

## ICTs, Public Sphere, and Deliberative Democracy

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### ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to look at the transformation of the public sphere in sync with the changes in the Information and Communication Technology (ICTs) mediums like mass media and the internet. The chapter tries to distinguish between different public spheres like Habermas's bourgeoisie public sphere, mass media-based public sphere and internet-based public sphere – and the way the public sphere influences democratic practice. The paper also attempts to look at the discursive nature of the internet. It attempts to look at whether the Internet can act as a functional medium for deliberative democratic practices.

### Introduction

The term deliberative democracy was first used by Joseph Bessette in 1980<sup>1</sup>. Deliberative democracy results from the underlying concepts of thinkers like Habermas, John Rawls and James Fishkin. According to the Deliberative Democracy Consortium, “deliberation is an approach to decision-making in which citizens consider relevant facts from multiple points of view, converse with one another to think critically about options before them and enlarge their perspectives, opinions and understandings. Deliberative democracy strengthens citizens' voice in governance by including people of all races, classes, ages and geographies in deliberations that directly affect public decisions. As a result, citizens influence – and can see the result of their influence on – the policy and resource decisions that impact their daily lives and their future” (p-1)<sup>2</sup>. To put it in a broader sense deliberative democracy is a political process to arrive at a rationally motivated consensus, a process to solve socio-economic and political problems in a cooperative manner, through a reasoned discussion among equals about public issues, and an act of collective decision making. Deliberation is “an unconstrained exchange of arguments that involves practical reasoning and always potentially leads to a transformation of preferences” (p-12)<sup>3</sup>. Deliberative democracy is an attempt to address the question; who guards the guardians? Should the guardians be guarded by the constitution or by people through different electoral methods? Why should not citizens be given the role of making decisions, implementing them and being responsible for their acts? Political thinkers like John Rawls and Habermas who are credited with their emphasis on deliberation through their works think that citizens can be given the opportunity to govern themselves. These thinkers held the view that public reason should not be exercised by the state, but in the public sphere by free and equal citizens through proper deliberation. This emphasizes the fact that these thinkers were in favour of the wider participation of citizens in the decision-making process.

### Deliberation as a Democratic Practice

The underlying assumption of deliberation is to get the moral and psychological benefits of democracy emphasizing people's need to participate and create policies and choices, and not simply choose among the

<sup>1</sup> Dryzek, J. S. (2000). *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond: Liberals, Critics, Contestations*. New York. Oxford University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Hartz-Karp, J. A Case Study in Deliberative Democracy: Dialogue with the city. *Journal of Public Deliberation*. Vol. 1. No. 1. (2005): 1 – 15.

<sup>3</sup> Dryzek, J. S. (2000). *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond: Liberals, Critics, Contestations*. New York. Oxford University Press.

options provided by their representatives<sup>4</sup>. The options provided by the representatives or delegates are limited in their domain, limited in their choice and innovation whereas the options or choices created by free citizens are innumerable and could appropriately fit the situation as people are the ones who really know what they want. Hence, citizens should be involved as much as possible, and the democratization strategy should try to include as many interests as possible. True deliberation should resemble a courtroom, where a panel of judges deliberate, discuss, and look out for different options that are available before arriving at a judgment. The consultation process among the judges is straight and verbal discourse is present in a continuous manner. Sufficient space will be there for the judges to raise all the points that fit the circumstances and sufficient space will be there for counter points raised by different members<sup>5</sup>.

### Public Sphere and Democracy

Public sphere can be understood as the existence or prevalence of multiple domains for rational and communicative space for the exchange of ideas in a free and unrestrained manner<sup>6</sup>. The legitimacy of a government depends on how open it is to the public sphere of that particular society that usually engages in accommodating debates on issues of public importance<sup>7</sup>. Public sphere endorses and brings legitimacy to the way democratic or sovereign power is exercised<sup>8</sup>. Public sphere is a sphere where people of all classes, ages, genders, or races can come together, assemble and express their opinions freely without any external force. In a theoretical sense, the definition points to the fact that *all* people should be in a position to access the public domain. But in practice, the public domain is severely restricted due to different constraints like physical space like land or a meeting place that can accommodate people to come together, meet and discuss. Similar restrictions can be clearly seen in other types of public sphere-related components like newspapers, journals, radio, television, books etc. as all of these components face restrictions in the form of paper space, limitations in circulation, limitations in transportation, airing time etc.<sup>9</sup>

Public sphere must provide equal access to all the participants disregarding to the status of the participants so as to make sure that everyone gets a chance to express their opinion on a subject. The effectiveness of the public sphere depends on how accommodative it is to heterogeneous classes, sections, regions, or gender. Mere accommodation of the participants does not ensure that the public sphere is vibrant or effective; it is vibrant and effective to those who get access and is non-existent to the remaining folks. Access to public spaces or public platforms is important in a political space. Access to political space gives an individual the power and control over the political affairs that concern her. Access to political platforms decides the outcome of the political systems and restrictions on accessing these platforms result in political exclusion<sup>10</sup>. Public sphere is a space which is not restricted or governed by a family or government nor it is a space that can be bought from the market or supplied by it, rather, it is a place or forum where public reasoning of the private citizens takes place<sup>11</sup>.

### ICTs and Public Sphere

Modern ICTs, especially the internet, are different from mass media. With the advancements in ICT, all the information about the socio-economic and political conditions of the environment is becoming public, publicized on the internet through different forums like social networking sites, personal blogs, community blogs, and various websites or domains maintained by individuals and organizations. Political analysts recognize the importance and the arrival of the 'virtual' public sphere, primarily promoted by the internet.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. See also, Margolis, M. & Moreno-Riano, G. (2009). *The Prospect of Internet Democracy*. Surrey. Ashgate Publishing Limited.

<sup>5</sup> Habermas, J. (1990). *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*. Massachusetts. MIT Press.

<sup>6</sup> Dahlgren, P. The Internet, Public Sphere, and Political Communications: Dispersion and Deliberation. *Journal of Political Communication*. Vo. 22 (2005): 147 – 162.

<sup>7</sup> Rasmussen, T. The Internet and Differentiation in the Political Public Sphere. Panel Discussion II; Culture and Media Technology – *NORDICOM Review*. 2013. 1 – 13.

<sup>8</sup> Fossum, J, E. & Schlesinger, P. (Eds.). (2007). *The European Union and the Public Sphere: A Communicative Space in the Making?* New York. Routledge.

<sup>9</sup> Orr, A. (2010). *Blogging, Deliberation and Public Sphere*. New South Wales. University of New South Wales – School of Social Science and International Studies. 1 – 11.

<sup>10</sup> Gerodimos, R. Democracy and the Internet: Access, Engagement and Deliberation. *Journal of Systemics, Cybernetics, and Informatics*. Vo.3. No. 6. (2006): 26 – 31.

<sup>11</sup> Butsch, R. (Ed). (2007). *Media and Public Spheres*. New York. Palgrave Macmillan.

Eventually, this virtual sphere is presumed to become an active and real public sphere<sup>12</sup>. The overall digital literacy rate among the younger generations is creating a new political culture. The socialization process itself is undergoing significant changes because of the advancements in ICT. The socialization process on the internet is becoming more inclusive as it is relatively constraint-free compared to the non-internet platforms that are limited by space, access, resources, time etc.<sup>13</sup> Space on the internet or cyberspace is redefining concepts like democracy, polity, citizenship, and territorial limitations<sup>14</sup>. Information technology, especially the internet has the greatest potential to transform the public sphere<sup>15</sup>. Social scientists recognize the fact that the internet is creating a democratic public sphere<sup>16</sup>. According to Habermas, the internet can undermine the censorship of the government as it is difficult to control it, unlike newspapers, television or radio<sup>17</sup>. Political scientists think that the internet makes a better public sphere than the mass media-based public sphere<sup>18</sup>. The possibilities of creating new ideas and the chance for the ideas to challenge other ideas in the form of extensive debate are unlimited in the public sphere that the internet is creating. The Internet is a medium that allows diverse sources of information. The Internet is considered a plural communicative medium with indefinite communicative space<sup>19</sup>.

Internet as a medium allows diverse sources of information<sup>20</sup>. Mass media produces homogeneity whereas the internet produces heterogeneity<sup>21</sup>. Internet gives space to express one's opinion without depending on the corporate media. Internet creates an indefinite communicative space or domain that plays a vital role in providing an unlimited platform for information sharing and exchange<sup>22</sup>. Internet is a two-way communication model and is relatively low in cost when compared to the mass media<sup>23</sup>. With the usage of the internet, one need not wait for the news on television and those who want to share the news need not run their news item through different filters, or editing<sup>24</sup>. Internet can free us from communication and transportation problems which enables us to go closely towards direct democracy. Articulation has become easy with the advancement of the internet. Controversies, issues, choices, and other expressions circulate like free air on the internet thus leading to debate, discussion, protest, and possible solutions to a problem. With the advancement of ICT, it has become easy for the information to flow from one department to the other within the government, and between the government and the people. Internet increases the competition among the parties and it increases inter-party competition and provides scope for direct democracy<sup>25</sup>. Internet, just like the mass media public sphere, meets the basic criteria to be called a public sphere as the people who discuss public issues on the internet can be said to be engaged in rational-critical communication. The outcomes may sometimes give unexpected levels of success or alternatives that the mass media-based public sphere has failed to produce<sup>26</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> Orr, A. (2010). *Blogging, Deliberation and Public Sphere*. New South Wales. University of New South Wales – School of Social Science and International Studies. 1 – 11.

<sup>13</sup> Gerodimos, R. Democracy and the Internet: Access, Engagement and Deliberation. *Journal of Systemics, Cybernetics, and Informatics*. Vo.3. No. 6. (2006): 26 – 31.

<sup>14</sup> Gibson, R, K., Rommele, A., and Ward, S, J. (Eds.). (2004). *Electronic Democracy: Mobilization, Organization and Participation via New ICTs*. London. Routledge.

<sup>15</sup> Manoharan, A & Holzer, M. (2012). *E-Governance and Civic Engagement: Factors and Determinants of E-Democracy*. Hershey. Information Science Reference.

<sup>16</sup> Margolis, M. & Moreno-Riano, G. (2009). *The Prospect of Internet Democracy*. Surrey. Ashgate Publishing Limited.

<sup>17</sup> Orr, A. (2010). *Blogging, Deliberation and Public Sphere*. New South Wales. University of New South Wales – School of Social Science and International Studies. 1 – 11.

<sup>18</sup> Gerhards, J. & Schafer, M, S. Is internet a better public sphere? Comparing old and new media in the US and Germany. *Journal of New Media & Society*. Vo. XX(X). (2009): 1 – 18.

<sup>19</sup> Dahlberg, L. The internet and democratic discourse: Exploring the prospects of online deliberative forums extending the public sphere. *Journal of information, communication & society*. Vo. 4. No. 4. (2001): 615 – 633.

<sup>20</sup> Gibson, R, K., Rommele, A., and Ward, S, J. (Eds.). (2004). *Electronic Democracy: Mobilization, Organization and Participation via New ICTs*. London. Routledge.

<sup>21</sup> Rasmussen, T. The Internet and Differentiation in the Political Public Sphere. Panel Discussion II; Culture and Media Technology – *NORDICOM Review*. 2013. 1 – 13.

<sup>22</sup> Margolis, M. & Moreno-Riano, G. (2009). *The Prospect of Internet Democracy*. Surrey. Ashgate Publishing Limited.

<sup>23</sup> Dahlberg, L & Siapera, E. (Eds.). (2007). *Radical Democracy and the Internet: Interrogating Theory and Practice*. New York. Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>24</sup> Gibson, R, K., Rommele, A., and Ward, S, J. (Eds.). (2004). *Electronic Democracy: Mobilization, Organization and Participation via New ICTs*. London. Routledge.

<sup>25</sup> Margolis, M. & Moreno-Riano, G. (2009). *The Prospect of Internet Democracy*. Surrey. Ashgate Publishing Limited.

<sup>26</sup> Rasmussen, T. The Internet and Differentiation in the Political Public Sphere. Panel Discussion II; Culture and Media Technology – *NORDICOM Review*. 2013. 1 – 13.

Habermas's public sphere, analyzed in his work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, was basically based on the interaction spaces of the 18th-century bourgeois class<sup>27</sup>. These principles can be applied to modern-day interactions like blogs or video blogging. Some analysts do not consider the internet space as a public sphere because of its uncontrollable character and borderless expansion. The question that strikes us is; is it necessary that public discussion should take place in saloons, restaurants, meeting places or golf grounds? Should we consider only face-to-face conversations as conversations that are eligible for the public sphere? Should the domain of the public sphere be decided based on its physical domain or controllability? Agreeing with these definitions means that we should not consider the internet as a public sphere. But if we were to stick to the definition of Habermas that the public sphere is a domain where all public-related matters can be discussed by 'all' without any restrictions in accessing it, then the internet certainly fits the concept of the public sphere<sup>28</sup>.

Internet acts as a decentralized political sphere, without a defined domain – both in terms of geography and in terms of nature of the issue that is in question<sup>29</sup>. It is a space where each and every citizen can fit in according to one's own ideas and attitudes towards a particular issue. But the same space also makes consensus difficult and the number of issues that people may need to concentrate in the internet may make them very unstable, and may drag them into more than one issue or many issues at a time, and this may weaken their stand on any particular issue<sup>30</sup>.

The emergence of the internet as a public sphere removed the structural barriers that are experienced in the mass media-based public sphere. The domain of the internet is bigger than mass media in many folds and the unlimited space that it provides accommodates all the 'rational' and 'irrational' discourses that its users will engage in. Hence, attempts to control the explosive expansion of the spread of the internet obviously mean killing the platform that has the potential to be the public sphere that can become a real alternative to the mass media-based public sphere. Hence, any filters on the internet simply mean cutting down the growing public sphere. Internet individualizes the media that was hitherto a mainstream media that always concentrated on issues that befit mass media-based 'public' sphere. This individualization provides scope for atomization of views that can, when articulated or countered with the ideas of other similar atomized ideas of individuals give results that are unconventional, and these new ideas may question everything that has been considered as 'right', 'appropriate' or 'contextual' so far. Internet propels a public sphere that is different in terms of topics, style, and plurality as it is a completely individual-centric mode of communication where the individual plays the role of editor and acts as a filter of her own content. Hence, the diversity of topics is broader than what we see in the mass media-based public sphere. Internet also helps in publishing unconventional thoughts as it sometimes allows anonymity. Hence, thoughts that are considered unconventional in nature can be published in unconventional language, sometimes in uncivil language as well. This may not sound right to most of those who back mass media for its civic language and uniformity in reporting but for those who think that the alternatives must be presented—the internet allows it in its public sphere<sup>31</sup>.

Internet acts as a functional alternative to the mass media in serving the public sphere, and the communication on the internet is two dimensional i.e., both the creator of the content and the reader of the content can interact through different modes like e-mails, chats, video conferences etc. and different readers can interact among themselves who can join or counter the first author. Though the mass media also has feedback mechanisms like letters to editors, publishing counter articles, live discussions on television channels, short message services (SMS) polls, televised telephonic debates etc., these methods more or less face some structural limitations; in the form of picking a few letters from among the whole letters that the editor picks based on her 'discretion', selecting the speakers who are going to express their views on television, allowing only a certain cellular service holders to send their opinions in the form of SMS etc. which limits the heterogeneity. Besides editing, screening, or selection of the respondents, the mass media has structural limitations to involve in two-way engagements in the form of space available for publication of the responses, broadcasting time, and all the required background works like typing, page setting, camera works, recording and editing works etc. that has

<sup>27</sup> Habermas, J. (Translation: Burger, Thomas). (1991). *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Massachusetts. The MIT Press – Cambridge.

<sup>28</sup> Dean, J. Why the net is not a public sphere. *Constellations – Blackwell Publishing Limited*. Vo. 10. No. 1. (2003): 95 – 113.

<sup>29</sup> Baek, Y, M. Wojcieszak, M. and Carpini, M, X, D. Online versus face-to-face deliberation: Who? Why? What? With what Effects? *New Media & Society*. Vo. 14. No. 3. (2011): 363 – 383.

<sup>30</sup> Gibson, R, K., Rommele, A., and Ward, S, J. (Eds.). (2004). *Electronic Democracy: Mobilization, Organization and Participation via New ICTs*. London. Routledge.

<sup>31</sup> Aiello, L, M and McFarland, D (Eds.). (2014). *Social Informatics*. Heidelberg. Springer. See also, Baek, Y, M. Wojcieszak, M. and Carpini, M, X, D. Online versus face-to-face deliberation: Who? Why? What? With what Effects? *New Media & Society*. Vo. 14. No. 3. (2011): 363 – 383.

to be carried out which obviously escalates the costs involved in creating a vibrant public sphere. This structural limitation forces the mass media to limit its role to dissemination of limited information or opinion, and severely restrict the feedback from the public. Contrary to this, internet is free from most of the above things.

Internet-based public sphere is not free from drawbacks as political thinkers express different pessimistic (or rational) views about citizens' critical analytical skills, their political understanding and societal orientation. Critics of the internet-based public sphere are pessimistic about citizens' capacities to use it for critical-rational communication. Based on their understanding the citizens can be divided broadly into three categories based on how 'unfit' they are to take the political affairs into their hands. The first category of citizens branded as "emotion-driven and passionate" are the citizens who fall prey to different irrational aspects. These citizens usually react to situations based on their prejudiced understanding of the situation. The second category of citizens are those who act with "short sight" and do not ground their conclusions on long-term empirical evidence. These citizens tend to respond in a hazy manner resulting in wrong calculations most of the time and the third category of citizens are branded as "puppet citizenry" who do nothing except react to the strings held or operated by others (state, media, religion, culture, majority, identity, class, caste, ideologies, and values)<sup>32</sup>.

Controlling or manipulation of information on the internet is another threat that the supporters of internet-based deliberation have to bear with. Dissemination of information in an exact manner and understanding of that information in the manner it is supposed to be understood are very important aspects of making people aware of the issues and possible solutions. Information influences the decision-making process of the people heavily<sup>33</sup>. Critics fear that multi-national corporations, media corporations and political parties may be holding the strings of the internet, and whatever people are getting may be the image of what these powerful people actually want to project<sup>34</sup>. The colonization of communication-related technologies in the hands of few or those close to it poses a bigger threat to the deliberative public sphere that the internet promises<sup>35</sup>. Critics argue that the Internet cannot be called a public sphere as it was not created for political interaction among the citizens but to serve all purposes like commerce, and communication (basically non-political) and a majority of users use the internet for activities that infuse consumerism. There are inequalities in terms of access to the internet based on the country's political environment, economic resources, culture, and educational levels, and the internet cannot yet be called an alternative space for political communication as the users most of the time use it in non-political ways like for casual chats, social networking, entertainment, gossips etc.

But it cannot be denied that those who have access to it in an open political environment are using it as a political communication fostering a different level of political culture<sup>36</sup>. The social capital of an individual plays an important role in the internet-based public sphere. In fact, it is the social capital of an individual that helps her to spread her voice on internet-related platforms initially, but her voice or opinions may go viral once the content that she publishes catches the attention of the readers. Social capital might be most prevalent among the advanced sections providing them a platform to stay connected in order to reap the benefits or opportunities that the internet provides. Social capital can also lead to negative consequences as tightly formed social groups without any outward interaction may end up doing bad things like caste bias, religious intolerance and polarized opinions. Governments can also affect social capital by creating formal or informal institutions or procedures for social interaction or articulation<sup>37</sup>.

### ICTs, Public Sphere and Deliberative Democracy

Every change in technology changes the polity and economy to some extent. Of all, the internet is the most radical change to date. This is what Robert Heilbroner has to say about the change in technology – "*that machines make history in some sense – that the level of technology has a direct bearing on the human drama – is, of course, obvious, that they do not make all of history, however, that word is defined, is equally clear. The challenge then, is to see if one can say something systematic about the matter, to whether one can order*

<sup>32</sup> Jacobs, L, R., Cook, F, L., and Carpini, M, X, D. (2009). *Talking Together: Public Deliberation and Political Participation in America*. London. The University of Chicago Press.

<sup>33</sup> OECD. (2003). *Promise and Problems of E-Democracy: Challenges of Online Citizen Engagement*. Paris. Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

<sup>34</sup> Margolis, M. & Moreno-Riano, G. (2009). *The Prospect of Internet Democracy*. Surrey. Ashgate Publishing Limited.

<sup>35</sup> Dahlberg, L. The Internet, deliberative democracy, and power: Radicalizing the public sphere. *International Journal of Media and Cultural Politics*. Vo. 3. No. 1. (2007): 47 – 64.

<sup>36</sup> Dahlgren, P. The Internet, Public Sphere, and Political Communications: Dispersion and Deliberation. *Journal of Political Communication*. Vo. 22 (2005): 147 – 162.

<sup>37</sup> Putnam, R, D. (Ed.). (2002). *Democracies in Flux: The Evolution of Social Capital in Contemporary Society*. New York. Oxford University Press.



the problem so that it becomes intellectually manageable" (pp. 150-151)<sup>38</sup>. The rapid change in technology is leading to demand for rights, participation in the political process, transparency from the government etc.<sup>39</sup> Apart from the change in technology, certain political changes like the rise in the number of countries that follow democracy, aggressive expansion of the civil society, expansive presence of different kinds of media, expansion of the infrastructure facilities etc. have led to the rise in demand for more transparent laws. With all these developments citizens are becoming attentive. Demand for participation of citizens in the decision-making process is on the rise<sup>40</sup>.

Internet acts as a force that nurtures radical democracy because of its inherent mechanism to accommodate the participants in an indefinite manner. First, the space available on internet is not limited unlike the physical space in the form of publishing space in a newspaper or magazine, or airing space on a radio or telecast space on a television. This apparently allows the internet to harbor everyone with a view to express which itself is a radical improvement of the public sphere vis-à-vis to the mass media-based public sphere. Second, the internet can be used by the groups that are so far excluded by the mass media-derived public sphere. Internet enables these groups to talk about their identity, language, issues, culture how they are different from others etc. Third, internet acts as a convergence platform for the so far excluded groups to come together and share the modes of exclusion that they have been undergoing. This enables them to understand different forms of exclusion that different groups are experiencing in different places under different power structures. This shared knowledge about different forms of exclusion and the possible solutions that can work to fight against these exclusions can be shared among these groups as the depth and width of exclusion may make these groups understand the suffering that the other groups are going through, and this process may bring them together in creating an alternative opinion or position that acts as a counter force to the status quo. This counter force develops further and further over time leading to an alliance of counter ideas that can create an alternative public sphere that can be more rational, radical, innovative, democratic, and inclusive in nature and that it can no longer be ignored by the mainstream public sphere. At this stage, a stage is set for the clash of ideas between the dominant or mainstream public sphere and the alternative public sphere that has been created through the convergence of different subaltern public spheres thus escalating the conflict between mainstream ideas and subaltern ideas leading to a situation where the mainstream ideas may have to give way to the subaltern ideas. This becomes unavoidable as the mainstream ideas are not formed through deliberation but have been imposed or made mainstream over time by the ruling elite by citing the functional deficiencies or difficulties in building a functional structure that is 'all-inclusive. The alternative or counter-public sphere, if emerges victorious, replaces or converges with the then-existing mainstream public sphere and transforms itself into a new public sphere, which, subsequently may face a similar kind of challenge from the new subaltern public spheres that could emerge as a result of the deliberative public sphere that has replaced the mainstream public sphere<sup>41</sup>.

### Summary

This paper emphasized the role of ICTs in transforming the public sphere and how the internet-based public sphere may foster deliberative possibilities. The paper discusses various types of advantages of the internet in acting as a two-way mode of communication and how this two-way mode of communication creates a discursive space that creates deliberative possibilities. The discursive space created by the internet fosters a deliberative public sphere. The deliberative public sphere offered by the internet is inclusive in nature in terms of ideas that can be published, circulated, discussed or presented. This discursive space allows chances for critical-rational communication that could lay the platform for deliberative democracy.

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