Book Review

The Internet and Democratic Citizenship. Theory, Practice and Policy, by S. Coleman and J. G. Blumler, 2009, Cambridge University Press, 220pp.

Can liberal democracy become more democratic to the extent that political elites and citizens engage each other? To answer this question is, at best, complicated. More simply it is to admit that democracy is faced with problems of trust and participation. Many politicians and academics see the new media, particularly the Internet, as an opportunity to solve the lack of engagement in the democratic system. But, while new technology is still eagerly seen as the driving force for democratic revivification, few have in fact moved beyond that deterministic discourse. In this respect *The Internet and Democratic Citizenship* appears as one of those few exceptions. In explaining the theoretical basis of modern democracy and analysing some e-Democracy cases, the book develops a response to democracy's complications that is worth our attention.

The Internet and Democratic Citizenship is the undertaking of two prominent scholars of political communication. Stephen Coleman is Professor of Political Communication at the University of Leeds and Jay G. Blumler is Emeritus Professor of Public Communication at the University of Leeds and Emeritus Professor of Journalism at the University of Maryland. The book is a further development of previous work regarding the social and democratic role of new media: *Realising Democracy Online: A Civic Commons in Cyber Space* published in 2001 by the Institute for Public Policy Research.

The starting point of Coleman and Blumler's argument is the lack of deliberative political culture in contemporary democracy. They argue that most democracies in Western Europe and North America surprisingly offer few channels for deliberative practices. In this respect, traditional spaces for deliberation (e.g. parliaments, national assemblies and congresses) seem, in their view, to be remote and disconnected from the public. Despite some experiment to involve citizens in decision making, the authors argue that there is still "a need for real-world experimentation in public deliberation" (p. 40). In this way, the lack of places and spaces for public talk on matters of common interest is seen as having an effect on democratic engagement. To counteract that, they propose to introduce deliberative practices within trusted democratic institutions and processes.

To support their idea in favour of deliberation, Coleman and Blumler refer to theoretical discussion and arguments for and against it. According to the authors, what supports the idea of embedding deliberation in democracy is its inherently democratic nature to the extent that can make the public less atomised and more civic. In allowing citizens to provide information and knowledge based on their experience and expertise and within fair, equal and inclusive rules of discourse, deliberation is believed to improve policy formation and decision making. In short, their assumption is that "public input legitimizes democratic decisions" (p. 39). To make deliberation possible some conditions are required: each person must be able to express openly their ideas, any restriction related to social status must be eliminated, arguments based primarily on appeal of tradition or dogma must be exposed and truth is to be sought by seeking a consensus.

The authors recognize that there are unsolved issues about deliberation. For instance, how to equally include huge numbers of people in public discussion without pushing anyone aside or how to deal with the apparent lack of cognitive competence of ordinary people in relation to sophisticated policy questions.

There are some answers but the book does not develop them extensively. What's more, suggesting that representative groups can be invited or randomly selected to deliberate could contrarily make deliberation elitist and undemocratic.

In their diagnosis of the current crisis of democracy, the authors also consider another aspect that has played, in their opinion, an important role to weaken citizens' civic engagement: the mass media. On the one hand, the relevance of the media is not only the provision of news but also the public legitimacy it confers to that news. In doing this, the mass media act as a public space where "people come together as more than passing strangers" (p. 43). In this way, the mass media, they affirm, become the most important cultural institution and means of public expression in contemporary society. On the other side, however, mass media developments ironically have led to a "crisis of public communication": making the communicative relationship between citizens and politicians defective rather than constructive. This crisis is caused by three societal forces. First, since the end of World War II, there are new societal developments including influential trends, such as individualisation, modernisation and secularisation. Second, there have been responses to these developments from political institutions, with professionalisation of political advocacy as its most prominent feature. Finally, there are also developments in the media sphere per se, such as the observation that journalists' political reporting has become more interpretative and pejorative, and an intensified competition between different media, due to the appearance of many more outlets for political information. Because of these developments, the connection between citizens and politics is lost.

In addition, with the introduction and use of the Internet, Coleman and Blumler observe that the mainstream mass media's traditional model of news production is being challenged. Rather than being a consumer of news, people with access to the Internet are able to publish their own accounts or remix others'. Likewise, new forms of open-source news production have forced established media organizations to abandon their top-down approach of news making for a more participative approach. More and more, online formats and tools are being used by traditional media organizations while competition with open-source media services has become intensive. Interestingly, Coleman and Blumler find that, despite these promising elements for democracy, the civic potential of the Internet has not been realised and that, contrarily, "that potential is vulnerable mainly because an infrastructure for its proper realization is lacking" (p. 67).

Another aspect in Coleman and Blumler's book is their support to what they call a direct representation model of democracy. Based on the rise of interactive and digital media, the authors assert that this model "offers citizens the prospect of representative closeness, mutuality, coherence and empathy, without expecting them to become full-time participating citizens" (p. 80). Their model of direct representation is argued to mobilize, listen to, learn from and respond to public experience and expertise. Direct representation's viability is supported by the vulnerable potential of new media to tackle barriers for deliberation (time, space and scale). In practice, the Internet's features allow greater transparency and public co-presence, networked collective action, dialogical debate and individual self-representation. In respect to the last point, the case of the political blogosphere is interesting. The authors consider it as a "more subjective space for citizens' self-expression", but we must consider as well that while some blogs have made their mark, they appear to have premature life and, more important, little decisive impact on their own. These two aspects could also act as pitfalls for participation and need to be considered in future research.

It should be noticed that deliberative democracy per se is not what Coleman and Blumler imagine as a paradigm. In reality their idea of direct representation does not cross the borders of the representative model of democracy. Their model is eclectically more about a reconfiguration of liberal democracy but

without radical transformation of its structure. To support their position, they affirm that although "the public has had enough of representation and now wants to make most or all political decisions for itself" (p. 78), evidence suggests citizens have no intention of giving up representation. From this perspective, deep-seated deliberative democrats might find the book a bit disappointing and conservative.

In looking at the relationship between the Internet and democracy, the book explores e-democracy arenas for their democracy potential. The authors analyse previous experiences that, they conclude, have attempted but failed to deliver a more democratic perspective using new media. One set of initiatives (for instance online consultation) are identified as "e-Democracy from above" which are initiated, funded and managed by state government bodies. By establishing top-down political communication, Coleman and Blumler argue that such "constraining techno-political sphere of managed cyberspace" invokes pseudo-participation that domesticates and disperses participatory energies. A second group of initiatives is classified as "e-Democracy from below". It is about non-hierarchical and autonomous online interaction among dispersed groups and/or people who articulate and represent their own interest and values. The authors state that groups mobilise themselves and share knowledge for political action beyond, around and across institutionally shaped and managed communication channels. This grassroots form of online participation, however, is paradoxically constrained by its disconnection from institutional politics and its elusive and ephemeral nature that keep it unseen by ordinary citizens and political elites.

Based on the interactivity and democratizing potential, but social and political *vulnerability* of the Internet, Coleman and Blumler propose a policy approach that calls for enhancing deliberation through the creation of an online civic commons. The authors perceive the need of creating a democratic online space run by a government-funded but independent public agency. Such a public agency "would be responsible for eliciting, gathering and coordinating citizens' deliberation upon and reactions to problems faced and proposal issued by public bodies, which would then be expected to react formally to whatever emerges from the public discussion" (p. 170). In doing this, the authors argue that citizens will no longer be seen as consumers of policy but they will become actively involved in policy making. Then public trust in politics will be bolstered.

The authors' proposal is far from a technocratic point of view that would advocate, for instance, the use of the Internet to improve instantaneity in democratic communication through the use of software and hardware. On the contrary, the appeal of their e-Democracy approach is that it calls for a policy intervention in which technology should be understood as "a system of knowledge, practices, roles and cultural devices" (p. 144). In order to confront governments' concerns about not being trusted and citizens' frustration at the efficacy of democracy, they consider an online civic commons as an opportunity to achieve mutual recognition, for example. This form of acknowledgement between representatives and the represented, they affirm, would be expressed in the way of accountability, empathy and respect.

A new channel for political communication seems unnecessary taking in consideration the diverse range of new media applications already in use. However the idea of adapting them to the work of a proactive mediating agency opens the door to encouraging a new level of relationship between politicians and citizens, at least in theory.

Nevertheless, this policy approach also raises questions and challenges. Coleman and Blumler are aware, for example, of the observation regarding the democratic legitimacy of such an agency. The concern is that an agency, whose role is to moderate public discussion, holds the power to censor participants and/or discussions. They also take note about certain "shadow of control" in internet-based discussions run by governments. On the other hand, it should be noticed that a public agency model promoting deliberation within the local and national context seems feasible, but spreading online discussion at the transnational level is more complex if not ambitious and thus idealistic. The latter

faces more evident constraints posed by social, cultural and political forces that should be taken into account. Despite the Internet's advantage in time and space, the challenge would be how to harmonize, for instance, cultural heterogeneity among people from outside the UK. In places where democracy is anaemic and/or vulnerable, it would be arduous to reproduce this policy approach. Moreover, although the role of the online civic commons as a space that will connect diverse and disperse social networks has been emphasized, the nature, responsibilities and activities of this online civic commons remain unclear in the book. Describing what the civic commons could do in theory as deliberative online forum may give the impression that it is still idealistic.

Overall, *The Internet and Democratic Citizenship* is a well-structured and easy-to-read book that represents a prominent contribution to the discussion of modern democracy in connection to the Internet. Undergraduate and postgraduate students, policy practitioners and those interested in Internet studies, political sciences and policy studies will find it a valuable resource for e-Democracy analysis and practice. This is a book whose value goes beyond an interpretation of "contemporary democratic ills" because it sets a precedent about what could be done to restore public trust. Whether the online civic commons will work or not in practice is not the issue now, what matters is to develop innovative responses to democracy's deficiencies and, in this respect this book is paving the way.

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