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Stephen Ward, Thierry Vedel

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Introduction: The Potential of the Internet Revisited

BY STEPHEN WARD AND THIERRY VEDEL

The net is the world's only functioning political anarchy but it could soon become a major tool for democracy by allowing anyone anywhere access to information and opinions of anyone else, anywhere else. A morsel is being given to mankind with one instruction: 'Eat Me', so that we may grow. (Rael A. Fenchurch, *Demos Quarterly*, 4, 1994, p. 36)

IN the space of little more than a decade the Internet has moved from the preserve of computer geeks and academics to becoming a global media of central concern for political actors and government policy makers and the public. Barely a day goes by without the Internet being declared as a panacea to a host of social and political problems or, alternatively, being held responsible for the promotion of pornography, racism and terrorism.

As with other technological advances in the twentieth century, the arrival of the Internet heralded an initial burst of techno-enthusiasm, with claims that the Internet would revolutionise political systems.¹ Part of this idea was built on a deterministic belief that the Internet is somehow different from other media and communication tools. Its supposedly unique inherent characteristics including: the lack of editorial control; its decentralised nature; the speed and volume of information that could be transferred worldwide; and centrally, the interactive and networking capacity of technologies would provide solutions to our rather tired system of representative democracy.

Yet, within five years, a consensus appeared to have developed that the Internet was being normalised into the traditional political world. Based on more empirically driven studies, mostly in liberal democracies, sceptics suggested that the Internet, as with previous technologies, would be adopted and adapted by mainstream political actors. Far from being a revolutionary force, some commentators now argued that the already dominant political forces would use their pre-existing power resources and advantages to control and neutralise any pluralist tendencies of the new media.² Moreover, sceptics pointed out that there was no inherent reason why the technology should be used for democratic purposes or politics at all. Indeed, most Internet content is not about politics but sex, sport and shopping. In just a few years, therefore, the Internet had moved from a harbinger of a new era of democracy to a mere leisure tool.

This volume assesses some of these claims and issues in the UK context. This introductory piece briefly outlines the growth of the Internet in the UK and then sets out the main areas of debate in the developing research agenda over the past decade. The remaining articles then concentrate on three key themes:

- **Participation and democracy:** Using new survey data, di Gennaro and Dutton's piece focuses on whether the Internet can attract new people into the political process and also improve the intensity of participation? Or whether new technologies merely exacerbate existing participation divides by providing another communication tool for the already engaged? Thierry Vedel, Scott Wright, and Ross Ferguson and Barry Griffiths all deal with different aspects of how and what the Internet contributes to democracy. Vedel examines the concept of e-democracy reminding us of its long history predating the Internet, whilst Wright and Ferguson and Griffiths assess online consultation exercises, e-voting and blogs as examples of more practical uses of information communication technologies (ICTs) for democratic purposes. One of the key questions here is what types of democracy are emerging online (direct, consumerist, deliberative) and whether technologies are facilitating new and innovative types of behaviour or reinforcing and accelerating pre-existing trends within democracy?
- **Institutional and organisational adaptation:** Richard Allan's and Helen Margett's articles look at the way that both traditional institutions such as parliament and government departments have adapted to the Internet era. By contrast, Jenny Pickerill and Maura Conway analyse the less institutionalised, outsider organisations and networks use of ICTs, including radical protest campaigns and terrorist groups. Here we ask whether the Internet, as some argue, is a tool that has primarily assisted the less hierarchical, less formalised new social movements (NSMs), global networks and flash campaigns or does cyberspace simply reflect existing institutional power configurations?
- **Governance and regulation of the Internet:** Richard Collins examines the development of a complex system of regulation and control of the Internet. The key concerns here are whether it is possible to regulate the Internet successfully and does the new media environment create a new level of problems distinct from the traditional media?

The growth of the UK Internet

The Internet began to emerge in the public domain in the UK in 1994 and enter wider public consciousness over the following year. Whilst the audience at this point was limited largely to elites—government

institutions, many big businesses, large NGOs and the main parties all created their first web presence in this period. Initial use amongst the general public at home was restricted by the cost and reliability of Internet access packages and dial-up connections. Even after two to three years, less than 10% of British public had home access by the 1997 general election. Although the rapid growth of e-mail in the workplace gave an indicator of future levels of activity. 1997–2000 saw the beginning of a period of extensive growth of the Internet. The emergence of Freeserve in 1998 along with the growing market competitiveness amongst Internet Service Providers provided significant boost to access through the reduction of costs.³ By the time of 2001 election, around one-third of the public had moved online and within a further five years this had almost doubled again. Some of this expansion is connected with the general growth of home computers but most notably in homes where there are school-age children.⁴

The main change in the last few years has been the rapid development of broadband which overtook dial-up access for the first time in 2004. This has allowed users to access the Internet more quickly and exploit its more sophisticated features notably the audio-visual elements. Browsing time amongst the UK public has also increased as flat rate costs and the ‘always on’ feature of broadband make the Internet more attractive and convenient.

Whilst these figures suggest an inevitable and inexorable growth of new media technologies, it is worth remembering that the diffusion rates of previous technologies, including radio, telephone and television, were much slower. In less than a decade, the Internet has gone from almost nothing to a mass market. Nevertheless, despite this rapid growth, the diffusion patterns reveal some persistent divides. Whilst early adopters tended to be, unsurprisingly, amongst the elite, middle class, professional groups, initial divides also opened up between men and women and young and old. Whilst some of these divides have been diluted overtime (notably the gender gap), others, especially social class and age, remain persistent. Indeed, in some cases they even appear to have widened.⁵ In 2006, those without access still tend to be amongst the poor and the elderly. Even where socially disadvantaged groups have access it often remains unequal in terms of quality. Moreover, recently rates of growth have slowed and although there is potential for further growth, there is a significant minority of the UK public (perhaps as large as 20%) who simply have no interest in accessing the Internet, suggesting that some divides are unlikely to be overcome quickly or easily.

The public, political engagement and the Internet

In the political sphere, at the micro-level, much of the interest in new ICTs has focused on whether they could stimulate engagement in politics and more generally change people’s political behaviour and consumption patterns. As we have noted elsewhere, the interest in

participation is not surprising, since the Internet has emerged against a backdrop of concerns about apparently declining public engagement in politics, lack of knowledge about politics and heightened levels of scepticism about politicians and mainstream political institutions.⁶ The drastic drop in turnout at the 2001 general election provided a catalyst to those looking for solutions to this apparent crisis of representative politics, one of which was the use of new media tools.⁷

The potency of the Internet as means of facilitating engagement has centred on increasing opportunities to participate, lowering the barriers to participation and enhancing the quality of the participatory experience. It has been suggested that new media tools could do all three. Firstly, the interactive elements of new technologies provide significant opportunities to create far more channels through which to engage in the political process. E-mail, blogs, online discussion or consultation fora all potentially open up new ways to participate and engage. Moreover, one can communicate more directly than in the past without having to rely on others (representatives) to articulate your views. In the short term, it was hoped that both the novelty and the more modern image of using online methods might attract new participants into the political process.⁸

Secondly, it was not just about creating new or different channels of participation, but how such channels could lower the barriers to, and increase the quality of, participating. New technologies, such as e-mail and websites, offer the potential reduction of participatory costs since at the push of a button, from the comfort of one's own home, at a time of your own choosing, it might be possible to take part in political activity. Searching for information, joining political organisations and expressing one's views could all be made easier online. No longer would it be necessary to have to attend meetings in remote, draughty town halls on dark winter evenings in order to take part in the political process. Hence, for the time poor, the housebound and the geographically remote, Internet-based forms of communication offer significant gains.

ICTs also potentially lower mobilisation and participation costs in two other respects: the ability to find and link-up with other individuals with common interests or concerns. Geography matters much less when one can communicate with individuals on a global scale and foster and sustain networks which were previously difficult to create. Additionally, the amount of information readily available to those with access to the Internet has been significantly expanded. Arguably, since there tends to be a positive correlation between exposure to increased media, news and information, ICTs could potentially create further socialisation and stimulate additional political activity.⁹

Although mass survey evidence testing of such assumptions is still relatively limited and fragmented in the UK, the consensus amongst most of the large studies in 2005 indicates a fairly narrow impact.¹⁰ In

particular, the main surveys suggest the following broad trends: First, relatively small numbers are involved in active online politics (joining organisations online, signing e-petitions, taking part in online discussion, etc.), suggesting that between two and eight percent of the online population (one to five percent of the overall population) are actively engaged. However, significantly more use the Internet for news and information gathering—up to a quarter of the British public now use online sources for news and current affairs.

Secondly, the profile of online participants is not significantly different from traditional activists. In other words, those that participate offline, tend to dominate online political engagement as well.¹¹ The stereotypical profile of an online participant is more likely to be an urban-based, middle class, male who is already highly politically engaged. Nor is activity online necessarily novel and different. People tend to use the Internet to supplement their offline behaviour and use online sources with which they are familiar with in the offline world. The BBC online, for example, dwarfs any other news and information source in the UK.

Overall, much of the survey evidence suggests a reinforcement effect, if not the possibility of exacerbating existing political divides, whereby those that gain the most through online access and engagement are those who are already powerful and already politically active, whilst those disadvantaged offline remain silent online.¹² Although some now even doubt that the Internet encourages or stimulates political activity even amongst those predisposed towards political activity.¹³

Nevertheless, the evidence is not absolutely clear-cut. There are also indications from UK data that the potential for online mobilisation and engagement remains in some contexts. ICTs have clearly played a useful role in mobilising and organising one-off protests, demonstrations and events. Protests as diverse as Countryside Alliance's march on London to Anti-Iraq war protest have seen considerable online mobilisation efforts, although it is more difficult to know whether this one-off activity has led to sustained involvement.¹⁴ As Pickerill's article suggests, one of the growth areas of political campaigning has been global protest. Whilst this is not new, the Internet appears to be accelerating the globalisation of political and social protest. Thus the large-scale anti-globalisation rallies, Make Poverty History and Live 8 campaigns have all been Internet assisted.

A further area of debate is the potential to engage young people online. As di Gennaro and Dutton note in this volume, some survey evidence points to the disproportionate engagement of young people via new technologies, at least superficially. At one level, this is no surprise since young people have generally grown up with the technology as part of their everyday experiences and have access to the Internet via the education system. Both Gibson et al. and Lusoli and Ward found small indications that ICTs are being used by young people who were not

previously political active—especially among higher and further education students.¹⁵ However, other studies indicate more limited long-term impacts. Livingstone’s comprehensive work on children and young people suggests that whilst new technologies are increasingly used for civic purposes by some (particularly older teenage girls), they are unlikely to change the overall patterns of young people’s participation in politics.¹⁶ Norris and Curtice go even further, from their survey data they found no evidence that access to the Internet makes the young more likely to be politically active.¹⁷

All this highlights the fact that the Internet per se is unlikely to stimulate widespread mobilisation or participation, but maybe important in certain organisational and issue contexts. This continues to underline the importance of political organisations and social networks as important mobilising factors rather than technology alone. Many people won’t participate unless asked to do so and are interested on issue basis rather than in politics generally. Nevertheless, as Norris and Curtice point out, ‘even if the Internet does not result in more people becoming politically active, it could still have important consequences if it makes the political activity that does take place more effective’.¹⁸

Representative institutions, organisations and the Internet?

At the organisational level, there have also been similar predictions about the potential impact of ICTs to foster radical change. Here, the debate has tended to focus on the ability of ICTs to facilitate new organisational forms, new internal dynamics and a shift in the balance of power between organisations.

CREATING NEW ORGANISATIONAL FORMS? Much interest has focussed on the potential to create new types of campaigns, networks and virtual structures online. Theoretically, it is no longer necessary for an organisation to maintain a physical infrastructure. New organisations could simply operate from cyberspace using electronic communication to recruit supporters, debate and organise, whilst traditional institutions and organisations could become leaner and increasingly virtual. Yet, whilst UK parties and trade unions have dabbled with the idea of virtual structures, traditional mainstream organisations have generally been slow to exploit this potential and have tended to maintain their traditional organisational forms alongside any virtual structures.¹⁹ Although there was much hype surrounding the creation of virtual trade union branches, for example, these have remained largely embryonic.

However, different types of Internet-based groups have emerged. As both Margetts and Allan point out here, one type of virtual organisation that is becoming increasingly prominent are those providing public information or reinterpreting government or official information.

One model is the My Society initiative (www.mysociety.org) which is a virtual charitable organisation dedicated to building websites to improve civic and community life including: www.writetothem.com, www.theyworkforyou.com and www.hearfromyourmp.com, all aimed at connecting people to their parliamentary representatives.²⁰ Sites such as these provide a vast amount of accessible material on government and politicians and also provide easier direct route to contacting representatives.

Other new virtual actors include the growth of blog campaigns. Although the UK blogosphere is newer, less well developed and has had far less impact than in the US, socio-political blogs (online news-current affairs or campaign diaries) are becoming increasingly popular. So far though, many UK blogs, as Ferguson and Griffiths argue here, often do little more than recycle news from the mainstream media rather than operating campaigns as such. A growing number are monitoring the activities of political representatives (e.g. *Online Parliamentarian—incunabula.typepad.com/parliament/*—dedicated to covering e-democracy issues in the Scottish Parliament) organisations and institutions such as traditional media outlets (e.g. the Daily Mail—www.mailwatch.co.uk or the BBC—biased-bbc.blogspot.com/). A smaller group such as www.bloggerheads.com are, however, running political campaigns and sometimes mobilising people on a diverse range of issues. Iraq and the war on terror in particular have created considerable interest from bloggers. Many of these online campaigns, networks and blogs are relatively short-lived flash phenomena, but interestingly some of these campaigns are highly flexible and adaptable. So as one issue campaign disappears, the network can lie dormant but re-emerge months later under a different guise or title on a different issue quickly reactivating earlier links. For example, the ‘hands up for peace’ network aimed at mobilising school children against the Iraq War originated, in part, out of an earlier online campaign around the sustainable development summit in Johannesburg.

INTERNAL RESTRUCTURING—REDUCING HIERARCHIES? As well as potentially allowing new organisational forms, one area of debate has been how far the Internet might internally restructure organisations/institutions. Much has been made of the democratising influence of new technologies, that they can resist the iron law of oligarchy and institutionalisation to produce more flexible grassroots decentralised style of organisation (see both Pickerill and Conway in this volume). This was based on the ability of ICTs to alter both the vertical relationship between members/supporters and elites and also horizontal member-to-member relationships.²¹ In the case of the former, it has been argued that the creation of intranets and internal online discussion fora, e-mail lists and the like, might make leaders more accountable to members and

grassroots supporters. Through ICTs members can have more frequent and direct access to elites to communicate their opinions. Equally, websites might be used to provide more information and more open forms of decision-making that would improve both the accountability and transparency of elite level decision-making. In terms of horizontal relationships, new ICTs potentially allow members, supporters and internal groups to communicate and network more effectively with one another without the need to go through official channels or organisational headquarters. Furthermore, the lack of control structures within the Internet mean that it is harder for organisational elites to control internal flows of information and even dissent. Consequently, potentially it makes it easier to challenge elites from below. The recent anti-Charles Kennedy website and e-petition (www.kennedymustgo.com) set up by disaffected Liberal Democrat supporters aimed at pressuring Kennedy to resign as Liberal Democrat leader might be indicative of a future trend.

Underlying such claims are normative assumptions that flattening hierarchies will increase the power of grassroots members and create a more participatory form of internal democracy. Sceptics, however, have subsequently questioned whether technologies are really likely to facilitate such unidirectional changes. Simply providing electronic tools for participation is not the same as actually empowering members. The participatory context is clearly important—who controls the agenda for electronic discussion? What are the rules for access? How do the existing rules of an organisation incorporate electronic channels? And is participation viewed as important? Several studies have indicated that because of the resource and power advantages existing elites and organisational headquarters are more likely to dominate the e-agenda and use it to strengthen their position of power. For example, Pickerill's study of Friends of the Earth (FoE) UK suggests that whilst ICTs offered a challenge to FoE's hierarchy, its overall effect was to maintain and reinforce vertical hierarchies.²² At a basic level, beyond the headquarters of many parties, trade unions and pressure groups, branch/local level access and use of new ICTs is far more patchy.²³ Others have questioned how far ICTs will strengthen collective grassroots activist structures.²⁴ Aside from whether virtual networks can engender the same levels of activity and participation, it is possible that ICTs may lead to a strengthening of the vertical relations between organisational elites and individual members but have limited impact on the horizontal level. Hence, if organisational leaders take a proactive stance with ICTs they can use it to bypass collective grassroots activist structures and appeal directly for support from the wider often more passive membership. In short, therefore, it is not yet clear that any particular model of internal democracy is favoured by the adoption of ICTs, much is clearly dependent on the pre-existing ethos of the organisation in question.

ACCELERATING ORGANISATIONAL PLURALISM? It is not simply within organisations/institutions that ICTs might impact but perhaps more fundamentally some have argued that the Internet might shift the balance of power between organisations and institutions. Debate has tended to crystallise around ideas of accelerated pluralism and equalisation on the one hand, or a normalisation process minimising change on the other. Notions of accelerated pluralism and equalising the communications playing field indicate that outsider, oppositional or fringe organisations are likely to benefit disproportionately from the rise of new ICTs and potentially pose more of a challenge to mainstream political establishment.²⁵ The idea of new media technologies supporting a more pluralistic environment rests on: Firstly, the lowering of communication costs—compared to the traditional media, the Internet is a cheap and open publishing source where obscure websites from the political fringe can sit alongside the establishment. Secondly, the Internet also theoretically increases the communication reach of outsider organisations. Whereas television and newspapers have limited space and editors can edit out fringe concerns, the Internet provides an unlimited platform with which to get one's message across; Thirdly, precisely because of the low costs and the lack of editorial control, small and fringe organisations can create an impression of legitimacy and appear more credible in cyberspace than they actually are in reality. It is difficult for a web surfer to gauge the size, legitimacy or authenticity of organisations by simply looking at a website; Fourthly, it has been suggested that the original, anarchic, decentralised nature of the Internet with free flows of information and a common space, relatively unregulated by governments benefits flexible, non-hierarchical types of organisation outside the mainstream such as direct action protest campaigns, anarchistic and libertarian networks whose values are supposedly best reflected in cyberspace.²⁶

The idea of equalisation or accelerated pluralism has been increasingly challenged. Resnick argues, that although originally a playground for the alternative and anarchic increasingly the Internet has been normalised.²⁷ In the political sphere this means that the large traditional political forces will come to predominate as they do in other media. This normalisation thesis argues that the increasing commercialisation and professionalisation of cyberspace has squeezed the space for alternative politics.²⁸ Far from being a cost-free exercise, sophisticated new media campaigning involves considerable investment of both time and money. Smaller volunteer-run or amateur activist organisations are unlikely to be able to match their professionalised counterparts since they are reliant on the goodwill of members or supporters who often lack the time and skills to manage web-campaigns on a continuous basis. Furthermore, Hindman et al's research in the US indicates that search engines have a tendency to promote links to a relatively small number of political sites resulting in these organisations having a much

higher online profile. Far from diversifying sources of information and creating a more pluralistic environment the world wide web (WWW) promotes a winner takes all culture.²⁹

Normalisers have also argued that because the Internet is a pull technology, political organisations are reliant on citizens having enough prior interest to visit their sites and the technology alone will not create such interest. This has led Norris to argue that party websites, for example, largely preach to the already converted i.e. supporters and sympathisers of existing organisations rather than reaching the unconverted or the politically uninterested.³⁰ Moreover, the Internet has contributed to further fragmentation of the media that presents the consumer with theoretically more choice but means that they can choose not to be exposed to politics.³¹ With web portals and digital television packages citizens can easily ignore politics. Whereas, with traditional terrestrial broadcasting the public is regularly exposed to political news even if only as passive consumers.

Finally, whilst the Internet is often depicted as an uncontrolled and uncontrollable platform for the radical and the extreme, it is clear that governments and established interests are devoting increasing amounts of time to trying to regulate and control the Internet (see Collins this issue). As both Pickerill and Conway remind us in this volume, increasing attempts have been made to restrict and monitor the online activities of a range of protest campaigns and terrorist or crime networks.

So far, changes in the organisational and institutional structure of UK politics are somewhat mixed. Whilst the Internet has become a key organisational and administrative necessity it has not revolutionised internal structures. Nor has it significantly upset the balance of power between organisations. It's difficult to think of a political equivalent to eBay or Amazon. Nevertheless, ICTs have undoubtedly lowered the start-up costs for campaigns and are facilitating the growth of new networks and organisations allowing them to operate in ways that weren't previously possible. In short, as Ward et al argue the Internet is widening the political playing field and also accelerating established trends such as growth of direct action protest, single-issue politics that predate the arrival of the Internet.³² Whilst new technologies have not revolutionised or destroyed traditional representative institutions or collective organisations they have benefited less than NSMs, protest campaigns and flexible, decentralised networks.

Lagging behind?

Compared with changes in other fields, such as business or social sector organisations, the traditional mainstream political sphere has been relatively cautious and conservative in its approach towards new technologies. ICTs are often still used as one-way, top-down communication tools by government and representatives replicating their traditional broadcast communication patterns. The unwillingness of mainstream

political organisations to use new media creatively is perhaps understandable and stems from a number of factors:

The institutional fragmentation of government and parliament is not necessarily conducive to fostering a coherent approach to information technology (IT). IT tends to cross-cut the traditional bureaucratic sectorisation of Westminster and Whitehall leading to a lack of ownership and leadership. As Allan's article reveals, in Parliament, for example, there is a high degree of division and also individualisation. Many complain of a lack of corporate culture in Westminster and a struggle to foster a collective identity because, parliaments essentially comprise individualised small businesses (MPs' offices) each doing their own thing. Fragmentation is compounded by the poor reputation that IT has within government and parliament. As Margetts notes, the experiences of many government departments with IT projects have often been extremely difficult. Such experiences often lead to a latent technophobia that runs through many political institutions. In part, it also reflects the wider culture of politicians (very few of whom have any IT background), who operate and win promotion through a very traditional partisan, adversarial, face-to-face culture. From local party meetings, parliamentary debates and doorstep canvassing, most UK politicians are still wedded to the adversarial cut and thrust style of politics. Politicians often seem to believe that there is little demand for ICT within the political system or that ICTs attract the wrong sort of people—cranks, spammers, single-issue fanatics and the already privileged middle class.³³ Overall, the result is often a fear factor within mainstream institutions. For parties, parliaments and government departments, their IT failures produce unwelcome publicity and are scrutinised in a way that does not apply to the less institutionalised parts of the political world such as NSMs, consequently they have more to lose. Not surprisingly, given the track record of government, there is a fear of making mistakes that has engendered a cautious approach to technology.

Democracy and the Internet revisited

At the systemic level, the nature of the argument has focussed on how ICTs might impact on the democratic system. Much of the initial discussion centred on two rather sterile debates, direct versus representative democracy and e-democracy/cyberdemocracy versus techno-populism. In part, this is not entirely surprising given the apparently increasing problems of 19th century style representative parliamentary and party based democracy. The apparent unpopularity of the institutions of representative democracy and lack of trust in representatives meant that there was a ready-made audience looking for solutions. The rise of new media technologies appeared to offer an alternative route for both direct democracy enthusiasts and politicians alike. Peter Mandelson's well-publicised comments about technology contributing to the end of the system of pure representative democracy is a good example of this.³⁴

The most radical and often speculative scenarios to emerge from early accounts was the idea that the Internet could hasten the demise of traditional representative democracy by producing a process of deinstitutionalisation and disintermediation as organisational hierarchies are flattened and displaced by direct input from citizens.³⁵ At its most revolutionary, a return to the classical model of unmediated direct democracy was envisaged where new technologies allow for much more regular and direct input from individuals. E-polling, e-voting and e-referenda all make it significantly more possible for citizens to have a direct say in governing themselves bypassing traditional mediating institutions and organisations such as parties, pressure groups and parliaments. Negroponte even discusses the possible end of the political nation state as technologies undermine geographical boundaries.³⁶ In short, the organisation and administration of direct democracy in a mass system was no longer untenable. Obviously, given the revolutionary nature of change envisaged here the operational detail of direct democracy has been less than precise. Whilst practical details are somewhat limited, one-dimensional normative debates about the benefits or drawbacks of direct democracy have flourished. While proponents see technology-enhanced direct democracy producing a new more responsive system of governance replacing the outmoded organisations and rules of a pre-modern era, critics point to the possible rise of electronic populism or demagoguery open to abuse and manipulation.³⁷

Aside from whether direct democracy would be a beneficial development, the idea of removal of political organisational framework seems fanciful for several reasons. An unwritten assumption in these types of accounts is the inability of political organisations to withstand the tide of technological change. Yet, as historical studies of the arrival of previous technologies remind us, most organisations tend to adapt and adopt the technology. Additionally, proponents of direct democracy underestimate the extent to which people wish to participate on individual basis. Citizens may lack time, skills, resources and interest to be involved on the scale required. They may also derive tangible psychological benefits from participating collectively. Hence, even if the technology is available some citizens may prefer to see experts and professionals in pressure groups carry out participation for them or wish to participate collectively themselves. Even in more direct forms of democracy, as Budge points out, the aggregating function of political parties could still be of prime importance for assisting citizens to make choices.³⁸

Recently, more nuanced arguments have begun to emerge that move away from simple dichotomies between representative and direct democracy. Stephen Coleman has written extensively about the potential of the new technologies to facilitate a reshaping of representative democracy and of representation itself rather than its replacement. Coleman suggests that new media tools (although not simply ICTs alone) could help create a form of direct representation.³⁹ Here new technologies are

not used simply for balloting or polling or irregular consultations but are used to form the basis of an ongoing conversational dialogue and deliberative discussion between citizens and their representatives, where citizens are engaged in the policy process as equals rather than being tolerated or patronised. This is more, he argues, than simply reconnecting people to the current processes of representation, which would be unlikely to work, but ultimately about changing the longer term culture of both representatives and represented promoting more efficacy and mutual understanding.

So far much of the empirically guided work in the UK indicates that the dominant trend towards new media amongst government and representatives has been a relatively limited modernisation approach, largely trying to maintain existing practices and relations but in new formats (see Wright, Allan, and Ferguson and Griffiths this volume). Examining e-government and e-democracy initiatives, some have argued that what has emerged is a form of thin, consumerist style democracy. Here ICTs are being used primarily to improve the efficiency of government services and citizens are regarded as consumers with a relatively narrow set of rights concentrating on the low politics of service delivery. In essence, ICTs are being used by government to continue trends in public service reform begun in the 1980s.⁴⁰ However, this alone is unlikely to help representatives or satisfy the public, without an effort to harness technologies and develop new ways of working, new styles of communication and wider political reforms. In the short term, at least, it appears that we are entering a period of what might be termed 'difficult democracy',⁴¹ where ICTs might provide increased openness, information and access (for some), but this in turn places strains and pressures on a democratic representative system which was originally developed around nineteenth- and early twentieth-century politics. We can identify five key pressures on the democratic system heightened by the Internet era: (1) Disaggregation and acceleration—as we have noted above, ICTs are particularly good at promoting flash mobilisation and protest and oppositional politics based around individual issues. For representatives, ICTs appear to create more noise and chaos in which politicians have to aggregate and distinguish key issues; (2) The amplification of voices of those already engaged and active in politics. There is a danger that ICTs will merely perpetuate and in some cases exacerbate pre-existing participatory divisions;⁴² (3) Fragmentation of representation—the amplification effect is then further underpinned by the fragmentation of online provision by representatives and government. As we noted above, those in highly wired area (often middle class urban and wealthy) have a better levels of access and representation than those who perhaps most require it;⁴³ (4) Raised expectations—the public have significant expectations of online activity from representatives and representative institutions but little understanding of the formal processes or restraints under which governments and MPs operate. Again, the risk

is that ICTs will heighten dissatisfaction if representatives fail to respond or continue with existing practice; (5) Growing distance between formal and informal democracy—replicating existing practice is likely to further intensify the divide between an increasingly vibrant informal DIY network style of politics which is assisted by new media tools and the formal system of representative democracy which is increasingly ignored, misunderstood and often seen as irrelevant.

None of this is of course pre-determined. Technologies do not drive one particular route or type of democracy. The potential for ICT assisted reinvigoration and opportunities for innovation as described by Coleman remains. In part, this is because ‘modernisation without democratisation’ is unlikely to work. Neither the public nor representatives are likely to be satisfied by such an approach and pressure for alternative solutions are likely to grow in the long term.

Conclusions

At one level, the changes facilitated by ICTs so far and the response of the political sphere look modest particularly compared to other sectors. This might lead one to conclude that the Internet is of limited consequence for democratic politics. However, we would argue there is danger of underestimating the ongoing changes in digital era. Often the way the debate has been defined has not assisted understanding of the interplay between politics and new technologies. The main problems include:

- The overhyping of new technologies which framed much of the initial debates has been unhelpful to the subsequent analysis. To understand the role of technologies we need to move away from all encompassing debates about good Internet–bad Internet or separating the Internet from other technologies and more broadly the political, economic and social realities that frame uses of technologies.
- Unhelpful comparisons: There has been a consistent trend to compare the UK unfavourably with the US or see the US as a model for future developments in the UK. Whilst it is tempting to do this, it is not necessarily helpful. One example illustrates the problem of looking for irrelevant comparisons. Much excitement was created during 2005 election campaign by looking for the British equivalent of the Howard Dean campaign and then subsequent disappointment not to find one. Yet this ignores the central role of the UK social, political and media environments in shaping the use of technology in different ways to the US. Indeed, one might argue that aspects of the British system actually downplay the role of ICTs in areas such as traditional political campaigning. The UK’s well-entrenched party-centred system with constituency campaigning based on comparatively small geographic areas means that the old techniques of doorstep canvassing and face-to-face contact are more valuable than e-campaigns.⁴⁴

- Narrow definitions and measurement: It maybe that we need to extend or move beyond our traditional definitions of what constitutes the political. Technologies could be extending the nature of political activity and debate. The growth of viral online satire and political humour is one area that is worthy of further exploration. We also need to consider the knock-on effects of expectations and pressures from outside the traditional political sphere. As Margetts notes, people's relations with a range of other institutions have changed significantly over the last decade. One question might be how far changes in other areas of people's lifestyles and social interactions eventually reshape their expectations of government and the political system generally.
- Early days: Finally, it's important to remember that in many respects we have barely started and that technology is evolving rapidly. Nor do we necessarily yet have the consistent long-term research evidence or research tools to understand the impact of new ICTs. Analysing the role of television in the 1950s, some 30 years after it first emerged, would have underestimated its eventual impact. In many ways, the Internet, at the end of its first decade, has already become more ubiquitous and arguably more influential.

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