Electronic Democracy

Habermas, Women and the Resurgence of Citizen Politics

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Abstract: While philosophers lament the demise of citizen politics, hidden within the hype of the Internet are examples of democratic citizenship in on-line, electronic communities. These citizen networks (often multiple-computer sites sponsored by local authorities), were established as information services but extended their role to debate and activism on a range of social and environmental issues. But 'flaming' on the 'Net' has hindered the inclusion of minorities (especially women), and demonstrated the need for protocols to curb uncivilized behaviour which threatens the potential of the Internet as a global public space for rational-critical discourse, and its openness to popular participation. The communicative action and discourse ethic theories of Jurgen Habermas offer a valuable theoretical framework for citizen politics and make explicit the connection between democratic polity and the open communication facilitated by computer-mediated communication technologies.

1. THE DECLINE OF CITIZEN POLITICS

Political philosopher Hannah Arendt, in *The Human Condition* [2] argued that in contemporary society, politics as a public space where citizens engage one another, deliberate, and debate, had almost disappeared. She blamed this demise on the differentiation of modern societies into three distinctive realms: the narrowly political, the social and/or economic, and the family. As the economic sphere expanded, the concern for political association disappeared, and the public space of politics was transformed by a pseudo interaction of citizens no longer acting for the common good, but behaving as mere economic producers and urban city dwellers.

More recently Dietz [4, p.243] has lamented the malaise, which has overtaken political life, seen in an obsession with citizenship as rights, and increasing apathy towards the responsibilities of citizenship. She notes that "more than casting a ballot every four years...we are less and less capable of imagining ourselves as mutually engaged citizens." Likewise, Benhabib [3, p.89] notes the demise of the autonomous citizen, whose reasoned judgement and participation was the "*sine qua non* of the public sphere." Schuler [12] points out the number of voters in the United States is now a mere 50%, and nonvoters form a larger bloc than either major political party.

Dietz [4] argues that the attitude which limits citizen participation is due in large part to the substantial transformations of modern societies under the impact of corporatization, mass electronic and print media, and the growth of business-style political associations, which have led to a conviction that the system is irredeemable. Schuler [12] contends that this belief takes two forms: first, that all politicians are corrupt and that big money controls politics, and second, that the only sensible recourse is to stay uninvolved. Such disenchantment with representative government is damaging to a democratic society in that it paralyses both the ethical maintenance of the political system and the efforts for democratic reform.

However, despite this scholarly lament, there is increased interest in the revitalization of the public sphere as a forum for political debate as a first and essential step towards a resurgence of citizen politics.

2. CONCEPTIONS OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Benhabib [3] provides a useful critique of three conceptions of political public space; first, the 'republican virtue' tradition, (described by Arendt as the 'agonistic' public space), second, the liberal, which Benhabib terms 'legalistic' public space, and third, the model implicit in Habermas' work, which Benhabib terms the 'discursive' public space.

Benhabib notes Arendt's 'agonistic' public space idealises the Greek polis by ignoring its dependence on "large groups of human beings like women (and) slaves ... excluded from it, who made possible through their labour for the daily necessities of life that leisure for politics which the few enjoyed," and while the liberal models strength is its transparent linking of power, legitimacy and public discourse, it neglects other dimensions of political life, that is, "political associations, movements, citizens' groups, town meetings, and other public fora" [3, p.101].

It is Habermas's model of political participation through practical discourses which Benhabib argues shows most promise in outlining a public space which is suited to the realities of modern societies.

3. THE HABERMASIAN DISCURSIVE MODEL OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Thompson [14] and Ess [6] have examined the Frankfurt School's critique of modern technology, including the technologies underlying CMC (computer-mediated communication), and have paid special attention to the communication action theory and discourse ethics of Habermas [8, 9].

In his 1962 work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, (translated into English in 1989), Habermas [8] describes the rise and the demise of the bourgeois public sphere which emerged in the late 17th and early 18th centuries in salons and coffee houses in England, France and Germany. Habermas argues that these bourgeois debates (and the plurality of these many 'publics') had a transformative impact on the institutional form of modern states, where basic rights such as freedom of speech and expression were guaranteed, and the political role of the public sphere was 'formally recognized in law' [14, p.177].

Habermas [9] in his *Discourse Ethics*, emphasizes inclusivity in public life across all social stratas, describing the necessary communicative conditions for a democratic polity by the rules and conditions of what he terms an 'ideal speech situation'; a universal standard of rights and responsibilities which holds for all discourse participants. The ideal speech situation requires a sense of solidarity between participants, a concern for fellow human beings and the community at large, and a definition of justice in terms of formal rules of democratic fairplay.

4. THE INTERNET AND THE 'IDEAL SPEECH SITUATION'

The primary arena for the Habermasian discourse ethic is grassroots democracy, and the ethic has particular value for electronic public fora, by providing theoretical justification for important elements of 'netiquette' and other efforts at moderating communication, including members of an electronic community excluding those who fail to exercise such guidelines. The Habermasian discourse ethic responds to problems associated with universal access, such as the plebiscitory vision of the 'electronic town hall' which is potentially anti-democratic in allowing individual voices to be overridden by aggression by a few, or by the "tyranny of the majority" [6, p.216]. And open discourse on Internet lists is often dominated by those with more aggressive communication styles. In practice, then, plebiscites originally intended to be open, egalitarian forums have become inhospitable to minorities, including women.

5. THE INTERNET AS PUBLIC SPHERE

Sreberny [13, p.213] notes, "the notion of a 'network' has become a key trope of contemporary social theory," which relates to global networks of wealth, power and information, but also the counter-hegemonic forces of social movements (such as Amnesty International, Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, and the Women's Movement) which offer a decentred form of organisation and intervention which both mirrors and counteracts the 'networking logic of domination' in the information society.

Frederick [7] terms this new phenomenon a 'global civil society,' best represented by the non-governmental organisations movement, and supported by a global meta-network of highly decentralised technologies - computers, fax machines and the like, which facilitate communications among and between national civil societies, transforming the capacity to build coalitions and networks, democratising information flow and breaking down hierarchies of power. Thus citizenship is re-conceived as participation in public life and society at large, not just in a political arena, but producing a new, reflexive kind of politics, from the local to the global.

Case studies such as Sreberny [13] show the Internet as a public sphere for citizen participation in what she describes as a 'network of networks,' exemplified by the diversity of the women's movement, from affective support, to professional groups, to those producing female culture and those offering public services. These many organisations which had built linkages over the years established WomeNet (ten key networks in nine countries) in 1992 for 'sharing research and exchanging information around the world, fast'. By 1997, WomeNet had 29 members in 20 countries, producing 'quarterly journals, newsletters; books, booklets and comics; posters and postcards', facilitating the development of networks, supporting 70 electronic conferences in three languages networked to over 20 countries and developing a number of WWW sites, APC [1].

The women's movement suggests a particular model of global activism that prefigures the construction of a global civil society. It is built upon a grassroots organisation that combines into networks and makes possible mass participation through the utilisation of CMC technologies that enable rapid, cheap exchange of information. It is thus a prime example of the articulation of local and global, whereby "intensely local issues can be made globally public and often elicit a global response leading to a local resolution, and where potentially universal issues can receive local discussion and reflection" [13, p.218]. However, many significant difficulties for women's global political activism remain, including the lack of awareness of how women are already mobilising. Although problems of access are a major concern, endemic problems, such as illiteracy, hinder

women's access to cultural and political participation far more than lack of access to communications technologies and are articulated far less often.

At the local level, the rise of electronic community networks that tackle local problems represents the rebuilding of the national democratic process. In the U.S., Dutton [5] and Schmitz [11] describe an innovative citizen network, Santa Monica's Public Electronic Network (PEN). Introduced in 1989, and designed and developed by a local government to facilitate access to public information and democratic participation by the provision of e-mail. PEN allows citizens to contact government agencies, public officials, and other PEN users, and allows users to participate in a variety of electronic meetings on topics of local concern. Training and access is free via a home computer or terminal in 16 public locations.

As a participant/observer, Schmitz [11, p.23] tracked PEN from its inception and notes its decline into incivility over the ten years he studied. Apart from the few moderated conferences, as time progressed much of PEN's "shared commitment to supply information and act in concert" descended into adversarial monologues, rife with personal attacks." By late 1992, "the harsh PEN invective had chilled participation," and by March 1993, the Santa Monica authorities pre-screened conference entries and limited their length. Unregulated conferences were consolidated at a few specified sites which were "harder to find and less useful." Schmitz attributes PEN's later incivility to Santa Monica's declining prosperity and more divisive local politics, but suggests the local context was only partly to blame. He questions the egalitarian assumptions regarding electronic fora, noting that the 'cues filtered out' aspect of electronic media provides both benefits and disadvantages over traditional face-to-face interaction. While electronic interaction may benefit from the obscuring of social categories that shape patterns of affiliations, it is disadvantaged by the psychological disinhibition that embodies lessened social restraints. However, PEN's heightened conflict should not obscure its important outcomes. Interaction among diverse persons took place regularly in ways 'wildly inappropriate' when using conventional media, and it was unlikely a conventional town meeting would regularly offer the exchanges among local officials and political activists that were commonplace on PEN [11, p.23].

6. WOMEN, CITIZENSHIP AND THE INTERNET

Dietz [6], in noting women's marginalization from politics, argues there is nothing intrinsically masculine about the public realm, but feminist preoccupation with the private domains of women's lives perpetuates binary oppositions of 'private woman, public man,' in realms which should not be

accepted as immutable. She argues the importance of moving to more liberating concepts of citizenship as social participation and integration (which Habermas has termed 'solidarity'). Dietz believes that women represent a potential force for the resuscitation of citizen politics because their social citizenship represents stronger, intimate connections to community, and a more deeply felt sense of political obligation.

In respect of electronic democracy, will women who show more reticence than men in using computers embrace the Internet to satisfy this 'political obligation?' Globally, this is already happening [13]. At a local level, the history of the domestic telephone provides evidence that women adopt then adapt communications technology that supports their social citizenship. Women commandeered the domestic telephone for maintaining networks in family, neighbourhood and wider community, contributing to a social support system with national importance [10]. Moyal refers to this feminine enculturation as a 'telephone neighbourhood,' and its similarity to an 'Internet neighbourhood' has significance for women's participation in electronic democracy.

Telephone technology has adapted to the requirements of women as their value as customers became apparent. The mobile telephone has changed the telephone from a shared household tool into a highly personalised communications medium that allows women to keep in touch with their children and manage the household from a distance. That is, to work 'parallel' shifts rather than 'double' shifts, by bringing the private into the public. As many women as men now use e-commerce as the time-saving factor of shopping and banking from home (or the workplace) make this use of the Internet attractive to women. And it is likely that the Internet will be made more welcoming to women as their commercial potential is recognised. Like the telephone, they may become the Internet's chief users.

Of further significance is that women, from the telephone's earliest days, have assumed an ethical role in mediating its use. In similar fashion, increasing female participation in electronic discourses may tame the Internet's present incivility that hinders its inclusivity. Despite women's increasing use of e-mail, it could also be argued that the Internet's impersonal interaction discourages female use, and the personal closeness made possible by voice interaction makes the telephone, at present, a preferred communications tool. It should be remembered, however, that the Internet as a global communications medium is still in its infancy, and the development of multimedia systems that enhance communication with vision and sound may change this female perspective, and provide the necessary inhibitory 'cues' which mediate face-to-face communication.

7. CONCLUSION

Traditional citizenship is being reformed by a global political and social activism that represents a new orientation toward political identity and community. What people identify with in these new arenas is no longer constrained by their formal relationships with their own territorial society. This profound 'reinvention of politics,' which is both reflexive and rule altering, operates from the local and reaches up to the global level.

The Internet may well represent a global web of Habermasian discursive public spaces with enormous potential for revitalising citizen politics, and for the civic participation of groups, including women, previously excluded from the democratic process. Its informal culture promises an arena conducive to the 'spontaneity, imagination, participation, and empowerment' which Arendt [2] saw as the heart of authentic politics, and its global scope and freedom from national control is encouraging of a global civil society equipped to tackle planetary problems. The Internet is not constrained by the boundaries of local time, which allows the public sphere to exist whenever and wherever global citizens choose to participate, and the public becomes private and vice versa because the Internet connects homes as well other diverse topographical locations.

However, citizen networks that reflect an agonistic culture fall far short of Habermas's discourse ethic, and lack even the basic rules that guide traditional political arenas. How might we tame the anarchy of cyberspace? Dutton [5] reminds us that the anarchy that once existed in face-to-face meetings was tamed by rules of order. For truly egalitarian electronic meetings, similar rules are necessary. Both the Habermasian discourse model and the discourse ethic present normative dialogue as taking place under an 'ideal speech situation' whose foundation is universal moral respect and egalitarian reciprocity, and which avoids the dilemmas of majoritarian political outcomes. These are the minimal requirements for citizenship in any democratic society, both on and off the Net.

Ess [6] reiterates that to fulfil the promise of democratisation via computer-mediated communications requires that we attend especially to the social context of the use of CMC, and to the ethical and political dimensions of our use of these technologies. It may be that women will adopt (and adapt to) the medium of the Internet as they have other communication technologies. Both mediating electronic discourse and bringing to electronic democracy a new vision of action in the public realm, based not on glory, but on an ethic of care and moral responsibility.

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