' impact. Recent models of 'acceleration', 'amplification' and 'institution building' take into account both pre-existing tendencies and technological change and raise a different set of questions that can help us understand and manage change. Conflicting phenomena emerge across the board affecting access, nationality, control, identity and voice. The complexity and the scale of the 21<sup>st</sup> century public sphere mean that political decisions need to be taken in order to realise the opportunities and face the challenges facilitated by the Internet.

Political discussion, and the subsequent formation of public opinion, is one of the core functions of democracy. Political communication scholars have been highlighting the increasingly important role of the media as the arena for such a discussion, in an age of mass publics and mass politics. However, recent advances and new information and communication technologies may be causing the segmentation (or even fragmentation) of the mass audience (Katz 1998), thus making the definition of political deliberation as we know it problematic.

That set of developments is related to a broader pattern of power dispersion away from the core of nation-states. The pressures from above, inside and below facing contemporary liberal democracies create interdependence between international, national and subnational actors. While the complexity of decision-making and public administration processes increases, the public's institutional voice (citizenship) remains static and tied up to the nation state. This gap aggravates the crisis of legitimacy facing liberal democracies (Gerodimos 2004a).

This paper reviews the recent discussion on new media and democracy and argues that in order to understand and manage change we need to move forward from binary oppositions of optimism / pessimism and technological determinism / reinforcement. Change is a result of the organic interaction between technology, politics and culture and in order to understand and manage it we need to face the complexities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century public sphere.

### **The Internet as an Agent of Change**

Given the media's central role in the political process and in our everyday life, it is only natural that scholars have turned their attention to them in an attempt to 'calculate' their net effect on democracy. There has been a long discussion on the relationship between the (old) media and democracy, with some scholars arguing that this is a negative relationship (e.g. Capella and Jamieson 1997, Fallows 1997) and others putting forward a more optimistic view (Norris 2000). The media have been accused of many things: promoting negativity and conflict over consensus, and image over substance, dumbing down political information, taking up our free time, leading to isolation and alienation, destroying the fabric of communities (Putnam 2000), placing political power in corporate hands and manipulating the public. Others have argued that journalists serve a vital role scrutinising politicians, making politics more accessible to lay citizens and increasing political education and participation. In an era of mass populations and issues the national media, continues this argument, is the natural arena for the realisation of political dialogue. This divide between optimists and pessimists is not limited to television, talk radio and the print press. It represents a broader conflict of visions regarding the relationship between technology and democracy.

Due to the recent radical advances in information and communication technologies and the global nature of the new media, these two traditions have produced a magnified version of their respective positions insofar as the future of democracy is concerned. This

clash of 'utopias' and 'dystopias' (see Fisher and Wright 2001) regarding the nature of post-cyberspace politics reached its peak in the mid-1990s. The former paradigm focuses on the potential for equal and interactive participation of all citizens facilitated by the nature of the new medium. It highlights the unprecedented access to alternative and unedited sources of information and the equally unprecedented existence of a forum via which all participants can disseminate their own views - however marginal or unconventional those may be.

In contrast to that perspective, other scholars stress the emerging dangers and negative effects allegedly caused by the technological revolution, e.g. social isolation and the loss of face-to-face contact, the compromise of our privacy and freedom, the multiplication of libellous or incorrect messages and the fragmentation of the public sphere leading to inequality and lack of collective identity.

Both views raise interesting and valid points about the difference of the new media from established communication avenues. One could even accept that the Internet is not a proportionate and sequential step in the evolution of communication technologies (following from the print press, radio and television) because of its infinite capacity. However both models overlook massive practical problems that obstruct the spreading of new information and communication technologies (and other resources such as time and IT knowledge) to the entire population and, therefore, limit any quantitative (if not qualitative) impact. More importantly, they exaggerate, if not the effects themselves, the *one-sided character of evolution*. As Fisher and Wright (2001: 1) explain, the discussion has been "ideologically charged, filled as much with the hopes and fears of individual authors as with the reality of the medium's effects".

Despite their significant differences, both models view the Internet (and technology) as an independent factor of change and could therefore be considered as parts of the paradigm of technological determinism. That school of thought has accommodated scholars and political philosophers from all mainstream democratic models (liberal, communitarian, deliberative, direct) that cut across the utopia/dystopia axis. Therefore, there are those scholars who argue that the Internet could empower the mobilisation of free individuals through new social movements (Myers 1994), revitalise community building and citizen associations (Klein 1999), enhance deliberation within a new public sphere, and empower direct participation via referenda. Others see the new media as a danger to our freedom and privacy, to the fabric of our social ties and communities, to the cohesion of the public sphere and finally to the complexity of decision-making. But as Stevenson (2000: 204) argues "it is as if they have allowed themselves to [be] defined by the discourse of the other, and in doing so have robbed us of a future defined by political agency".

### **The Internet as a Reflector of Human Agency**

The debate between pessimists and optimists stimulated the interest of social researchers and, since the mid-1990s, several empirical studies have attempted to measure a net effect of the Internet on democracy (Hill and Hughes 1998, Norris 2000). A

series of such analyses led to the rise of the 'realistic' paradigm, which stresses the primacy of socio-cultural patterns. According to this school of thought, the political motivation of individual citizens and existing (offline) forms of social inequality (among other things) will be *reinforced*, rather than transformed, online. Norris (2000: 133) found that "[t]he gap between information-rich and information poor has widened substantially, at both individual and societal levels in the emergent Internet era". Hill and Hughes (1997: 25) argue that "the contemporary explosion of electronic communication is *not* a paradigm shift. Rather, people are merely moving their age-old patterns of interaction into a new realm".

A good example of that process is the use of weblogs, which have provided a cheap and user-friendly platform for the dissemination of social commentary and personal experiences by the lay user. During the initial stages of innovation and early adoption, weblogs projected an egalitarian image of readership, interactivity and feedback. However, one of the main arguments in favour of 'reinforcement' models is the Pareto law (or power law distribution). Referring to the multiplication of weblogs, Shirky (2003: 1) explains that

"[d]iversity plus freedom of choice creates inequality, and the greater the diversity, the more extreme the inequality. In systems where many people are free to choose between many options, a small subset of the whole will get a disproportionate amount of traffic (or attention, or income) even if no members of the system actively work towards such an outcome... The very act of choosing, spread widely enough and freely enough, creates a power law distribution".

Therefore, although weblogs constitute a revolution in terms of freedom of expression, the actual quantitative impact on audiences (readership) follows patterns that pre-exist technology. Schneider (1996: 384) finds similar patterns in terms of participation in Usenet newsgroups: "Concentration of participation among the most frequent contributors was extreme. More than half of contributors wrote only one message, whereas the most frequent 15 authors wrote more than 40% of the messages". Thus, the extent of the Internet's *original* effect on the political process is questioned by this paradigm. The interest and motivation of citizens to participate in political discussions and other activities cannot be transformed by the hardware and software of new technologies. Therefore, a culture obsessed by celebrity, for example, or a political arena colonised by commercial interests will be reproduced in the online world.

It would be wrong to place 'reinforcement' *between* the optimistic and pessimistic models. It is *outside* of the two, since it sees human agency (whether individual, collective or mixed is a different matter) as the source. The weakness of the reinforcement thesis is that it does not recognise the contribution of technology to obvious developments. By rejecting the role of *the means* in human activity it projects an almost inflexible picture of political traits insulated by their environment (a similar position that would ignore the role of, say, money or education in human activity would be untenable). It, thus, subtly promotes a relativistic view of technological uses as an exclusive product of pre-existing cultural or psychological influences. For that reason, the extreme expressions of the

reinforcement model are equally deterministic to the opposite model of technological determinism.

## Understanding and Managing Change

By searching for a unique source and sort of change we may be missing the point, which is to understand the different aspects of that change. *Negative effects, positive effects and no effects are not mutually exclusive*. They may even be evident simultaneously within the same medium, system or feature of political practice. Bimber (1999: 425) found that the Internet "may be broadening the democratic base of those who express themselves to government", but it may also lead to the undermining of the deliberative value of communication given the varied quality of new messages. Increased quantity of messages does not equal increased quality; it may in fact facilitate abuse.

A recent strand of literature highlights the continuing relevance of existing social patterns but allows space for the organic coexistence of technology and culture leading to a range of diverse (even conflicting) effects. One such example is the model of 'accelerated pluralism' (Bimber 1998), which predicts that the Internet will act as a catalyst for the functioning of issue politics. The de-alignment of social and party cleavages and the increasing complexity of human activities has led to the formation of single-issue or ad hoc interest groups. These groups and movements mobilise around a specific cause (such as the right to abortion, fox hunting, anti-war demonstrations or gay rights) rather than an across-the-board ideology. New technologies make this trend happen faster because they facilitate civic awareness and mobilisation (including fund-raising, petitions and lobbying).

A similar model has been put forward by Agre (2002: 315) who argues that "[i]f the Internet has "effects", it has many effects scattered throughout the structures of society, so that it is difficult if not impossible to compute a resultant of the vectors along which the various effects run". Although the 'amplification' model concedes the importance of existing forces, it attempts to understand change by focusing on how specific institutions adapt to change and make use of the new technologies.

Thus, both 'accelerated pluralism' and 'amplification' models observe an interaction of political technology and political culture: "The Internet changes nothing on its own, but it can amplify existing forces, and those amplified forces might change something" (Agre, 2002: 317). This is a very useful perspective because it highlights the fact that the distinction between technology (e.g. the Internet) and human agency (e.g. political motivation) and the subsequent quest for *the* original or genuine source (or for a blanket effect) is largely artificial. In danger of stating the obvious, new information and communication technologies are *created by* humans, and become an embedded part of everyday activity *affecting* humans.

There is a parallel set of scholars who recognise both the potential contribution of the Internet and the importance of civic culture. By taking a more normative stance, they call

for the establishment of those institutions and practices that will assist citizens to make the most of the new technologies. We could label this as the 'institution building' paradigm (see, for example, Blumler and Gurevitch 2001, Coleman 1999, Barber 1998).

Assessing the successes and failures of various civic networking and online deliberation experiments, those scholars propose a list of measures that can enhance the positive contribution of the Internet on civic engagement. Dahlberg (2001: 630) argues that "[t]he public sphere will not be extended merely through the diffusion of new technological artefact. People must be drawn into rational-critical discourse before new technologies can be successfully employed...". Amongst the key issues that need to be institutionally addressed are the spreading of access (Tambini 1999) and basic IT knowledge, political education and the quality of civic contributions, and a meaningful link between local/public participation and formation of local/public policy (Gerodimos 2004b).

### The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Public Sphere

These requirements for the democratic exploitation of the Net emerge from an examination of recent civic activities online. Again, these developments are a product of the *interaction* between political culture, human nature and technology. A closer analysis of the uses of the new media by individuals, groups and organisations projects a very interesting and complex picture, made up of challenges to existing systemic features, opportunities for the development of new ones, and a complementary use of old and new media. Given its distinct character as a 'pull' medium (i.e. people need to search, find and use the information themselves rather than passively receive it), the Net could *ultimately* prove to be a much better gauge of citizens' intentions and actual political / other activities, without the mediation of pollsters and editors. If it is not such a gauge for the entire population yet, given the lack of access amongst specific groups of the population, it has provided some revealing evidence regarding those that *are* online.

One such group is the younger generations. Young people have been steadily disengaging from the political process during the last thirty years and this has been shown to be an inter-cohort feature rather than a temporary aberration (Delli Carpini 2000, Rahn and Transue 1998). However, recent evidence suggests that an online youth civic culture has been developing and is expressed through awareness, volunteering, writing about events and learning political skills (Montgomery, Gottlieb-Robles and Larson 2004). Furthermore, according to a recent study 44% of US Internet users have produced their own content online, contributing their thoughts and files (Lenhart, Horrigan and Fallows 2004). New technologies have also facilitated the involvement of traditionally excluded groups, such as the disabled.

These encouraging signs do not cancel out the significant digital divide between information-rich and information-poor across socio-economic groups and countries (Norris 2001). Nor do they imply the phasing out of existing avenues of communication or citizenship. But they contribute to a more pluralistic and diverse public sphere. However, as was shown before, with diversity comes inequality. Equal access to that space needs

to be institutionally assisted. Again, as Papacharissi (2002: 15) argues, "online technologies render participation in the political sphere more convenient, but do not guarantee it".

Similar conflicting trends emerge in terms of borders, nationality and control. It is becoming widely accepted that national borders and cyberspace do not go together. As Katz puts it there is "a lack of fit between geopolitical boundaries and the boundaries defined by the new media technology" (1998: 103). Mitra and Schwartz (2001) go as far as to ask for a metaphoric shift away from maps and nations towards hyper-linked spaces and cyber-communities. On one level this can be interpreted as a positive development given the emerging gap between multi-level governance and nation-state citizenship. In other words, we are now able to learn much more about global issues that affect us all, such as war and international terrorism, biotechnology and genetics, multinational corporatism and environmental problems. Given that our institutional voice, our citizenship, is tied up to the nation state, this uncontrolled, unmediated flow of information may empower us. Poster argues that the Net is "becoming a paranational culture that combines global connectivity with local specificity, a "glocal" phenomenon that seems to resist national political agendas and to befuddle national political leaderships" (1999: 236).

However, (and apart from the fact that some of these problems may be accelerated by the technological advances) when it comes to deliberating on civic matters many scholars argue that some form of gate-keeping is necessary so as to avoid flaming and similar problems (Tambini 1999, Murray 1998). Such control of participation may only be sustainable (and, at any rate, democratic) along the lines of locality, i.e. restricting access only to local residents, which would, however, also restrict the scope of such a forum.

Finally, scholars have observed that the construction of our identity and the exercise of voice are liberated in the virtual sphere. Waskul and Douglas (1997: 387) argue that "the development of an on-line self is not merely the designation of a screen name but an emergent process that forms out of and is based within ongoing computer mediated communications with others. As in everyday life, the self is continually presented, negotiated, and validated through interaction with others". Taking this point further, Mitra (2001) finds that virtuality and interactivity lead to a re-negotiation of the marginal and the dominant by bringing down the barriers between central and peripheral. Groups that have been traditionally considered as socially excluded exercise their suppressed voice and obtain a collective identity that is shaped not by the medium itself, but *in negotiation with* the medium. This fluidity may be linked to the rise of pluralism and issue politics mentioned above. Whether it can be accommodated within the existing institutional and value systems is not yet clear.

## Conclusions

Observing changes and possibilities such as those does not mean that one subscribes to one or the other position of technological determinism. By accepting the organic

interaction of users and means we identify trends that may have been developing offline and were merely expressed or magnified online. That is not to say that one has to adopt a view of culture as an inflexible force, either. The future is not written. It can be changed, for the better or for the worse, by a *combination* of socio-cultural and techno-structural evolutions.

Finding the balance between conflicting forces and trade-offs, realising the apparent opportunities and dealing effectively with the risks is the challenge facing political leaders at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Adopting a complacent stance based on 'reinforcement' (i.e. believing that technology has no effect so we need not deal with it) is misleading. Equally, positive change for democracy is not part of the software; it does not happen automatically. As Street (1996: 510) argues, "[t]he recognition that citizenship and public space are constantly being constructed and reconstructed does not absolve us of the need to address the political arguments about democracy".

Therefore, the separation of technology from human agency attempted by the models of 'technological determinism' (optimists and pessimists) and 'reinforcement' is to a large extent artificial. In order to understand change we need to ask a different set of questions, such as:

- How do people use the internet for political purposes?
- How do specific institutions and individuals adapt to change?
- How can we overcome the barriers of inequality and disengagement using the available means?
- What kind of democracy do we want and how can we move to that direction?
- What measures need to be taken so as to neuter the risks and realise the opportunities facilitated by technological change?
- How can we manage the series of tensions and conflicting effects emerging?

Only then, will we be able to build new forms of citizenship that match the complex realities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**References:**

- Agre P. E. (2002), "Real-Time Politics: The Internet and the Political Process", *The Information Society*, 18: 5, 311 - 332
- Barber B. (1998), "The New Telecommunications Technology: Endless Frontier or the End of Democracy?" in R. G. Noll and M. E. Price (eds), 'A Communications Cornucopia: Markle Foundation Essays on Information Policy', Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press
- Bimber, B. (1998), "The Internet and Political Transformation: Populism, Community, and Accelerated Pluralism", *Polity*, XXXI: 1, 133 - 160
- Bimber B. (1999), "The Internet and Citizen Communication With Government: Does the Medium Matter?", *Political Communication*, 16: 4, 409 - 428
- Bimber B. (2000), "The Study of Information Technology and Civic Engagement", *Political Communication*, 17: 4, 329 - 333
- Blumler J. G. and M. Gurevitch (2001), "The New Media and Our Political Communication Discontents: Democratizing Cyberspace", *Information, Communication and Society*, 4: 1, 1 - 13
- Capella J. N. and K. H. Jamieson (1997), "Spiral of Cynicism: The Press and the Public Good", Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Coleman S. (1999), "The New Media and Democratic Politics", *New Media and Society*, 1: 1, 67 - 74
- Dahlberg L. (2001), "The Internet and Democratic Discourse: Exploring the Prospects of Online Deliberative Forums Extending the Public Sphere", *Information, Communication and Society*, 4: 4, 615 - 633
- Delli Carpini M. X. (2000), "Gen.com: Youth, Civic Engagement, and the New Information Environment", *Political Communication*, 17: 4, 341 - 349
- Fallows J. (1997), "Breaking the News: How the Media Undermine American Democracy", New York: Vintage Books
- Fisher D. R. and L. M. Wright (2001), "On Utopias and Dystopias: Toward an Understanding of the Discourse Surrounding the Internet", *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 6: 2
- Gerodimos R. (2004a), "'Mind the Gaps': Political Rhetoric, Executive Reality and Public Trust", paper presented at the international conference '*Communication in the Age of Suspicion: Trust, Communication and Culture*', University of Bournemouth, 20/21 February 2004
- Gerodimos R. (2004b), "Democracy and the Internet: Access, Engagement and Deliberation", *Proceedings of the International Conference on Politics and Information Systems: Technologies and Applications (PISTA)*, Orlando, Florida, 21-25 July 2004, forthcoming

- Hill K. A. and J. E. Hughes (1997), "Computer-Mediated Political Communication: The USENET and Political Communities", *Political Communication*, 14: 1, 3 - 28
- Hill K. A. and J. E. Hughes (1998), "Cyberpolitics: Citizen Activism in the Age of the Internet", Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield
- Katz E. (1998), "And Deliver Us from Segmentation" in R. G. Noll and M. E. Price (eds), 'A Communications Cornucopia: Markle Foundation Essays on Information Policy', Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press
- Klein H. K. (1999), "Tocqueville in Cyberspace: Using the Internet for Citizen Associations", *The Information Society*, 15: 4, 213 - 220
- Lenhart A., J. Horrigan and D. Fallows (2004), "Content Creation Online", *Pew Internet and American Life Project*, available at: <http://www.pewinternet.org> [accessed on 01 April 2004]
- Mitra A. (2001), "Marginal Voices in Cyberspace", *New Media and Society*, 3: 1, 29 - 48
- Mitra A. and R. L. Schwartz (2001), "From Cyber Space to Cybernetic Space: Rethinking the Relationship between Real and Virtual Spaces", *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 7: 1
- Montgomery K., B. Gottlieb-Robles and G. O. Larson (2004), "Youth as E-Citizens: Engaging the Digital Generation", *Center for Social Media*, available at: <http://www.centerforsocialmedia.org/ecitizens/youthreport.pdf> [accessed on 01 April 2004]
- Murray B. (1998), "Promoting Deliberative Public Discourse on the Web" in R. G. Noll and M. E. Price (eds), 'A Communications Cornucopia: Markle Foundation Essays on Information Policy', Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press
- Myers D. J. (1994), "Communication Technology and Social Movements: Contributions of Computer Networks to Activism", *Social Science Computer Review*, 12: 2, 250 - 260
- Norris P. (2000), "A Virtuous Circle: Political Communications in Postindustrial Societies", Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Norris P. (2001), "Digital Divide: Civic Engagement, Information Poverty and the Internet Worldwide", Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Papacharissi, Z. (2002), "The Virtual Sphere: the Internet as a Public Sphere", *New Media and Society*, 4: 1, 9 - 27
- Poster M. (1999), "National Identities and Communication Technologies", *The Information Society*, 15: 4, 235 - 240
- Putnam R. D. (2000), "Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community", New York: Touchstone
- Rahn W. and J. E. Transue (1998), "Social Trust and Value Change: The Decline of Social Capital in American Youth, 1976 – 1995", *Political Psychology*, 19 (3), 545 – 564

- Schneider S. M. (1996), "Creating a Democratic Public Sphere Through Political Discussion", *Social Science Computer Review*, 14: 4, 373 - 393
- Shirky C. (2003), "Power Laws, Weblogs, and Inequality", *Networks, Economics and Culture* Mailing List, published on 8 February 2003, available from: <http://www.shirky.com> [accessed on 01 April 2004]
- Stevenson N. (2000), "The Future of Public Media Cultures: Cosmopolitan Democracy and Ambivalence", *Information, Communication & Society*, 3: 2, 192 - 214
- Street J. (1996), "Remote Control: Politics, Technology and Culture", *Contemporary Political Studies 1996*, Proceedings of the Annual PSA Conference, University of Glasgow, 502 - 510
- Tambini D. (1999), "New Media and Democracy: The Civic Networking Movement", *New Media and Society*, 1: 3, 305 - 329
- Waskul D. and M. Douglass (1997), "Cyberself: The Emergence of Self in On-Line Chat", *The Information Society*, 13: 4, 375 - 397