

Democratic agency in an age of digital networks

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Resumo

A política contemporânea possui uma qualidade transitória e indeterminada, pairando de forma inquieta entre o centralizado e o em rede, o nacional e o global, o gerenciado e o populista, o analógico e o digital. Práticas políticas antes tomadas como certas começaram a parecer instáveis e modos emergentes de articulação política estão desestabilizando complacências institucionais. Ao longo do século XX, a consolidação de democracias políticas gerou abordagens de rotina à produção, ao processamento e à comunicação de mensagens políticas. Este sistema de comunicação política resultou em relações previsíveis entre elites políticas, mediadores jornalísticos e cidadãos. Como espero ter deixado claro nesta palestra, seria ingênuo supor que simplesmente mover a comunicação política online irá enriquecer ou degradar as vozes dos cidadãos democráticos. O antigo debate entre o bem e o mal da internet é despropositado e redundante. Porém, se a pressão democrática popular pelo tipo de construção de capacidade cívica que eu elenquei nesta palestra ganhar tração, tecnologias digitais, espaços e códigos podem, realmente, ter um papel significativo em facilitar práticas conducentes a uma democracia mais inclusiva, respeitosa e deliberativa.

Abstract

Contemporary politics has a transitional and indeterminate quality, hovering uneasily between, the centralised and the networked, the national and the global, the managed and the populist and the analogue and the digital. Once taken-for-granted political practices have begun to seem unstable and emergent modes of political articulation are unsettling institutional complacencies. During the course of the twentieth century the consolidation of political democracies generated routine approaches to producing, processing, and communicating political messages. This political communication system resulted in predictable relations between political elites, journalistic mediators and citizens. As I hope I have made clear in this lecture, it would be naïve to assume that simply moving political communication online will either enrich or degrade the voices of democratic citizens. The old debate between Internet-Good and Internet-Bad is pointless and redundant. But if popular democratic pressure for the kind of civic capability-building that I have outlined in this lecture were to gain traction, digital technologies, spaces and codes might indeed play a significant role in facilitating practices conducive to a more inclusive, respectful and deliberative democracy.

Democratic agency in an age of digital networks

Stephen COLEMAN

Contemporary politics has a transitional and indeterminate quality, hovering uneasily between, the centralised and the networked, the national and the global, the managed and the populist and the analogue and the digital.

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During the course of the twentieth century the consolidation of political democracies generated routine approaches to producing, processing, and communicating political messages. This political communication system resulted in predictable relations between political elites, journalistic mediators and citizens. Four interrelated factors have profoundly disrupted this system.

1) The first emanates from the seismic consequences of globalisation.

As the core activities of social existence – economic, cultural and political – have come to be integrated in real time on a planetary scale, earlier notions of place-based and spatially-bounded power seem to lack meaning.

Nation states persist, not least because of their intense symbolic appeal, but their capacity to exercise sovereign power is constrained by global forces beyond their control. Politics and power have become increasingly decoupled.

The most pressing social challenges, from climate change, pandemics and the drugs' trade to unregulated migration, terror threats and conflicts of moral fundamentalisms are beyond the political scope of any single elected government. Governments are increasingly preoccupied with aspects of social life that they are incapable of governing.

Huge powers are assumed by largely unelected and unaccountable transnational bodies. Nationally-constituted political processes acquire a peripheral status, often characterised by a grandiosity of political rhetoric that cannot disguise their irrelevance.

Faced with the tension between parochial politics and global power, democratically-inclined thinkers have found themselves looking for spaces in which the increasingly interconnected people of the world can hold global power to account.

2) Secondly, the institutions through which political power has traditionally been mediated have fallen into disrepair.

Political parties, which are supposed to represent the interests, preferences and values of citizens and translate them into achievable policies begin to look like peculiar associations of the unrepresentatively committed.

Government institutions, which derive their legitimacy from the electoral consent of the people in whose name they act, seem incapable of developing communicative relations with people that reflect the expectations of everyday sociality in the digital era.

The mass media, whose role is to hold the powerful to account, provide citizens with information that allows them to make considered choices about matters that affect them and maintain a space for pluralistic public dialogue, are struggling to work out effective ways of talking to audiences that are now capable of talking back to them.

In most democratic countries mainstream parties, government bureaucracies and the mass media are the least trusted institutions. All of them are trying desperately to reinvent themselves; to appear more open to public input and less manifestly locked into a legacy of thinking of 'the masses' as a seducible audience rather than potential partners.

It sometimes feels as if centralised parties, government bureaucracies and the mainstream media are historical holding operations, enduring because nothing has yet emerged to displace them.

3) *Thirdly, hitherto distinct boundaries between public and private have become increasingly unstable and bedevilled by ambiguities between first-person experiences and universal concerns.*

Issues once regarded as domestic and intimate, such as family dynamics, personal identities, sexual relationships and aesthetic values, have been taken up as matters of public contestation.

At the same time, issues once thought to be best confined to an impersonal political language of instrumental rationality are now often discussed in terms of experiential sensibility. Authenticity emerges as a register of dextrous mediation between the disparate visibilities of the new publicness.

Previously conceived in terms of linear transmission, the political communication system has become porous and the democratic project, once limited to a clearly delineated 'public sphere', seeps into innumerable areas of social interaction that cannot be easily categorised as public or non-public, political or non-political.

4) *Fourthly, the structure of the media ecology, through which messages and meanings travel, has changed.*

Unleashed by innovations in microelectronics and communication technologies, the emergent ubiquity of weakly-linked networks that exceed state boundaries has coincided with a decentering of political power and an escalation of new patterns of dispersed and unorthodox collective action.

The Internet, which is, in reality, a network of communication networks linked by codified programmes that determine metacommunication, has emerged as an axial zone of political appearance and influence.

Those who possess dexterity in techniques of switching between networks and exploiting weak links have an advantage in an era of distributed governance.

With the emergence of the Internet as a publically-accessible network by hundreds of millions of people, it is no longer possible to speak of the media as centralised, quasi-industrial disseminators of public knowledge to a mass audience.

The emergence of digital communication technologies have seriously disrupted journalistic practices, weakened gatekeeping privileges, expanded agenda-setting, circumvented contrived information scarcity and opened up a vast space for autonomous public interaction.

This new media ecology has not displaced the old media system, but reconfigured it, leaving centres of communicative power vulnerable to a range of voices that had previously been easy to marginalise or ignore.

The space, rhythm and flow of political communication in an era of networks presents formidable challenges for top-down models of authority and control. Governments seem to be stuck in a moment when democracy is neither sustainable as it stands nor amenable to coherent strategies of re-invention.

Faced with these uncertainties, political institutions have tended to dig in, sometimes replicating routine processes online in the name of digital democracy, hoping that this will curb the contagion. All politicians now agree that they must govern with and through the Internet, but few are clear about how to do so.

If they look to some of the more enthusiastic claims made by researchers, they are told that the Internet changes everything or that it changes nothing in the political sphere - but such claims over-state the powers of technology, reducing history to a crude study of media effects.

My own approach is to resist the notion that digital networks possess some kind of deterministic agency and turn instead to what Jay Blumler and I have referred to as ‘the *vulnerable potential*’ of digital networks to the expand the range of self-articulating moves that citizens feel able to make in order to stamp their efficacy upon the political process.

Thinking from this perspective entails a theoretical shift from the reductive idea of social networks as an arid cartography in which political relations appear to be a consequence of spatial position and propinquity to one which regards networks as contextually and contingently enacted formations in which social relations are made and remade through the activities of complex human beings.

In making this theoretical shift, we should most certainly heed the exhortation of the political scientist, Rob Rhodes, to put ‘people back into networks’.

Faced with a global space within which one can lurk, troll, search, filter, connect or scream into the lonely void, the question arises, what do citizens need to be capable of doing and being in order to function as social actors who can exercise democratic agency?

In asking this question, I am drawing upon the economist Amartya Sen’s important translation of the Aristotelian concept, *dunamin*, which refers to the ability of people not merely to function socially, but to choose how they want to function. Capabilities’ theory, then, refers to people’s substantive freedom to engage in social activities that they value.

In the context of democratic agency, I am interested in the extent to which modes of communication – such as digital networks – help to enable people to become the kind of democratic citizens they would wish to be.

In my new book, *Can the Internet Strengthen Democracy?* I have identified four democratic capabilities that could be strengthened through people acting with and upon technologies of digital mediation.

I shall now turn to these four capabilities with a view to summarising what we know about the extent to which they are currently being realised within networked politics and the discrepancies between what citizens need to be capable of doing and the existing political environment in most countries that claim to be democracies.

1) *Being able to make sense of the political world.*

Political information is a public good. Anyone can access it without depleting its availability to others. But having access to information is not in itself of much value unless its recipients can make sense of it.

An illiterate person locked inside a library will be faced with the challenge of deciphering what would at first look like a vast mass of illegible data. People do not simply search for data, but for meaning.

The formidable challenge for democracy is to empower citizens to turn recondite data into useful knowledge. There are two main empirical findings here:

- a) Many Internet users select their information sources on the basis of their existing beliefs and prejudices and resist information sources that are likely to cause cognitive dissonance. We might say that they remain locked into their social networks, resulting in intensified group polarisation.
- b) At the same time, the speed and breadth of online information allows some people to select, evaluate and process unprecedented volumes of information, as well as hyperlinking between contrasting accounts and pluralistic explanations, often inadvertently. When people access media networks such as Facebook and Twitter they are more likely to enter into political discussion with people who don't share their outlooks, regardless of the usual socio-demographic barriers to political engagement. To these more promiscuous digital networkers the Internet provides an independent pathway to political socialisation and participatory behaviour through exposure to cross-cutting political perspectives, sometimes leading them to reconsider their original positions.

From a capabilities perspective, we might ask how tools of interpretation can be developed that can translate the super-abundant store of digitally-accessible information into useful knowledge.

Many Internet users report feeling overwhelmed by data overload. The problem of information overload refers to people's different capacities to devote attention to the range of media content that is available to them.

This is not simply a quantitative problem of there being too much 'stuff' and too many contexts in which it can be found. It also describes a qualitative cultural change, pressurising people to make frequent filtering choices about what really matters to them; to spend more time than they have available making uncertain assessments of the value and credibility of information; and to arrive at faster decisions, driven by the uncontrollable speed of data flows.

Counter-intuitive as it may seem, a valuable contribution that the Internet could make to democracy would be to decelerate exposure, allowing people time to think about what trends and events mean; work out what they think about them; and take time to hear from others who interpret information differently.

Few people would buy a house on the basis of hearing a fast-talking, uninterrupted pitch from a person with an interest in selling it. They would want time to look around, compare it with other houses and take advice from friends and experts.

Think then of an election campaign and the ways in which voters are urged to select a government. The speed of the pitch runs counter to calm reflection: a semiotic bombardment rather than a reasoned appeal.

Sometimes people go online to check on what they have been told during the hurly-burly of the fast-moving campaign. This impulse to check, compare, weigh up and dissect could be better served.

By designing digital resources that effectively slow down the democratic process and allow the majority of people who are neither political aficionados nor technological

wizards to engage reflectively with political information, democracy could be made more inclusively accessible and intelligibly navigable.

Consider two examples of how the Internet has opened up such spaces of democratic deceleration.

TheyWorkForYou.com is a website that provides rich information about representatives' voting records, expenses and speeches in the UK Parliament and also the Scottish Parliament and Northern Irish Assembly.

The 2-300,000 people who access the site each month are able to annotate written parliamentary proceedings and create customised newsfeeds about the latest appearances of individual members, as well as receiving email alerts on any item mentioning certain keywords.

They also have access to video recordings of debates in the House of Commons which can be searched using verbatim, timestamped transcripts.

This is a remarkably successful democratic tool, with one in five of its users not having participated in politics at all in the year prior to using it and not being members of any political group.

Given that the non-profit organisation that runs TheyWorkForYou.com (MySociety) has access to only a small fraction of the funding available to official parliamentary and governmental websites, one can only imagine how much more expansive and detailed such digital monitoring could become if supported by appropriate democratic commitment. The value of this tool is that it allows citizens to take time exploring the ways in which they are being represented.

Rather than having to keep up with obscurely placed reports of parliamentary proceedings, they can ask the kind of specific questions that matter to them. This is not necessarily an alternative to following the fast-moving news, but a personalised supplement to it.

A second project relating to slowed-down politics was initiated by my own team of researchers from the University of Leeds and the Open University who have developed a way of allowing voters to make sense in their own time of the competing political claims made in televised election debates.

In 2015 seven UK party leaders took part in a two-hour televised election debate on ITV.

Within minutes of it ending polling companies declared ‘who won’ on the basis of asking viewers for their snapshot responses.

Even before then, Twitter analysts were making claims about how voters were responding in real time. Everything was geared to instantaneous reactions.

My research team has designed a platform that allows voters to re-watch the debate (or watch it for the first time), viewing all or any selected sections critically by being able to find answers to a range of questions about the sources and accuracy of the claims that debaters were making; the various performative strategies that the debaters employed; the extent to which their arguments were internally consistent and related to what other debaters were saying; and the live responses of viewers to their claims and performances.

Initial user testing:

- 43% might change the way they voted in the light of what they learned
- 80% gained unexpected insights on what the debaters said and stood for
- 66% better appreciated perspectives that they did not share
- 98% would recommend the tool to a friend

The assumption upon which this project was founded is that real-time exposure to fast-talking political arguments is not the best way to arrive at a final, considered judgement about it. Slowing down the political process allows citizens to reflect upon claims made to them and arrive at more refined judgments.

2) *Being open to argumentative exchange*

The political sphere seems to be dominated by the over-opinionated, who will not consider changing their minds, and the under-opinionated, who feel incapable of making up their minds.

The former do not make good democratic citizens because their values and preferences are too rigid. The latter are problematic because they are either over-dependent on leaders to tell them what to do or they abstain from participation.

The purpose of deliberation is to allow both of these groups of people (as well as the large number of citizens who have views, but remain open to persuasion) to be exposed to cross-cutting public discussion with a view to possibly arriving at refined perspectives.

Many deliberative experiments have been conducted to see whether and how exposure to informed, respectful, inclusive discussion leads to preference shifting. Faced with the pressure to justify undeveloped opinions or consider previously unheard ideas, people generally respond with a degree of intellectual flexibility that is less likely to be found in narrowly homophilic settings.

Two contrasting findings arise from studies of online political talk.

- a) Where spaces for online discussion of political issues are carefully designed and structured, often as experimental projects, participants tend to behave in ways that are more consistent with democratic norms than in offline discussion. Research has found that online deliberators are more open to considering and embracing a broadened repertoire of arguments and evidence; more likely to change their minds about where they stand; and likely to retain their more reflective judgements months after the discussions conclude. (However, the quality of online discourse deteriorates markedly in highly partisan contexts, which manifest identical characteristics to offline polarised spaces).

- b) It is rare for online political discussion to be meaningfully integrated into institutional processes of policy formation or decision-making. To put it bluntly, most online political talkers speak only to themselves. Even when online discussions provide insightful narrative perspectives, valuable (often local) evidence and coherent accounts of how discrete arguments relate to one another, political decision-makers fail to engage with them in more than tokenistic ways.

Apart from institutionally-connected politics, there is compelling evidence to suggest that even when online discussion is more extemporaneous, informal and unsupported by any kind of deliberative infrastructure, participant behaviour is often much closer to deliberative norms than might be expected .

What is the point of such political talk?

Firstly, it bridges the gap between what can easily be dismissed as mundane, politically irrelevant talk about music, football, soap narratives or private values and views about the distribution and exercise of social power. Such talk can lead people to recognise the presence of the political within what they might have first regarded as purely personal talk.

Secondly, it enables people to address other citizens with a view to influencing public opinion. There is evidence to suggest that people are more likely to feel efficacious in relation to horizontal (peer-to-peer) effects than vertical (citizen-to-government) influence.

Thirdly, political talk, even when it is only for its own sake, has epistemic benefits, especially when, through porous online networks, people are exposed to views and experiences that they did not set out to encounter.

In thinking about deliberation as a democratic capability, there are several models to learn from here:

- a) the ways in which participatory budgeting exercises have been conducted within online spaces;

- b) the impressive online debates that fed into the re-writing of the Icelandic constitution in response to that country's economic implosion;
- c) the widespread use of lay deliberative juries in contemporary science debates, such as embryo research and GM crops

A number of specific designs for online deliberative spaces have been produced, including Unchat and The Deliberative Community Networks (Open DCN), both real-time discussion tools for small-group deliberation.

The former features 'speed bumps', designed to force users to encounter relevant information prior to participating in debate. Transcripts are provided to help latecomers to 'catch up' with previous discussion.

The Deliberative Community Networks (OpenDCN) project allows participants to upload their own background information in a wide array of formats, using built-in templates to supply their own datasets or links to external datasets. In this way, they are able to offer their own interpretations of evidence, thereby transcending the rather artificial distinction between background information and deliberative practice.

Here I should mention the proposal that Jay Blumler and I have been advocating for the past two decades to establish a trusted online space where the dispersed energies, self-articulations and aspirations of citizens can be rehearsed, in public, within a process of ongoing feedback to the various levels and centres of governance; local, national and transnational.

3) *The circulation of public experience*

In the era dominated by broadcasting, the framing of public stories fell to a small number of media organisations, often driven by commercial and ideological interests at odds with the norms of democracy.

There can be no doubt that the emergence of social networking sites such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter have reconfigured the storytelling environment. The numbers alone are staggering: Facebook has 1.65 billion user accounts, with 500,000 new people joining each day at a rate of six per second; on YouTube there are 300 hours of video content uploaded per minute and 3.25 billion hours viewed per month; on Twitter there are 500,000 tweets sent out each day at a rate of 6000 per second and there are 320 million active users.

At the micro-level, there is evidence to suggest that users are able to manage social relationships within online networks in ways that make it easier for them to make social connections with others.

For example, evidence from the United States suggests that Facebook users are half as likely to be socially isolated as average Americans, more trusting of others than most Americans and much more likely to be politically engaged. People who are connected to large personal online networks are more likely to engage in both formal and informal political actions.

Even more important than the size of online networks is their heterogeneity, i.e. the extent to which they expose users to diverse experiences and opinions. The more that people encounter social networks comprising people unlike themselves, the more likely they are to be receptive to new political perspectives.

At a macro-social level, the proliferation of online narratives helps to counter official and corporate attempts to shape the public agenda.

The concept of 'news' is in transition and political elites often find it necessary to respond swiftly to digitally-circulating stories and issues that emerge beyond the comfort zones of their own mediacentric bubbles.

There are two principal ways in which online stories trigger broader political agendas.

The first occur when the mass media pick up concerns, stories and debates that are circulating online, perhaps in the blogosphere or on Facebook or Twitter. Such spill-

over effects are most likely to transpire when themes are raised by coalitions of actors capable of framing the significance of their issues in terms that can be understood and replicated by mainstream journalists.

A second path to agenda-setting is rather less conspicuous. When people use search engines such as Google to find political information they are at the same time generating important information about what sort of issues and ideas are salient to them. When search issues trend on Google political actors and mass-media journalists are likely to pay attention, not only to the subjects that interest people, but to the ways in which they formulate their search questions.

As a crude indicator of changing political perceptions, the Internet offers an impressionistic picture of an informal public sphere – or, more precisely, a map of intersecting public spheres.

4) *Being able to make a difference*

The effectiveness of democratic representatives depends upon there being an unambiguous relationship between the actions they take and the will of the represented.

There can be little doubt that networked forms of social communication have enabled twenty-first century activists have combined online coordination and street-level action to set agendas, register influence and enact protest.

More extensive, instantaneous and innovatory than most institutional uses of the Internet, digital activism relies upon a form of political energy that leaves old-fashioned politics seeming sluggish and stale.

Rather than waiting for representatives to speak for them, digital activists have fine-tuned dynamic practices of self-representation.

In doing so, they have had to address the historic challenge of coordination. Both scholars and practitioners have sensed that there is something about the Internet that

makes it possible for groups with few resources, flexible structures and evolving programmes to coordinate for collective action, but it is only recently that this phenomenon has been systematically theorised.

Bennett and Segerberg's book, *The Logic of Connective Action*, which is based on extensive empirical evidence from new social movements such as the Spanish indignados and Occupy, has been rightly regarded as a groundbreaking attempt to reconceive collective action for the digital age. The authors show in great detail how digital technologies enable people with similar problems or goals to join together without being managed by centralised party or movement leaderships. It is impossible to do complete justice here to this carefully constructed theory, but the nub of Bennett and Segerberg's argument is that

When interpersonal networks are enabled by technology platforms of various designs that coordinate and scale the networks, the resulting action can resemble collective action, yet without the same role played by formal organizations or the need for exclusive, collective action framings. In place of content that is distributed and relationships that are brokered by hierarchical organizations, connective action networks involve co-production and co-distribution, revealing different economic and psychological logic: peer production based on sharing and personalized expression. (p.35)

As a consequence, democratic action becomes easier to coordinate, less oppressively binding to engage in and capable of morphing flexibly between related issues.

But there are limits to connective action. The capacity to initiate and sustain forms of political action based on the coordination of dispersed energy is a vital precondition for democratic efficacy, but only a precondition.

There is a significant difference between short-term mobilisation and long-term policy formation. Setting a radical counter-agenda is one thing; turning it into a framework for policy implementation is another.

Without effective mobilisation, durable political impacts are unlikely to be realised; but with only vibrant mobilisation, democratic energy can all too easily be dissipated.

At stake here is a fundamental tension at the heart of democratic politics between inputs and outputs.

Inputs refer to the expression of political demands. The democratic quality of inputs can be evaluated in terms of the extent to which they are arrived at and supported fairly, reflectively and inclusively.

Outputs refer to the decisions and actions of political authorities: the policies that are implemented and the social effects that are realised. The democratic quality of outputs are best evaluated in terms of the extent to which they reflect public inputs.

A political system that encourages public input into the policy process, but ignores such input when it comes to producing outputs lacks democratic legitimacy. Likewise, a political system that limits policy inputs to elites can never be fully democratic, even if its policy outputs are bureaucratically effective in keeping the public content.

Connective action may be good at mobilising radical inputs, but offers no mechanism for translating them into outputs.

A fundamental challenge for networked politics is to seek ways of democratising the decision-making process itself so that public will can be transfigured into sustainable policies.

The democratic theorist, John Keane, has observed that

When faced with unfamiliar situations, it is always tempting to suppose that new media will carry on doing familiar things, but in more efficient and effective, faster and cheaper ways. The enticement should be resisted. Presumptions that have outlived their usefulness must be abandoned. What is needed are bold new probes, freshminded perspectives, 'wild' concepts that enable different and meaningful ways of seeing things, more discriminating methods of recognising the novelties of our times, the

democratic opportunities they offer and the counter-trends that have the potential to snuff out democratic politics.

Following this wise advice entails a fine balance between acknowledging the institutional entrenchment and resilience of actually existing democracy and apprehending the scope for new democratic values, practices and connections that accord with the novelties of our times.

This means asking fundamental questions about the sort of democracy we want to live in; the kind of politics that would serve us well; and the ways in which information and communication technologies might help us to realise our humanity.

I want to suggest that none of the capabilities I have outlined can strengthen democratic agency on its own. The answer does not lie in the promotion of more deliberation or more abundant information or more opportunities to engage in networked protest.

The challenge for democracy is to create productive synergies across all of these capabilities: storytelling and deliberation; more expansive sources of information and new modes of connective action.

Where do we stand at the moment in relation to that challenge?

Is it helpful to think of digital networks as enablers of forms of democratic practice that could enhance democratic agency and counter the drift towards complacent elitism and deluded populism?

In recent times this question has become far from abstract or academic. The ascendancy of populist leaders and programmes has unnerved many people who had until now assumed that democratic politics could withstand the illiberal allure of demagogy.

For a long time it was complacently assumed that the unheard would simply fade into sullen silence, interrupted by occasional bouts of vulgar pique and localised self-harm.

Leave them alone; exclude them from the polling models because they won't vote; humour their audacious resentments and tell them what's best for them, from how to speak correctly to when to tighten their belts.

Perhaps pay rhetorical lip service to the value of listening to them, while failing to acknowledge the unbridgeable chasm between tokenistic attention and sensitive comprehension.

We find ourselves living through an insurgency of the unheard.

People who had not cast a ballot for years have voted for outcomes that the political pundits failed to predict.

People whose votes were regarded as 'safe' have turned against parties and leaders that took them for granted.

Political insiders who claimed to be experts at 'playing the game' have been shocked to discover that the rules have changed.

New ways of talking about politics are emerging in defiance of the incestuous codes of technocratic management.

The supporters of Trump, Brexit and the many other snake-oil panaceas that are on offer are longing for a new way of exercising political voice.

Often new political realities are heralded not by grand declarations, but by newly inflected ways of speaking about the world. Rather than thinking about the Internet as a constellation of clever technical devices or a mass of disparate content, we might think of it as a new space of public articulation; a multi-vocal arena in which no single standard of cultural status or evaluation of communicative literacy prevails.

As I hope I have made clear in this lecture, it would be naïve to assume that simply moving political communication online will either enrich or degrade the voices of democratic citizens. The old debate between Internet-Good and Internet-Bad is pointless and redundant.

But if popular democratic pressure for the kind of civic capability-building that I have outlined in this lecture were to gain traction, digital technologies, spaces and codes might indeed play a significant role in facilitating practices conducive to a more inclusive, respectful and deliberative democracy.

Notes

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²Mediation and recording: João Guilherme Santos.

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