

**Perceptual culture, ethos of the Internet,
and e-democracy – a Probe**

by

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Abstract

The Internet is commonly perceived and accepted as a tool of democracy. Many techno-optimists ascribe revolutionary powers to the medium, predicting greater citizen engagement in civic affairs and the elimination of traditional barriers to participation such as gender, class, education, income, and physical location. Most contrary views, which are in the minority and often difficult to find, focus on the issue of the Digital Divide ... which is to say that most critical debate about the relationship between the Internet and democracy is focused not on the qualities and attributes of the medium itself, but solely on the issue of access to it.

This paper aims to show that a deeper understanding of the relationship between humans and their communication media is necessary in order to plan and predict future outcomes of e-democracy initiatives, and will specifically explore the attributes of the Internet medium. Themes of perceptual culture and communication ethos will be combined with the use of McLuhan's media laws as conceptual probes to help show that the outcome of various e-democracy initiatives depends on more than mere access to the medium.

Through the discussion identified above and through analysis of two current e-democracy case studies, this paper will show why and how the medium of the Internet has the potential not only to strengthen democracies but also to weaken them.

Introduction

The effects of new media have changed all aspects of society: social elements such as gender, race, class, redefinitions of “workplace” and “work hours”; political elements such as democracy, activism, nationalism, the rise and fall of repressive regimes; economic elements such as the fall and rise of cottage industries and industrialism, and the emergence of the knowledge worker. In all these cases the underlying theme is that change in media has a ripple effect which alters the balance and allocation of power. New technology affects the balance of power because new technology changes the way people perceive the world. And, if we accept the adage that knowledge is power, we may also accept Harold Innis’ observation that: “Inventions in communication compel realignments in the monopoly or the oligopoly of knowledge” (Innis, 1951, 4).

It is often useful to take an example from a more distant time than the present in order to illustrate a point. So let us consider that in the Elizabethan age the definition of “power” may have included the ability to command loyalty of one’s subjects, servants, or others in the lesser social strata. Thus it was not unusual for a priest to have more power than a wealthy merchant. In contrast, today’s definition of “power” is less likely to mention the concept of loyalty and more likely to include financial wealth among the criteria. We might say Donald Trump is the modern era’s Archbishop of Canterbury. This realignment in the oligopoly of knowledge (power) is the result of new inventions in communication technology.

The point is that the perception and definition of power changes over time as society absorbs new technology. The degree to which power is distributed among citizens is key to any definition of what constitutes democracy.

We should pause here to acknowledge that the merits of democracy has also been, and continues to be, a topic of considerable discussion: Winston Churchill famously quipped that while democracy is a faulty system, it is preferable to any

known alternative. Plato's writings, on the other hand, are known to favor benign dictatorship over democracy. And Thomas Jefferson once critiqued democracy as "nothing more than mob rule, where fifty-one per cent of the people may take away the rights of the other forty-nine" (Walker, 2004, 29).

Despite these attitudes about the relative value and character of democracy, it is clear from a review of the historical events of the 20th century that democratic rule is a most favored system and preference for the future. The 20th century saw the disappearance of Monarchies after the Great War, the defeat of would-be global Dictators and Emperors after the Second World War, and the collapse of the Soviet Dictatorship after the Cold War (although some – like Robert Logan – would argue that communications technology played as much or more of a role in breaking down the Berlin Wall than any Western foreign policy; but that is a thesis for another paper).

Indeed, since Freedom House began taking survey's of political rights worldwide in 1973, the number of "free" states has doubled while the number of "not free" states has declined by thirty per cent (Walker, 2004, 29). So the contemporary view of democracy is closer to Churchill's after all: it has flaws, but is increasingly preferred over the alternatives.

As people have debated the qualities and merits of democracy throughout time, so too have they debated the relationship between democracy and technology. Indeed the relationship between the two is perhaps not unlike that between conjoined twins: it is very difficult to separate one from the other, and in fact each defines the other, even though they are not identical.

Examples to demonstrate this point can be found in many places in history, although those in more recent history are better documented and understood. For example, the 1812 Luddite revolt against machines and industrialization has come to symbolize the dynamic tension between workers – as individuals or as a

collective – and the technologies which affect their livelihood. Barely more than a generation later, Karl Marx articulated the average laborer's discontent with the technologies of industrialization arguing, among other things, that the technologies had reduced the value and integrity of labor and had caused the commoditization of people:

The worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and range. The worker becomes an ever cheaper commodity the more commodities he creates. With the increasing value of the world of things proceeds in direct proportion the devaluation of the world of men (Tucker, 1978, 71).

And, on the changing relationship between workers and technology:

Owing to the extensive use of machinery and division of labour, the work of the proletarians has lost all individual character, and consequently, all charm for the workman. He becomes an appendage of the machine ... (Tucker, 1978, 479)

While there are many points of view, one thing can be counted on with regard to this topic: the discussion about the relationship between democracy and technology generally falls into two main camps: the techno-optimists and the techno-pessimists.

Typical of the optimists view are such organizations as the United Nations, the World Bank, major technology corporations, and others. The UNDP's position on communication technology for example is that "Those nations that succeed in harnessing the potential of ICT can look forward to greatly expanded economic growth, dramatically improved human welfare, and stronger forms of democratic government" (UNDP, 2000, 1). Technology is seen much like water or electricity – a resource to be harnessed and utilized for the common good, providing wealth, health, and justice for all.

So prevailing is the optimistic view, that it is hardly ever challenged. If debated at, the discussion is more often not about whether to get new technology but how to get it quickly and more universally deployed. This is essentially the argument commonly known as the Digital Divide. Some argue that fully developed countries' access to the latest new technologies -- more specifically the Internet - - gives them social and economic advantages over the less developed countries and solidifies their preeminence over world affairs. Experts cite statistics (such as the fact that 96 percent of Internet host computers are located in the highest income nations representing only 16% of the world's population, and that there are more Internet hosts in New York City than the entire continent of Africa) (UNDP, 2000, 1) in order to expose an improper balance of access to technology and the economic, social, and political benefits that come with it.

Because of the perceived unfairness of this imbalance, there are few who question the merits of rapid technological proliferation in less developed countries. However some, like Benjamin Compaine have endeavored to neutralize the notion of the Digital Divide as a new, threatening, and frightening effect. Citing examples that go back over a century to the introduction of telephone service in the United States, Compaigne says the Digital Divide is "a new label for a similar concept of the previous generation: information haves and have-nots" (Compaigne, 2000, 3). It is merely the latest incarnation of the "telephone gap", the "radio gap", and the "television gap". Moreover, the gap is shrinking much faster than previous gaps as technology becomes cheaper as it becomes better, and thus more accessible and easier to use. Compaigne's viewpoint might be described as one of many which form the "normalization" thesis -- essentially an argument which states that use of the Internet, once accessible and fully integrated into lifestyles and behaviors, will have no effect on the outcome of political discourse one way or the other (Gibson, Luscoli, & Ward, 2002, 5).

A more profound example of the techno-pessimists view can be found in the writings of B. R. Barber. Barber puts forward a strong voice to expose and challenge the “zealots of technology”. He writes: “from the time of the Greeks, who believed Prometheus’ theft of fire from the Gods lit the way to human civilization, technical gadgets have been made to support democratization” (Barber, 1997, 220). Barber argues that unchecked enthusiasm – blind enthusiasm – for any new technology is not only unfounded but also dangerous. “The trouble with the zealots of technology as an instrument of democratic liberation is not their understanding of technology but their grasp of democracy” (Barber, 1997, 224). Echoing the voice of Jefferson, he predicts that the realization of some popular e-democracy dreams could lead not to a better or stronger society but only to “the tyranny of the undeliberative majority” and rule by “plebiscitary dictatorship” (Barber, 1997, 212).

A contemporary indication of this drift toward plebiscitary dictatorship is the obsessive attention paid, in Western democracies, to public opinion polls. For example, one newspaper recently reported as “news” that a CNN/USA Today survey, following revelations about prisoner of war abuse in Iraq, that the US President’s overall popularity rating had fallen to an all-time low of 46 percent and the number of people disapproving of the President rose to an all-time high of 51 percent. Furthermore, despite this decline, the President retained a poll score modestly higher than the Democratic challenger, beating him 48 percent to 47 percent. The Defence Secretary’s approval rating meanwhile had fallen from 58 percent to 46 percent, and support for the war had dropped from 50 percent to 44 percent over the past twelve months (Japan Times, May 12, 2004). But what, if anything, does this mean? Is this data *information* or is it *amusement* (or both)? What should the reader do with this data? What should policy makers do with this data? If the survey says support for the war is below 50 percent, should the Government quit the war? It is ironic that a continuing obsession with polls may lead to an ongoing drift toward plebiscitary dictatorship which, in turn, may

achieve greater citizen participation in public policy issues but not actually result in better decision making.

Robert Logan (2000, 267-268) contributes to this issue by saying the distinction between direct participatory democracy and representative democracy is also key to any meaningful discussion in this area. He notes that direct participatory democracy is the type of democracy practiced by *oral* cultures, wherein participants in civic discourse are afforded equal opportunity to say their piece and to respond thoughtfully to the views of others. Representative democracy, on the other hand, is the type of democracy practised by *visual* cultures, wherein participants interrupt each other's dialogue and battle for air time. We will pursue this line of thought further in the next section.

Barber favours the participatory / oral tradition of democracy. He posits that the most desirable form of democracy is "strong" democracy – one which "depends on deliberation, prudence, slow-footed interaction, and time-consuming (thus "inefficient") forms of multilateral conversation and social interaction that by postmodern standards may seem cumbersome, time-consuming, demanding, sometimes interminable and always certifiable unentertaining" (Barber, 1997, 222).

Barber goes on to add, however, that the danger with integrating new media such as the Internet into our political systems is that "unless we are clear about what democracy means to us, and what kind of democracy we envision, technology is as likely to stunt as enhance the civic polity" (Barber, 1997, 222).

When we talk about democracy, do we mean democracy that reflects "the careful and prudent judgement of citizens who participate in deliberative, self-governing communities" or do we mean something else? When Governments and other deploy the Internet for e-democracy projects and initiatives, are they prepared for outcomes which are not deliberative?

Key to a more meaningful appreciation of the relationship between democracy and technology, is greater understanding of two core communications (though frequently overlooked in mainstream discussions) issues. These are: the perceptual culture of societies, and the ethos of the Internet.

Culture

Robert Logan (2002) has said that culture is concerned with the capacity of the individual to appraise problems and with enabling him to take the proper steps at the right time. Therefore culture is core to any serious discussion about democracy.

Occasionally there have been other arguments cautioning against the onward march of progress, technology, and democracy. Some even argue that various cultures in the world are not suited to participatory democracy. For example, in the debate immediately preceding the second Gulf War, some argued that it would be futile to attempt to plant the seeds of democracy in Iraq on the basis of the argument that the Iraqi people have never had democratic rulers and are therefore culturally predisposed to closed systems operating under authoritarian rule – either by tyrant, King, or Emperor. It is perhaps too early to assess the veracity of that argument, but it is reminiscent of the arguments that were made decades earlier with regard to the peoples and nations of the Soviet Union – many of whom are living in open, functional, and successful democracies today.

This is one aspect of the “culture” debate: that history and tradition dictate a polity’s aptitude for democracy. The other aspect of the culture debate, largely overlooked by the mainstream media, but the primary subject of interest in this paper, is the degree to which various cultures are audio-based or visually-based (or what McLuhan has classified as two-dimensional and three-dimensional cultures). The UNDP, and other organizations as well, proceed to evangelize,

advocate and deploy the technological tools of democracy with some consideration in regard to the former argument (historical / traditional), but hardly any consideration in regard to the latter (perceptual / neurological).

To further explain why this point about perceptual culture is important, we can draw upon an example related in McLuhan's *Gutenberg Galaxy*. He relates the story of an attempt, in the middle of the past century, to educate African villagers about water sanitation. Since the villagers could not read or write (belonged to an oral / two-dimensional culture), the health educators decided to create a film (more appropriate to a visual / three-dimensional culture) to communicate the proper sanitation techniques. This was a seemingly sensible and appropriate decision, but ultimately was proven utterly inappropriate: the villagers were completely unprepared for basic conventions of film communication. The message of the medium far overpowered the content of the film. The sanitation project failed.

In the rush to deploy Internet technology around the world, and graft it onto policy making organizations and institutions, is any thought being given to the cultural and perceptual sensibilities of the recipients? Or are organizations and nations blithely deploying the Internet – in any shape or form – as quickly as possible? What thought has been given to the possibilities that “The global village could bring all humanity together for slaughter as easily as for anything else” (Wolfe, 2004, 22)? How does the global village cope with the views of some, such as Ayatollah Ruholla Khomeini, when they say that “The real threat to Islam does not come from the Shah, but from the idea of imposing on Muslim lands the Western system of democracy, which is a form of prostitution” (Walker, 2004, 34)?

In addition to overlooking issues of cultural perception, most mainstream e-democracy initiatives fail to consider issues of the ethos of the Internet. An exploration of this issue is appropriate here.

Ethos

Much consideration is given to technological issues such as bandwidth, security, privacy, spam / anti-spam, hacking, viruses, and so on. These are all valid concerns, but hardly comprehensive. The rhetorical qualities and ethos of the Internet is as important as either of the foregoing.

A key part of the challenge of using the Internet as a tool of democracy is that its ethos promotes polarized and extreme positions, short sentences, anonymity, and unreality. A worst case scenario for democracy and technology would be a scenario in which the deliberative, social, interactive, forms of democratic decision-making are replaced by a large scale at-home computer voting where "... political participation is reduced to the passive and private act of registering one's own preconceived opinion on an issue" and where making decisions of important moral and ethical questions are made by pushing buttons from home (Buchstein, 1997, 260). This might truly represent Barber's plebiscitary dictatorship.

This merits further discussion - what is the ethos of this technology being deployed so enthusiastically around the world by the UNDP and others in order to "close the digital divide, expand economic growth, dramatically improve human welfare, and stronger forms of democratic government" (UNDP, 2000, 1)?

Barber answers by saying the ethos of the Internet is solipsistic – self centred, self focussed, and promotes individualism rather than collectivism.

In addition, it has been shown that the commercial trends of the Internet gravitate toward the interests of the individual and toward forces of monopoly and privatization. Indeed that individuals, not groups, get rich in cyberspace is almost

a proverb. This identifies a distinctly un-democratic quality of the Internet.

Barber cautions that privatization is the death of democracy:

For democracy is always about public willing and public goods and the commonweal. Decentralization can enhance democracy, privatization only corrupts it. Little is no better than big when it is private and for profit rather than public (if local) and for the common good (not personal benefit). You can be eaten alive by piranha as well as by a great white shark: it just takes longer. (Barber, 1997, 216)

Buchstein agrees and writes: "The transformation of all information into saleable goods not only damages the egalitarian underpinnings of democracy, but also destroys the notion of a common public sphere" (Buchstein, 1997, 257).

And Harold Innis writing about monopoly and individualism, referencing the early twentieth century, said that "Communication based on the eye in terms of printing and photography had developed a monopoly which threatened to destroy Western Civilization first in war and then in peace. This monopoly emphasized individualism and in turn instability and created illusions in catchwords such as democracy, freedom of the press, and freedom of speech" (Innis, 1951, 80).

When preferences on public issues are contemplated and expressed from an isolated and individual existence, democracy becomes divorced from the symbolic spaces of concern for the common good. And thus, "The Internet will probably encourage privatistic judgements on public issues and thus erode public oriented citizenship" (Buchstein, 1997, 259). This is hardly the outcome that many anticipate when developing e-democracy programs.

Summary

The debate about Internet and democracy is too often focused on the technology itself, and on access to it. Much of the topical debate, such as found in many UN and World Bank policy papers and symposia, treats the effect of new technology as if it were a natural resource. What is often overlooked are the deeper social

effects of the technology. New technologies not only affect the balance of power, but the way people perceive the world.

This point is poignantly made with a two thousand year old Chinese story, related in McLuhan's *Gutenberg Galaxy*:

The Chinese sage Chuang-Tzu spoke of the danger of the machine when he said: "As Tzu-Gung was traveling through the regions north of the river Han, he saw an old man working in his vegetable garden. He had dug an irrigation ditch. The man would descend into the well, fetch up a vessel of water in his arms and pour it out into the ditch. While his efforts were tremendous the results appeared to be very meager. Tzu-Gung said, "There is a way whereby you can irrigate a hundred ditches in one day, and whereby you can do much with little effort. Would you not like to hear of it?" The the gardener stood up, looked at him and said, "And what would that be?" Tzu-Gung replied, "You take a wooden lever, weighted at the back and light in the front. In this way you can bring up water so quickly that it just gushes out. This is called a draw-well." Then anger rose up in the old man's face, and he said, "I have heard my teacher say that whoever uses machines does all his work as a machine. He who does his work like a machine grows a heart like a machine, and he who carries the heart of a machine in his breast loses his simplicity. He who has lost his simplicity becomes unsure in the strivings of his soul. Uncertainty in the strivings of the soul is something which does not agree with honest sense. It is not that I do not know of such things; I am ashamed to use them" (McLuhan, 1962, 29)

Commenting on the above, McLuhan states that "uncertainty in the strivings of the soul" is perhaps one of the aptest descriptions of man's condition in our modern crisis; technology, the machine, has spread through the world to a degree that our Chinese sage could not have even suspected."

In effect, the question which needs to be answered is not so much whether access to and use of new technology empowers people, but how it empowers them -- empowers them to what effect?

The next section of this paper will take a closer look at communications theory with regard to issues of culture, the ethos of the Internet, and how they are affected by media laws.

Theory

British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli has been attributed with the wry remark that, as a general rule, “the most successful man in life is the man who has the best information” (Disraeli). It was an astute observation in the 19th Century and is no less so in today’s age of the “information society”. The problem today, however, is not so much having access to information as having the ability to make any sense of it. It seems entirely likely that we are today more informed than ever before, although perhaps no more knowledgeable or wiser.

Such are the demands of coping with everyday life and its many distractions that we seldom have time -- or perhaps more truthfully the focus of attention -- to seek knowledge or attend to issues of deeper contemplation or noetic substance. But it would be a falsehood to ascribe this problem uniquely to the current generation. In addition to the ancient insights of Chuang-Tzu’s ancient gardener, other more recent commentators have derided the fact that our lives are disorganized “... for the over-organization of our absence of thought” (Logan, 2002, 86). Being detracted from the search for wisdom, knowledge, and spiritual growth by the demands of society and culture is a recurring theme throughout time.

What this means in regard to democracy and civic affairs -- where the ability to make wise decisions is acute -- is that rule “by the people” only makes sense if ‘the people’ have the ability to make sense of the information available to them.

We can call upon the scholarly work of several distinguished communications theorists to help frame this probe further. The triad of Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan, and Robert Logan offer core concepts which provide a useful and often prescient theoretical framework for examining the relationship between democracy and technology. Each of these three, at different points in time over the past century, have argued that by understanding the effects of media upon

the senses, culture, and society, we are better able to divine the sensible from the senseless.

Innis established and articulated the pattern throughout history of communication media affecting deep and significant change. From stone slab, clay tablet, sheet of papyrus and from stylus to brush and beyond, Innis established that Western civilization has been profoundly influenced by communication technology, and that those media have had important implications far beyond their immediate applications.

McLuhan's work is broad and multi-faceted, but key to this probe on the relationship between the Internet and democracy is McLuhan's theory that there are two types of human condition – not in the physiological or biological sense, but certainly in the sensorial and perceptual sense. McLuhan goes a step beyond Innis to theorize not only that media change our culture, but that media change *us*. Our very perceptions and senses are altered by our communication media environment. In his own words:

The world has become a computer, an electronic brain ... and as our senses have gone outside us, Big Brother goes inside (McLuhan, 1962, 32).

That media extend our senses, and that the “electric dilation of our various senses” has profoundly affected the way in which we observe and think about the world -- including, notably, political policies and issues -- is a key effect.

Expanding upon this notion, McLuhan goes further to classify people into two perceptual cultures: those of two dimensions and of three dimensions. Simply put, the two dimensional world is defined by McLuhan as primarily audile-tactile. The three dimensional world adds the visual element to people's sensorial repertoire. In effect, the visual element is that which allows people to see with the mind's eye – to read words (not just hear spoken words) and to “see” and “paint” ideas in text. The two dimensional person is tribal, and lives in a closed society. The tree dimensional person lives in an open society and is “civilized” –

which is to say he lives in abstract terms. The two dimensional person lives within a “natural order” of relationships and roles. The person in the three dimensional world must struggle to determine his appropriate and changing role in society. This, and McLuhan’s media laws, are epistemological concepts we will pursue throughout this paper.

Robert Logan, the only living member of the triad, continues to support and advance the thinking of Innis and McLuhan by providing contemporary examples and a personal lifeline to their core theories.

Of particular interest is Logan’s view that “net societies” are like oral cultures because the technology prevents people from interrupting online discourse (Logan, 2000, 267). The oral tradition, he argues, is such that speakers are provided the uninterrupted opportunity to thoughtfully say what they want to say about any particular issue. This harkens back to Barber’s view that “strong” democracy has a deliberative quality – that views can be thoughtfully expressed, carefully digested, and respectfully countered.

Logan takes the techno-optimist view when he posits that the Internet, because of the way it retrieves the deliberative discourse qualities of oral cultures, has the potential to restore direct participatory democracy. He says: “Both oral societies and net societies practice a form of total direct participatory democracy, while literate society practices a representative form of democracy” (Logan, 2000, 267) and he adds: “Although modern literate cultures celebrate the myth that they invented democracy, their triumph is nothing more than a restoration of the democratic practices of preliterate societies” (Logan, 2000, 267). So Logan sees the Internet as having more in common with the oral cultures (two dimensional man) of the distant past than with the literate cultures (three dimensional man) of the recent past.

In subtle reference to Innis' suggestion that media of communication can form monopolies of knowledge, to the point that social equilibrium is disturbed, Logan has observed that in the early 1900's - "The disastrous effect of the monopoly of communication based on the eye hastened the development of a competitive type of communication based on the ear, in the radio linking of sound to the cinema and to television" (Logan, 2000, 81). This shows the connection between knowledge, communication media, and culture.

If we take the foregoing into account to update to our present time the truism attributed to Disraeli, we might say that the most powerful person today is the one with the most access to information. Given the Internet's ability to provide cheap and easy access to stockpiles of information, what effect will that have on the distribution of power in society? Will the Internet be a modern day Robin Hood, taking information from a few elites and redistributing it among the masses? Will the masses use this information wisely? Or might Jefferson's views on democracy take effect – that fifty-one percent of the population will take away the rights of the other forty-nine?

Before addressing these questions, let us return to McLuhan's concepts of cultural dimensions.

Cultural Dimensions

As stated earlier, the two dimensional world is audile-tactile. The two dimensional person is tribal, and lives in a closed society. The three dimensional person lives in an open society and lives in abstract terms. The two dimensional person lives within a "natural order" of relationships and roles. The three dimensional person by definition must struggle to determine her appropriate and changing role in society. When these two dimensions are in conflict, disruption of social equilibrium occurs.

Examples of the disruption which is created when the dimensions are in conflict can be found in many places. McLuhan, for example, used Shakespeare's King Lear as an expression of the social tensions between the preliterate duodenal culture of medieval times and the emerging three-dimensional literate culture of Elizabethan times. He saw the relationships between the King and his family as a metaphor for the disruption of social order caused by the proliferation of typography brought about by Gutenberg and his press.

An appropriate contemporary metaphor of the three dimensional world's qualities and the search for meaning in the electronic age can be found in the theatrical work of the "Blue Man Group" performing to audiences today. These performances, which are executed without any dialogue or spoken word, stimulate the audience's audile, visual, and tactile senses and also project written text for the audience to read. Significantly, the Blue Man group is a trio of performers, emphasizing the three dimensional characteristics of the electronic world. None of the Blue Men have ears and their blue-painted faces emphasize their eyes; this is clearly another nod to McLuhan's observation that while the bias of the ear was a dominating characteristic of preliterate culture, it is the bias of the eye which is the dominant sensory feature of electronic culture. Furthermore, since the men are all blue (commonly considered a "cool" color) they therefore cannot be white, black, yellow, or red – and one can only conclude, as McLuhan prophesized, that in a global village all people are of the same tribe. A more thorough analysis of this performance group as a metaphor for McLuhan's theories and the attributes of three dimensional culture would be an interesting, if abstract, future research project.

A further theory of McLuhan's which is of interest to this discussion, because it sheds light on the way in which media also have distinctive qualities, is his work which divides media into two types: cool and hot. Cool media, such as television, is passive and realistic and does not require the observer to expend much intellectual effort to divine or reflect upon the meaning of the content. On the

other hand, hot media, such as print, does offer the reader the opportunity to reflect upon the content in a more intellectually active way.

Blending insights from the works of Innis, McLuhan and Logan, one is able to chart the associations and correlations between hot media and cool media, between two-dimensional and three-dimensional cultures, and between participatory democracy and representative democracy.

Hot	Cool
Hot Media: Print	Cool Media: Television, Radio, Internet
Bias of the Ear	Bias of the Eye
Sacral, non-literate Man	Profane, literate Man
Oral World	Visual World
Speech	Writing – as an abstract of speech
2 Dimensional sense bias (audile, tactile)	3 Dimensional (audile, tactile, visual)
Tribal	Civilized
A hot, hyperesthetic world	A cool, neutral world
Direct, participatory democracy	Representative democracy

Understanding that media expands the senses and changes the lens through which man views and reacts to his environment gives us the ability to better appreciate and anticipate ways in which perceptual culture may affect the use of new technologies, and the collateral effect this may have on democratic initiatives. We will refer back to this chart later in this paper.

Ethos of the Internet

At this point a discussion on the ethos of the Internet is appropriate since, together with culture, this rhetorical concept will be used to frame this probe and to help draw conclusions about the nature of the relationship between democracy and the Internet.

In his writings Aristotle held that there are two kinds of proofs a person could draw upon to make a persuasive argument: inartistic and artistic. Inartistic proofs include such things as contracts, deeds, and oaths. Artistic proofs include the kind that need to be invented. Invented proofs are created through the skillful application of ethical proofs (ethos), emotional proofs (pathos), and logical proofs (logos). These arguments traditionally are applied by individuals – one imagines Abraham Lincoln, or Winston Churchill as masters of the trade – but they can also be applied by groups and communities known as rhetorical bodies (Gurak, 1997, 12).

In her study of two contrasting cases of online protests activities (citizen resistance to Lotus Marketplace and the Clipper Chip), Laura Gurak found that both online communities' arguments functioned through the appeal of ethos (Gurak, 1997). In both cases, the group ethos appealed to others of similar persuasion and thus the dissemination of the information spread rapidly to others of similar beliefs, eager to receive a message that supported and conformed to their own views and conclusions.

In reference to the Internet's ethos, Buchstein has said that it not only appeals to others of similar persuasion but also nourishes the "rantings of fanatics, extremist, and conspiracy theorists" and is generally individualistic, extreme, and out of touch with reality. Furthermore the ethos of the Internet, he says, presents "an unreal world which allows all of us to create one or even more virtual identities" (Buchstein, 1997, 257-258). This observation raises serious questions about the probability that people using the Internet will achieve in reality the theoretical consequences of deliberative democracy and retrieving the oral

tradition of direct participatory democracy which Logan and others have predicted.

This quality of the Internet to not only give users anonymity but also the ability to assume or create new identities is concerning particularly when considering ways in which the Internet can be used to assist in the creation of public policy. For in addition to providing a soapbox or pulpit for the fanatics and their rantings, the Internet also has a uniquely “etherworld” quality with permits users to not just to achieve anonymity but also to engage in outright fantasizing. It is not only possible but true that many users online are not who they say they are, and do not believe what they are saying. As Summer Jenkins has astutely remarked: “When human interaction is reduced to the written word, identity is easily blurred. Men can present themselves as women, the fat can pretend to be thin, the young can masquerade as old” (Jenkins, 2004, 1).

How does this advance social discourse or the cause of democracy and public policy making? Or, as Barber has put the question: “Enthusiasts for Internet chatrooms or cybertot playpens prattle on about “community”, but can an anonymous exchange with strangers whose identity is a matter of invention and artifice replicate the kind of conversations that occur spontaneously among fellow PTA members ...?” (Barber, 1997, 217).

While perhaps unfortunate or unsavory, and despite whatever compatibilities there may be between some net societies and the oral tradition, the above suggests the Internet is more a medium of the three dimensional, visual, “literate man” where roles are constantly being redefined, changed, and reoriented . As McLuhan has said: “The more “literate” people become, the more they tend to become detached from the world in which they live” (McLuhan, 1962, 76). This is in stark contrast to the non-literate, two dimensional peoples who identify themselves very much more closely with the world in which they live. It is also ironic, as Logan has observed, that “As modern developments in communication

have made for greater realism they have greater possibilities of delusion” (Logan, 2000, 82).

This susceptibility toward delusion is in part also a consequence of the ethos of the Internet. Gurak, in her study mentioned earlier, found that the appeal of the content ethos was more powerful than the desire to verify facts (Gurak, 1997). It may be, therefore, that the ethos of the Internet is more powerful than its oral properties, and so may be predisposed to favor the biases of the three dimensional literary culture.

A contemporary example to elaborate the point, taken from the world of cinema, is Michael Moore’s film “Fahrenheit 911”. Strong on invented artistic proofs, but deprived of inartistic proofs, the director draws heavily upon his carefully nurtured persona as a “regular American citizen searching for the truth” to present a story which will certainly reinforce the views of those who already do not like President Bush, but will in all likelihood do nothing to instigate further fact checking or deliberation upon complicated issues of foreign and domestic policy. In this example, the ethos of the message overpowers whatever other potential the medium may have to initiate thoughtful deliberation.

With reference to the chart illustrated earlier, we can also use the example of Moore’s film to illustrate the connection between ethos and culture. We can see that Moore’s message is communicated through a “cool” medium, which appeals to the bias of the eye, and requires no or little intellectual activity on the part of the user / consumer.

One reason the Internet feeds fanatics and fantasists, and also a hint at a possible remedy to this, is that the Internet lacks appropriate Governors -- or what Buchstein calls “communications junctions” – the filters that help collect, evaluate, and distribute information which help information users distinguish between nonsense and information. Typical communications junctions include

personal friends, reliable speakers, news anchors, a familiar newspaper, or political groups and parties. Without healthy communications junctions, the well-being of democracies is at risk (Buchstein, 1997, 245).

The troubling characteristic of the Internet is that, while on the one hand it is open, and breaks down class barriers, it is also “the ultimate opposition to the model of communication junctions. It is endless, nondiscriminating, and unfocussed” (Buchstein, 1997, 254).

Media Laws

It was mentioned earlier that McLuhan’s media laws would be used in this paper to help frame this probe on the Internet and democracy. In his four laws of media, often referred to as tetrads, McLuhan said that all medium (i) extends or intensifies something, (ii) renders something obsolete, (iii) retrieves or brings back something, and (iv) when pushed, transcends itself or “flips into” something new (McLuhan and McLuhan, 1988).

For example, applying McLuhan’s laws to the current era, Logan has said of the Internet that it obeys a pattern of enhancing access to information, obsolescing the specialist, retrieving individual learning, and, possibly, flipping into information overload (Logan, 2000, 29). Also acknowledging the tetrad’s epistemology, Buchstein has said that the Internet reduces (makes obsolete) social and class barriers but also amplifies (extends and intensifies) intolerance, cruelty, and poor manners (Buchstein, 1997, 257).

In our analysis of the case studies presented later in this paper, we will use the epistemology of the media laws to help discuss and understand how the Internet is being used in different cases, what the effect of that usage is, and what we might predict the future usage to be.

What the media laws will help explain is why it is not necessarily true that the characteristics of the Internet today must be the same tomorrow. For the laws of media say that, when pushed, a medium may evolve into something else. This is worth some further discussion, before we examine two e-democracy case studies in the next chapter of this probe.

We tend to consider the Internet as an independent, stand-alone, medium when the realities of the electronic and digital world suggest that in fact no medium is self-contained and change is inevitable. In a short period of time the Internet has expanded – been pushed -- from a largely text-based media (which incidentally has also retrieved logographics in the form of “emoticons”) to one that is now increasingly picture-based and video-based. As the Internet’s capacity to carry more information at greater speeds continues to grow, the use of moving pictures and live video is likely also to increase. This fact opens the door to the idea or likelihood that the Internet may also blend or merge successfully with other media.

An example of the Internet being used successfully in public discourse, and artificially provided with appropriate communications junctions, was Barber’s experience in Arizona, using video teleconferencing to host a four-site (Tuba City, Flagstaff, Tempe and Tucson) interactive discussion on public policy issues. The benefits of this blend of space-spanning technology with non-anonymous and personal, or virtual, “face-to-face” communication were to break down the parochialism of face to face interaction without completely sacrificing personalism. “It again was demonstrated how interactive television can transform a passive medium aimed at complacent consumers of entertainment and advertising into an active theatre or social discourse and political feedback” (Barber, 1997, 221). The idea of blending Internet with face to face communication, as moderated by an appropriate Governor / Communications Junction, is an intriguing one, and suggests that the rhetorical qualities of the

Internet which are contrary to the ideas of deliberative democracy may yet be overcome.

Conclusions

Communications theory tells us several things relevant to this probe on technology and democracy. First, that technological advances in communication media change society and change our perceptual culture. Second, that media also have distinctive characteristics and ethos. In the case of the Internet, that it encourages individualism and segmentation. Finally, we understand that the Internet is not a finite thing. By using the media laws to examine situations we can understand that defining the characteristics of the Internet precisely is perhaps achievable only for a moment in time. It is expanding from a media which communicates primarily through the written word to one which increasingly communicates with images, moving images, and audio. It is also rapidly transcending from a primarily immobile "desk top" tool to a mobile tool, transcending from a post office (from which to send and receive mail) to a broadcast center (from which to broadcast opinions to masses of likeminded others) while continuing to render other media, such as the telephone, obsolete.

To summarize, if we understand that not all cultures are the same -- that two-dimensional and three-dimensional cultures exist and are different -- and if we understand the ethos of the Internet, and use the media laws to uncover truths with regard to both of the foregoing, we should be well equipped to probe the relationship between technology and democracy and to uncover new insights into the nature of this relationship.

The next section of this paper will review two recent case studies appropriate to our topic area, and will provide a practical opportunity to examine the effects of perceptual culture and the ethos of the Internet on their respective e-democracy scenarios.

Methodology

Introduction

As noted earlier, governments and political organizations of all kinds are rapidly integrating Internet technology into their daily modus operandi. Examples of design range from the most basic, such as email, to the more complex and ambitious plans such as e-voting or coordinated malicious e-protests (attempts to overload Servers through targeted mass emailing).

Consultant and researcher Stephen Clift presents a definition of e-democracy, as it is currently and commonly understood by people, organizations, corporations and bureaucracies around the world today:

e-democracy represents the use of information and communication technologies and strategies by democratic actors (governments, elected officials, the media, political organizations, citizen/voters) within political and governance process of local communities, nations and on the international stage. To many, e-democracy suggests greater and more active citizen participation enabled by the Internet, mobile communications, and other technologies in today's representative democracy as well as through more participatory or direct forms of citizen involvement in addressing public challenges (Clift).

Clift's definition is as clear and precise as any contemporary definition. Yet there is little in this definition to suggest that the use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT's) may have anything other than a positive effect. Indeed, the definition reflects the prevailing assumption that the effects are bound to be good and desirable.

So what are the actual outcomes of e-democracy initiatives? Have they all been successful? How are democratic actors using the technologies within the governance process? Are more citizens actively engaged in representative democracy? Are citizens more involved in participatory forms of civic

engagement? And more to the point of this paper – how has perceptual culture and the ethos of the Internet affected these outcomes?

To shed insight on the above questions it is useful, instructive, and appropriate, to complement the earlier discussion on communications theory with an examination and comparison of two practical e-democracy Case Studies of different scope and focus. The studies identified for review represent one experience from a new democracy (Romania), and one from an established democracy (the United Kingdom).

The Romanian study was conducted by Hera, Ailioaie, and Kertesz at eDemocratie.ro in February 2004. The study was designed to evaluate the level of transparency of public authorities' online communications with citizens.

This case was selected for review for two key reasons: first, Romania is an example of a “new democracy”; it is a formerly closed society where traditions of open debate and discourse on political issues have until very recently been forcefully repressed. For most of the twentieth century, Romanians lived under authoritarian rule, swinging from Nazism in the 1930's to Communism in the post-war era, and concluding with Nicolae Ceaușescu's execution in 1989. Whether from the extreme political right or extreme political left, Romanian civil society has historically been one where generations have become accustomed to violation of human rights, a censored press, and purges of political dissidents. It has only been within the last fifteen years that Romania has had a new constitution and multiparty elections.

The second key reason the Romanian case study was been selected for review is that it focused on the Members of Parliament. The elected officials, and how they use the Internet to communicate with citizens, were the subject of the research project. This contrasts with the focus of the UK case study.

The United Kingdom study was conducted by Gibson, Luscoli, and Ward at the University of Salford, using data from a survey conducted in May 2004. The study was designed to examine the online political habits of the British public.

In strong contrast to Romania, the United Kingdom is one of the oldest and most stable open societies, with a strong social tradition of public discourse in both formal institutions (such as “parliament”) and informal institutions (such as Speakers Corner), where freedom of expression and the art of deliberative discourse are not only allowed but also expected and indeed relished. The UK study is also interesting as its focus is on the attitudes and practices of Internet users in the general population.

Examination of these two case studies revealed that the use of the Internet by MPs in Romania is vastly underused, to the point of being almost entirely ineffective. In contrast, the UK study shows the Internet is being successfully integrated into political communication and participation – although not without revealing some leading questions about the quality of participation.

A more detailed review of the findings of these case studies follows.

Case Study Findings

The Romanian @Parliament case study was the result of a “reply reaction” research project conducted by a Romanian organization called eDemocratie.ro. As noted above, the project was conducted in order to evaluate the level of transparency of public officials’ communication with citizens. Promptitude and conciseness of responses to email communication from citizens to elected officials were the two areas of principal interest.

The research was conducted in October and November 2003. In order to test elected officials’ use of the Internet and analyze their responses to citizen

enquiries, the researchers deployed a “reply reaction” methodology: they sent two batches of email communications to the elected officials who have their email addresses listed on the official websites of the two chambers of the Romanian Parliament. The emails asked simple questions about issues topical at the time of the survey.

At the time of the survey there were 485 active Members of Parliament of which 123 had publicly listed email addresses. The emails were sent only to the 123 MPs with email addresses.

Analysis of the responses was both quantitative and qualitative. The key quantitative finding was that less than 10% of those questioned replied. Additionally, the researchers found that only 4.9% of the MPs replied to both questions, and took between four and six days to respond.

The researchers (Hera, Ailioaie, & Kertesz) created a “transparency indicator” index to rate the key qualitative findings. The index estimated the degree of utility of the Internet assisted email communication between the Citizens and their elected officials running on a scale from 0 to 5 with 0 indicating no replies at all and 5 indicating 100% response rate and a relevancy score of 5. In the specific research case under examination, the transparency Index result was 0.29

Thus the overall finding of the Romanian research project was that the Internet communication channel between citizens and their elected representatives was essentially non functional (“practically shut down”) at the time of the survey.

The UK case study revealed interesting, and contrasting, data about the way in which citizens in the UK have responded to the Internet, specifically in regard to exercising their democratic franchise. Researchers at the University of Salford commissioned NOP Research to conduct a survey on the online political habits

of the British public. The survey was undertaken in May 2002 and surveyed 1,972 adults.

The data from this research was collected via face to face interviews, asking a variety of questions about internet use, how long they have been using the Internet, and how long they stay online when connected. The interviews were done with a random sample of the British population aged fifteen and older.

In addition to “online questions” (questions about political activity on the Internet), the respondents were asked a series of “offline questions” (questions about political activity not on the Internet) regarding voting habits: whether the respondents discuss politics with family and friends, contacted an elected official, engaged in strike activity, donated money to a political cause, participate in a rally, joined a political organization, or actively campaigned for a political organization. A third set of questions were designed to determine whether a person had electronically visited or contacted a range of political organizations, including single issue protest campaigns, charity, pressure groups, political parties, anti-capitalist groups, mainstream news organizations, and independent media or had contacted them with email.

Among Gibson, Lusoli, and Ward’s key findings was that offline political participating – such as voting, discussing politics, attending a rally, volunteering for a candidate -- is far more inclusive, and more representative of the general population of Britain. Additionally, online participants were considerably more likely to be male, well educated, and of higher social and economic status. To summarize: “... a reinforcement of existing inequalities in participation is taking place. Rather than widening the participation base, cyberspace actually seems to be shrinking it.”

However, Gibson et al also concluded both from their analysis of the data and from other information regarding general access to the Internet that the social

and economic disparity between user groups is temporary and will dissipate as access issues continue to evaporate as the cost of access continues to drop and proliferation of Internet usage in other areas of life continue to take root (echoing Compaigne's argument that the Digital Divide is more a temporary and normal effect, rather than a sustained advantage for elites). They cite, for example, the data which shows that young people's rates of participation online far outstrip their inclination to participate in the more traditional offline forms of public policy debate: while only 10% of those aged 15-24 years of age have engaged in any form of offline political activity, three times that proportion have done something political on the Internet. They also found a small subset in the surveyed youth who only engage in online politics; they tend to come from younger age groups, be of lower social class, and be recent users of Internet technology.

One third of the survey respondents reported visiting or emailing a range of organizations such as political party website, charities, and mainstream news services. News services, such as the BBC or newspapers, proved to be the most popular destinations.

Gibson et al attempted to systematically reveal the causal relationship between user profile and user activity by implementing a logistic regression model to further examine the data. Their findings were that traditional offline political participation was more likely done by older males of higher social and economic status, and higher education. On the other hand, socio-economic status and education levels played a significantly less influential role with regard to online political participation, and younger people were more likely to participate. They also found a strong connection between offline behavior and online behavior in that those who were politically active offline were 346% to 431% more likely to contact political organizations online, regardless of social and economic condition. Not surprisingly, although certainly significant, they also found a strong connection between the amount of time spent online and the likelihood of

political participation online. In other words, the longer one uses the Internet, the greater the likelihood they will engage in online political activities.

The key the conclusions from Gibson et al's analysis of the NOP research, relevant to this paper, are as follows:

- The research affirms (in 2002) dominance of well educated males in online political participation;
- The research recognizes and reveals that the Internet has opened up a new space for political engagement to those who might otherwise not engage, particularly for young people;
- The research identified the existence / emergence of a small group of dedicated online political participants who otherwise would not engage in offline politics, and who are of lower social and economic status;
- The research showed that almost 30% of people who contacted a political organization online subsequently became more involved with that organization; this was especially true for single-interest protest campaigns and anti-capitalist organizations.

Discussion

These two case studies were chosen because of the *subjects* of study were contrasting, because the socio-political *environments* of the studies were also contrasting, and because the *findings* attained were so diverse and opposing. In the first instance, one study chose to gather data regarding the response rate and relevancy of communications sent to elected officials. The other study chose to gather data regarding citizen use of the Internet for political communication. Put another way, one case is focused on the Government personality (the MP) while the other case is focused on the Citizen personality (the general population). Each study reveals interesting data on what are – or perhaps should be -- opposite sides of the same coin.

In the second instance, one study was conducted in a new democracy where citizens have very little tradition in open discourse on political matters; while the other study was conducted in a well-established democracy where such discourse is common and expected.

Finally, the striking difference between the results attained in the two case studies suggest and reaffirms the view that the relationship between -- or the effect of -- the Internet and democracy is a far more complex matter than a merely technological one. It is apparent that successful use of the Internet in e-democracy initiatives requires more than mere *access* to the technology. In the Romanian case, those MPs who had email addresses listed on the parliamentary web site were contacted by citizens with simple questions yet failed overwhelmingly to provide prompt or relevant replies. Why? If the matter were merely a technological one, then one would expect that closer to 100% of Romanian MPs would have email addresses -- or that at least 100% of those with email addresses would be able to respond to citizen's emails.

It would be interesting to repeat the Romanian research project in the UK to determine the Transparency Index for UK MPs. There are 658 Members of Parliament in the United Kingdom, and 549 (83%) have email addresses listed on the UK Parliament's official website (<http://www.parliament.uk>). That compares to 485 MPs in Romania, with 123 having email addresses (25%). Why the huge disparity?

The relationship between socio-perceptual culture and e-democracy begins to come into focus in the Romanian case. It is perhaps no coincidence that a formerly closed political society has MPs who a) don't have email addresses, or b) if they do, don't make them publicly available, and c) if they do, they don't respond in a timely or effective manner to enquiries from citizens. A sensible

conclusion is that the two-dimensional culture of Romania is reflected in the attitudes of its politicians and is further reflected in their use of the Internet.

Similarly, in the UK case, the long history of open communication and political discourse in society is reflected in the survey which shows that this three-dimensional cultural attribute is reflected online. The “usual suspects” (well educated males) have embraced the new technology in order to continue their activities, and new segments of society are becoming engaged.

The next section of this paper will investigate these initial conclusions further, showing links to communications theory reviewed in Introduction and Theory sections.

Analysis

Introduction

The Romanian case examined the responsiveness of political leaders to email communications; the UK case examined and compared the relationships between the online and offline activities of citizens. The Romanian case took place in a new democracy; while the UK case took place in a well established democracy. These differences in perspective will help test and explore the theories about two dimensional and three dimensional cultures, add insight to previous findings with regard to the ethos of the Internet, and will provide opportunities to use the media laws to discuss the possible future use and effects of the Internet in these countries.

Romania Case Analysis

The Romanian case study supports and illustrates a number of points raised in earlier segments of this paper. Specifically, and significantly, the Romanian case illustrates that new democracies cannot be expected to function like established democracies merely because they now have functioning economies and access to technology. McLuhan has said that two dimensional person is tribal and lives in a closed society; she lives within a "natural order" of relationships and roles; her world is audile-tactile. Even though Romania is far less a closed society than it was ten, or twenty, years ago its two-dimensional cultural characteristics have not entirely vanished.

Culture

The poor response rate of elected officials to citizen communications suggests strongly that a two dimensional mindset remains active among political leaders. This may in part also be a generational / demographic issue, considering that

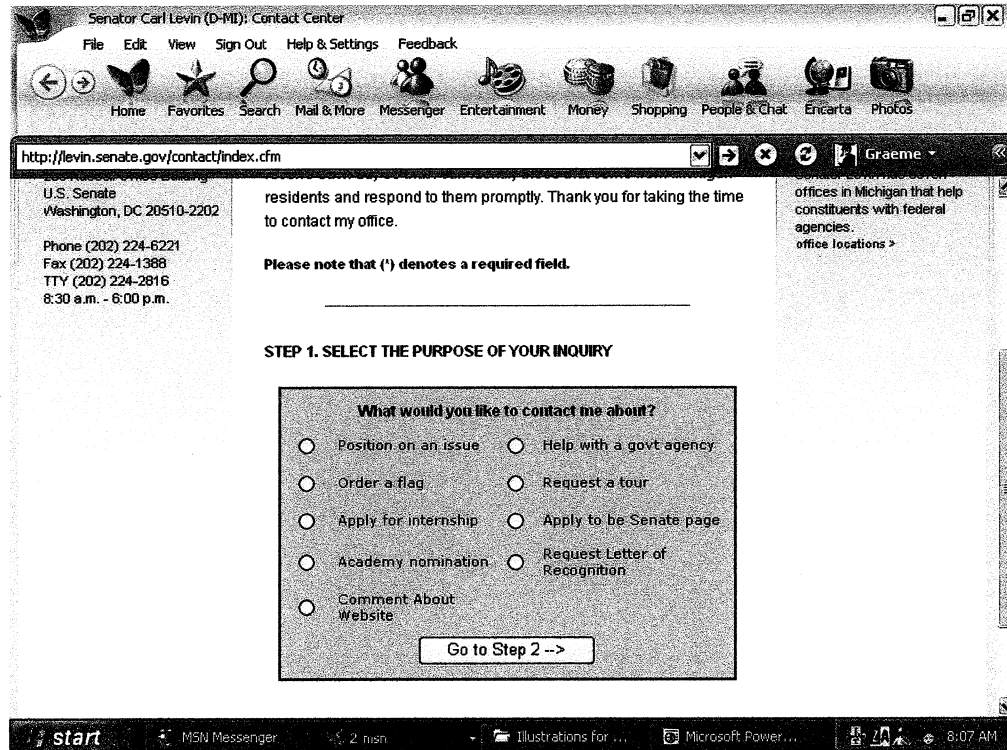
most middle aged men (the MPs) in Romania would have been raised and educated in the Communist era, and could therefore be expected to retain certain attitudes with regard to social order, regardless of political opportunity or regime structure. Nevertheless, the point is that despite having transitioned from a closed regime to an open one, and despite the access to Internet technology, the political leaders have failed to respond to citizen requests for information. Clearly, the problem is intellectual / neurological, not technological. A reasonable conclusion is that the MPs retain a view that the natural order of things is a top-down approach to political communication.

For example, the research showed that only 123 out of 485 MPs in Romania (25%) have email addresses publicly listed. Why don't the other 75% have email addresses? Perhaps they do have email addresses, but don't wish to make them public. In either case, the decision of the 75% of MPs not to use email (or to keep their addresses confidential) suggests their attitude toward the role of Official and Citizen are even more rigid and two dimensional than the 25% who do have email addresses.

In another example, the researchers found that in addition to the majority of MPs who chose simply not to respond to citizen enquiries at all, one MP even responded by asking why he had been contacted at all. Clearly, MPs in Romania do not give citizen enquiries high priority and some question why they were even contacted in the first place. What this suggests is that MPs perceptions about social order, the relationships between elected official and citizen, and the roles of elected official and citizen, fit the profile of a two dimensional culture.

Often a picture can be made clearer and sharper when contrasted with an opposite example. Thus, in order to better understand the position of the Romanian MP, it may be useful to examine briefly an example from another elected official in a different place, using the same Internet technology. For this

The steps are easy to follow and require the user to make a series of simple mouse clicks.



This example from Senator Levin is relevant as it shows how Internet technology has been used in extreme contrast to the way it has *not* been used by elected officials in Romania, despite equal access to the technology.

If we return to the chart illustrated on page 21 of this paper, we can also see that there is a question of “misfit” between the way in which the Romanian officials are using internet technology, and a case of “fit” so far as Senator Levin is concerned. The chart shows that, according to the combined communications theories of Innis, McLuhan, and Logan, the Internet is a “cool” medium which favors the bias of the eye. In Levin’s case, he has appropriately gone beyond the predominantly text based limits of the Internet by expanding his communication methodology from simple text based email communication to visually stimulating web site communication. The Romanian representatives, at least those of them

who use the Internet at all, remain limited to text-based email more reminiscent of the “hot” medium of print appropriate for the tribal, closed, social environment of two dimensional cultures.

Ethos

With regard to the Ethos of the Internet, the Romanian case study supports the view that despite its potential to connect large numbers of citizens in an open forum and to improve and facilitate dialogue between citizens and elected officials, the mere ownership of technology does not necessarily translate into effective use of it. Gurak and other researchers have noted that internet’s ethos encourages the development of self-selecting communities. Despite the theoretical and technological “open door” aspect of online communities, the ethos of the Internet in fact encourages the development of closed communities. The Romanian case, which exists within a tribal and more closed two dimensional culture, demonstrates this point to an extreme: in the Romanian case, only 25% of elected officials make their email address public. The addresses of the other 75% are either secret or do not exist; citizens are in the dark on this matter. Perhaps the elected officials only use their email addresses to send communications to each other, as members of a unique and distinguished group, and do not wish to have outsiders (citizens) intruding into their community. We (and Romanian citizens) are forced to speculate about this, in the absence of any information on this point.

Media Laws

Assessed through the formula of the media laws, the Romanian case study offers an interesting and compelling reality check for the cyber optimists’ view that use of the Internet in government will necessarily result in more open and transparent communications between citizen and official. We recall the media laws state that all medium (i) extend or intensify something, (ii) render something obsolete, (iii)

retrieve or bring back something, and (iv) when pushed, transcends itself or "flips into" something new. By way of example and to briefly elaborate further, we might observe today that the Internet has: intensified the use of personal computers, rendered the facsimile machine obsolete, retrieved shorthand, and when pushed can turn a PC into a television or a radio.

Using the media laws we might reasonably conclude, based on the Romanian research results, that the Internet technology adopted by Romanian officials has merely: (i) extended the ability of elected officials to remain an aloof and exclusive society; (ii) rendered obsolete the concepts of quick access to public policy information, (iii) retrieved the concept of citizen as Serf, and (iv) when pushed, may become a private and closed form of exclusive and privileged form communication between elites.

Of course, this analysis may – and very likely will -- change as Romanian culture shifts from a two dimensional to a three dimensional perspective over time. We are grateful, however, for this example of the Internet not causing a explosion of openness and freedom of information. For the Romanian case study reminds us there are as yet many unexplored concepts, issues, and consequences regarding the political use of the Internet – for example: the ability to digitally manipulate and post false images, to rapidly spread misinformation, to retrieve the palimpsest and enable users to quickly delete or rewrite history, to limit access to certain sites and information, to horde information – all of which would be interesting and worthwhile subjects for further research.

Summary

In summary, what the Romanian case study shows us, and what the Levin example brings into sharper focus, is the reality that not all democracies are the same, and that equal access to technology does not automatically translate into equal use of the technology or a necessary explosion in participatory and

deliberative democracy or citizen empowerment. This suggests that the digital divide is perhaps not so much a gap in resources or access as it is a neurological gap between two dimensional and three dimensional cultures. The Romanian officials are neurologically two dimensional, and they are using a three dimensional technology in a two dimensional way. This fact alone can explain the low transparency index results revealed in the research project.

As Romania continues to develop its democracy, join Western organizations such as the European Union, expand its trading relationships and open its borders to encourage a more open flow of goods, people, and ideas, we may anticipate that the neurological divide will narrow. We can predict, based on communications theory, that more MPs will use email communications, that the transparency index of those communications will increase, and that communications will expand beyond the textual bias of email to include the more visual bias of the web site. This will come to pass not as a result of greater access to Internet technology, but as a result of a change of perception, and as a result from a change from a two dimensional culture to a three dimensional one.

UK Case Analysis

The UK case study also supports and illustrates a number of points raised in earlier segments of this paper. Specifically, the UK case illustrates that three dimensional cultures – ones which are open “civilized” societies and where people perceive life in abstract terms – will adopt new technology in a manner that corresponds to their cultural profile.

Additionally, the UK study supports several findings with regard to the ethos of the Internet, especially its potential to polarize groups into their own interest areas and to empower the previously disenfranchised and the “fringe” or extremist / activist radical element.

Finally, through the epistemology of the media laws, the UK study helps provide insights on how the Internet may be used, and how it may affect future online public policy discourse and shape the notions of e-democracy.

Culture

To begin with aspects of culture, we may recall that the difference between three dimensional and two dimensional cultures is that the three dimensional culture adds the visual element to the sensorial repertoire. The visual element is the element which allows one to see with the mind's eye – to read words (not just hear spoken words) and to “see” and “paint” ideas in text. The three dimensional person lives in abstract terms. Additionally, in contrast to the two dimensional culture's “natural order” of relationships and roles, the three dimensional individual has to struggle to determine his appropriate and changing role in society.

If we return again to the chart on page 21 of this paper, we find the attributes and characteristics of three dimensional culture describe the UK situation well: citizens of the UK have been early adopters of cool media such as television, radio, and internet technology and therefore are living in a visual world which creates and supports the bias of the eye; writing is understood to be and is commonly used as an abstract of speech; representative democracy is well established and entrenched. Gibson, Lusoli, and Ward's finding that offline political participating such as voting, discussing politics, attending a rally, and volunteering for a candidate is far more inclusive and more representative of the general population of Britain than online participation reinforces this analysis. It shows that the abstract thinking and attitudes of three-dimensional cultures are entrenched in the U.K. – both offline and online.

The findings that online participants were considerably more likely to be male, well educated, and of higher social and economic status, does not initially

suggest the Internet has opened the political process up to a larger demographic, economic, or psychographic polis. As the reports itself states: "Rather than widening the participation base, cyberspace actually seems to be shrinking it." But the authors of this research also concede that these initial finding may merely represent the tip of the iceberg – the early adopters – and it would be inappropriate to conclude at this early stage in online political activity that well educated males will remain the dominant users in the future.

The UK case study's finding that citizens who were politically active offline were 346% to 431% more likely to contact political organizations online, regardless of social and economic condition, suggests that citizens have quickly accepted the Internet technology as a natural extension of their traditional offline activities. This supports the theory of "normalization" referred to earlier in this paper, and supports Compaine's (1997) writings with regard to the Internet merely being the next link in a long chain of tools extending back through time (television, radio, telephone, telegraph, and so on). In this sense we might conclude that, as with Romania, the availability and use of the Internet has not significantly changed the way in which cultures perceive the world – at least, not in any revolutionary sense, and not independently of other medium.

An interesting and curious contrast to the general finding about offline participation increasing the likelihood of online participation was the finding that while only 10% of those aged 15-24 had engaged in any form of offline political activity, three times that proportion from that age group had done something political on the Internet. Additionally, and also a curious almost contradictory contrast to the general finding that "rather than widening the participation base, cyberspace actually seems to be shrinking it" was the study's finding that socio-economic status and education levels were less of a barrier to political engagement online.

These findings with regard to youth, socio-economic status, and education levels, suggests diverse groups of youth may be skipping entirely the traditional “offline” forms and aspects of political participation and are instead engaging directly via the Internet. One questions whether this particular phenomenon is the result of -- or points to the emergence of -- a generational gap or possibly even a neurological gap (or both). From a techno-optimists view, the fact that diverse groups of youth are politically active online may be interpreted as evidence of the Internet’s power to engage more citizens (particularly the underrepresented: lower income, less education, youth) in the political process.

From a techno-pessimist’s perspective, however, these finding may be cause for concern for as has been discussed earlier the ethos of the Internet does not encourage thoughtful and deliberative discourse. This merits further discussion.

Ethos

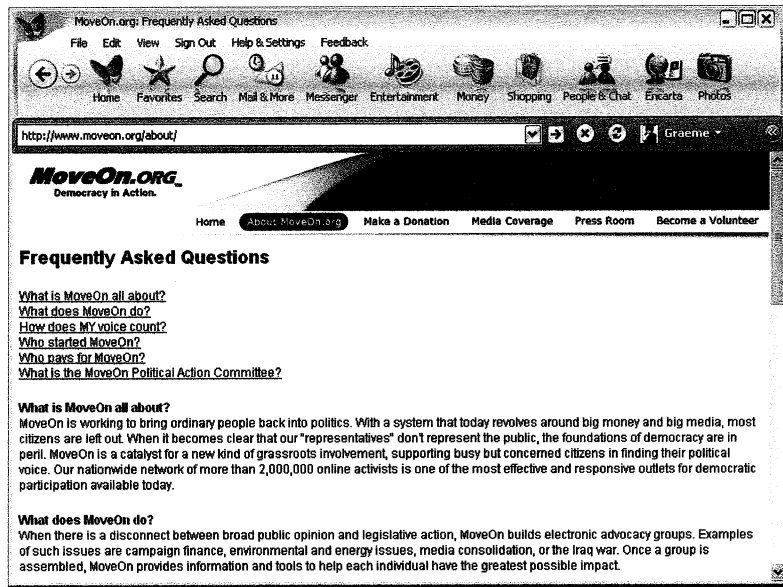
The findings from the UK study, in the context of ethos, raise a number of important questions relevant to this paper; for example: are the new political participants identified in the UK study engaged online because the Internet liberates them from the socio-economic prejudices of the offline world, or is it because they can hide behind the Internet’s anonymity and pretend to be someone else? Are they engaging in a deliberative way or in rude or extreme ways? Are they engaged in mainstream political discussions or are they engaged in extreme and radical discussions? Are they being brought into the mainstream political community or are they being polarized (even if voluntary)? Are they learning about new ideas, expanding their intellectual horizons, and becoming more tolerant or are they becoming entrenched in their own views and becoming increasingly intolerant of alternative views? A qualitative analysis of youth participation online would be an interesting and important future research project and is key to assessing the possible meaning and consequences of these findings.

Participation in anti-capitalist or protest groups by a small but dedicated minority is frequently excused as a youthful “phase” which will pass in time or which in any event will amount to matters of no consequence. However, we should recall that the anarchists who were active at the turn of the last century were only a small group of lower social and economic status whose protest actions nevertheless had global effect (Tuchman, 1962). In particular, and most notably, we might recall that it was a mere teenager - Gavrilo Princip - who infamously shot and killed Archduke Ferdinand in 1914. So while we might approve of the findings which show the Internet offers new potential for youth, and those of socio-economic and less education, to engage in political activity, it is not unreasonable or irresponsible to also ask if the ethos of the Internet is encouraging deliberative discourse or some other alternative less conducive to the common good. Could the Internet be used to recruit the next Gavrilo Princip? This may seem a harsh or unduly dramatic question, but if we consider it is already accepted that there are “cyber stalkers” preying upon vulnerable girls and children over the internet, why should we not also consider there may be cyber anarchists and cyber terrorists searching seditiously for new recruits? There seems to be a lacuna of consideration given to this aspect of the extension of political activity online.

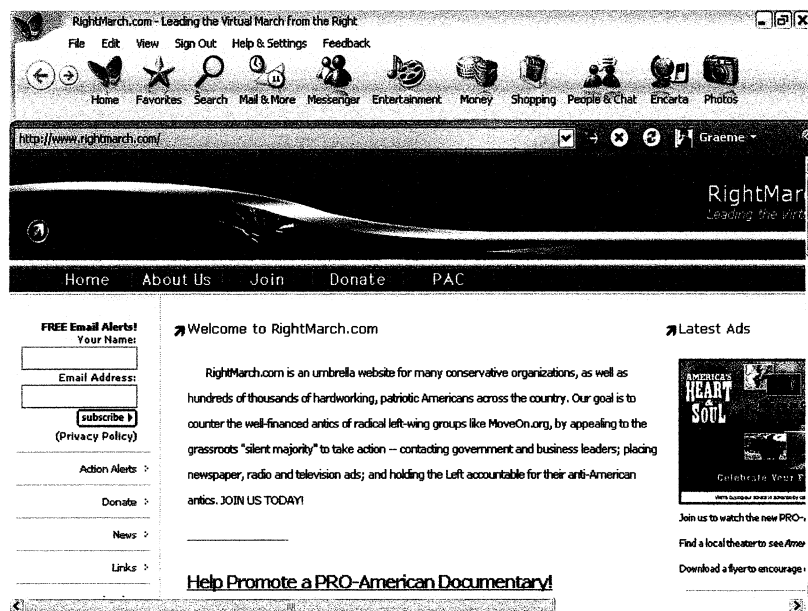
We have discussed earlier the work of Gurak and her finding that Internet message boards and email groups appeal largely to the like-minded. The same is true of web sites. To elaborate upon this point it may be useful to figuratively step away from the UK research and look for examples from beyond that limited context. In this regard, we may find two excellent contemporary examples in the web sites of MoveOn.org and RightMarch.org, found in the United States.

MoveOn.org is “working to bring ordinary people back into politics. With a system today that revolves around big money and big media, most citizens are

left out. When it becomes clear that our “representatives” don’t represent the public, the foundations of democracy are in peril” (MoveOn.org).



RightMarch.org is “an umbrella website for many conservative organizations, as well as thousands of hardworking, patriotic Americans across the country. Our goal is to counter the well-financed antics of radical left-wing groups like MoveOn.org, by appealing to the grassroots “silent majority” to take action ...” (RightMarch.org).



What is fascinating about these examples is that -- rhetorically speaking -- each site is in so many artistic respects a mirror image of the other and yet, in so far as political or inartistic content or perspective goes, they are diametrically opposed to the each other. Both claim to be open and inclusive, yet it is clear one group is for advocates of the political "left" and one is for the "right". This supports Gurak's conclusion that, despite the potential for citizens to engage with each other in open and deliberative dialogue on the Internet, the tendency instead is to gravitate toward communities where currently held views and opinions are merely fed and encouraged.

Returning to the UK case study, techno-optimists may find evidence in the work of Gibson et al to show the Internet has engaged a broader cross segment of society in political discourse; yet the issues of ethos compel us to resist the conclusion that increased engagement of alienated minorities necessarily equates to greater and stronger democracy. A more balanced analysis of the UK study, if not necessarily a pessimistic one, is that: a) those who are already politically active offline will also become active online; b) those who are not politically active offline may become active online, but not necessarily with mainstream political groups and organizations; and c) increased activity online (including both more people, from more segments of society) does not necessarily translate into increased consensus or strengthening of the commonweal.

Media laws

The media laws provide a valuable epistemology for critically assessing the findings of the UK case study and help uncover some interesting questions to challenge panglossian assumptions about access to information technology and the ascendancy of deliberative and participatory democracy. If we limit our critique to the findings with regard to youth, we may reasonably ask, based on

the research results, if the Internet technology adopted by UK citizens may have the potential or likelihood to: (i) intensify political participation and activism among fringe groups and individuals on the political periphery; (ii) render obsolete socio-economic barriers such as class and education, (iii) retrieve the ability of extremists and radicals to identify each other and reinforce non-traditional views, and (iv) when pushed, may weaken centralized power and decision-making authority and may consequently threaten social and financial support for marginalized groups.

Summary

The UK case study illustrates how a three dimensional culture easily and rapidly absorbs new communication technology such as the Internet. In this case, the Internet is being adopted as the latest in a line of electronic devices such as the telephone, radio, and television. The traditional “offline” participants in the political process have been shown to be the first to become significantly engaged online. This supports the conclusion that the Internet is a medium of the three dimensional world, most easily absorbed into the pre-wired neural sensorium of three dimensional peoples.

Among the most interesting aspect of the UK findings, however, were the early results with regard to non traditional participants – those typically disenfranchised by their social and economic status, including education levels. For the techno-optimists, this finding that the Internet may have the power to bring these groups into the political process is an affirmation of the Internet’s powers to strengthen democracy. However, when issues and findings from other researchers regarding the ethos of the Internet are brought into the discussion, the value of fringe group engagement becomes more questionable: more people may become politically active online as a result of access to the Internet, but there is significant reason to question whether this activity will lead to more deliberative and participatory democracy.

Romania and UK Case Studies - Discussion

Despite the acknowledged differences and contrasts between these two case studies, common ground can be found with regard to what they reveal about communications theory. Both cases demonstrate that issues of perceptual culture and the ethos of the internet significantly affect the manner in which internet technology is used by a given polis. Each case provides an interesting and unique example for considering the media laws, and offer opportunities to use the epistemology of the media laws to predict future trends and activities.

Regarding culture, the Romania case shows us that the social order of a two dimensional culture does not disappear the instant a regime is changed or a new technology deployed. The UK case study shows us that the ability to engage online does not solve the three dimensional culture's struggle to find meaningful social roles and order. Both cases serve as opposite sides of the same coin in this respect; they prove the same points about the existence and relevance of perceptual cultures in different ways.

Conclusions

In the introduction to this paper we identified the discussion about technology and democracy falls generally into two camps: techno-optimists and techno-pessimists. Typical of the optimists view were mainstream policy groups such as the UN and World Bank, in addition to various commercial enterprises. An additional illustration and reminder of the optimists' views about the relationship between technology and democracy can be found in an e-democracy essay by Mark Malloch Brown of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). In his essay he has written:

... the spread of knowledge triggered by Gutenberg's printing press both helped drive, and was supported by, a continent-wide rivalry of religious ideas. Now, the Internet has become both the fuel and the vehicle for dramatic spread in democracy, intensifying the demand for and supporting the spread of genuinely transparent and participatory and more efficient systems of government at both the national and global levels (Brown, 2001, 1).

Despite whatever elements of truth there may be to the above statement, this paper has illuminated significant evidence from the pessimists' camp to suggest a more cautious and realistic assessment of the Internet's powers to spread democracy would be more appropriate.

The analysis of the e-democracy cases detailed in this paper suggests the Internet does indeed have the ability to empower individuals and groups on the periphery of society but, while this in itself may be an isolated and short-term democratic effect, it does not necessarily mean that democratic systems and organizations will ultimately be strengthened in the long-term. To use Malloch Brown's example, it is perhaps easy to look back now after five hundred years and celebrate the stimulating effect of the printing press upon the rivalry of religious ideas. But in doing so we overlook the fact that at the time and for many years the Reformation was far from bloody and the effects upon the organized Church were disruptive and decentralizing in the extreme.

Conversely, it is equally naive to conclude or predict, after only a few years of Internet activity, that the Internet will undeniably lead to more participation and transparency. Certainly the Romanian case study shows the weakness of that particular argument.

Our analysis of the case studies has shown, despite and because of their differences and contrasts, that we can justifiably question the value and potential of the Internet with regard to democracy initiatives on the basis of two often overlooked considerations: perceptual culture of the users; and the rhetorical powers of the medium, especially the ethos of the Internet.

On the question of culture, we recall at the beginning of this paper we identified the Internet as a cool medium of three-dimensional cultures. That assessment, based on the communications theories of Innis, McLuhan, and Logan has been upheld. Our analysis has shown that it is indeed a cool medium which appeals to the bias of the eye, is passive, and does not require the user to expend intellectual effort, is solipsistic, and supports individualism.

The Romanian and UK case studies have shown that different cultures are using and responding differently to the Internet medium.

The analysis of the Romanian case revealed a socio-technical neurological gap among Romanian MPs. Clearly, the transition from a two-dimensional to a three-dimensional culture is not yet complete: the after-effects of the social equilibrium which lead to a transition to democracy in 1989 are still being felt in this new democracy. The MPs are not engaging online, and the case analysis demonstrated a misfit between the two-dimensional MPs and the three-dimensional medium has resulted in low transparency index findings.

The analysis of the UK case on the other hand revealed evidence of a neurological gap of a different kind among the younger generation. They are

skipping traditional offline engagement altogether – suggesting they are neurologically advanced and are advancing directly to forms of online political activity which is as yet uncharted and as decentralized as it is untraditional.

On the question of ethos, it was identified that the qualities of the Internet promote contemplation from an isolated and individualistic existence which has the effect of divorcing democracy from concern for the common good.

It was also identified that the ethos of communication has the ability to subvert the message of the medium.

Media laws have been used as a tool throughout this paper to examine the qualities and powers of a medium. At this final point in this probe we may use what we have learned about culture and ethos to summarize our findings with regard to the message of the Internet. Logan (2002, 261) has affirmed McLuhan's view that every medium has its message, and has said of the Internet that it has the five messages:

1. The Internet promotes two-way communication and hence dialogue;
2. The Internet facilitates access to information;
3. The Internet promotes continuous learning;
4. The Internet aligns and integrates information knowledge and structures;
5. The Internet promotes community;

The identification of these messages may be valid, but the Romanian and UK case studies and the findings and views from others such as Gurak and Barber give us pause for further thought.

In the first instance, in regard to the Internet's powers to promote two-way communication and dialogue, we find that the rhetorical qualities of the Internet give reason to question the *quality* of dialogue generated. Logan is generous to

presume that people communicating via email and chat rooms will be deliberative and thoughtful. The evidence from others suggests Logan's ideal users may turn out to be in the minority. Indeed, there is already a case before the courts in California of a lawyer suing the Internet provider Yahoo for "anonymous abuse" – for being harassed and defamed by anonymous users on a Yahoo message board (BBC, 2004). We might agree with the general conclusion that the Internet promotes two way communication and dialogue, but there is increasing evidence to suggest that its powers to promote one way communication and proliferation of a singular and sometimes hostile message are stronger.

Second, we can agree that the Internet provides access to information. But the conclusions from this paper are that it promotes access to information that already supports the users' own views.

Third, we can agree that the Internet promotes continuous learning. But the conclusions from this paper are that it promotes learning about one's own areas of interest.

Fourth, we can agree that the Internet aligns and integrates information knowledge structures. But they are prevalingly solipsistic structures.

Finally, we can agree that the Internet promotes community. But the conclusions of this paper are that it promotes homogenous communities, where people of similar views gather to reinforce their existing perspectives.

In summary, the conclusions of this probe on the relationship between culture, ethos, and e-democracy are:

- That the Internet is aligned with the perceptual biases of three-dimensional peoples and cultures. It is non-deliberative, does not inherently promote participatory democracy, is cool and individualistic.
- That the *ethos* of the Internet is more powerful, or more influential, than the *message* of the medium.

By explaining the characteristics and differences between two-dimensional and three-dimensional cultures, and by developing an understanding of the ethos of the Internet, we conclude that the Internet may indeed have the potential to be both the “fuel and the vehicle” for the spread of democracy, but it may also have the potential to reinforce closed societies and to weaken the powerbase and authority of traditional political actors.

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