PART II

The Future of the Internet and Democracy Beyond Metaphors, Towards Policy

by

Professor Stephen Coleman

Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford, United Kingdom

This paper argues that much analysis of the relationship between the Internet and democracy has been obscured by the use of metaphors. The paper seeks to root e-democracy within the context of changing democratic culture and procedures. A model of information-flows for e-democracy is outlined. A number of policy objectives are set out, including the creation of trusted online spaces for democracy; integration of e-democracy into constitutionally recognised channels; the cultivation of meaningful interactivity between representatives and represented; the recruitment of traditionally excluded voices to online public debate, which entails seeing information as a common resource and ensuring just representation of all parts of the globe. These principles and proposals are an attempt to escape metaphor and speculation and establish policy objectives that can be evaluated.

Exploring metaphors

Surfing on the information highway

The Internet is a vast, amorphous metaphor in search of tangibility. A highway, an agora, a mall, a library, a portal, a Web, a brain, an ethereal universe of bits and bytes. We surf, we scroll, we browse, we search, we navigate, we post, we chat, we lurk, we log on and we go offline.

For some, the Internet is that which lies within their computer: the innards; a virtual mind; a cyber-soul. Talk of "controlling" the Internet and of "knowledge management" suggest that, like Frankenstein's mind, the Internet has an autonomous existence which humans must pacify or learn to live with. Anxieties about the Internet's ever-expanding outpouring of volcanic data suggest that its programmes, codes and design are invulnerable to human control. Newspaper and magazine articles (written in the solidity of print, the previous millenium's volcanic lava) urge us to adapt to the world of the Internet, as if the virtual universe is inherently bigger than ours.

For others, the Internet is conceived as a socio-neural network. Former US Vice-President Al Gore suggested, as early as 1994, that "We now can at last create a planetary information network that transmits messages and images with the speed of light from the largest city to the smallest village on every continent." (Gore, 1994) Castells' notion of "the network society" offers a metaphor of hope for a society of increasingly unfathomable complexity (Castells, 1996). The metaphor suggests a paradox: on the one side, increasing anomie, public alienation and privatisation; on the other, spatio-temporal compression and the prospect of a global village. But if villages have squares in which the public can gather, networks have no obvious centre and require us to **think in new ways about the place of the public.**

Another, more populist metaphor, depicts the Internet as an anarchic, Hobbesian jungle that engenders fear and calls for legal protection. The Internet, we are told, attracts predators; our children are not safe there. And then there are viruses (malicious ones, indeed), bugs, trojan horses, crashes and memory loss. Objectively, it may be less safe to give your credit card over the counter in a shop than through a secure site on the Internet, but this is not how it feels when dealing in faceless transactions. In a world where honesty is judged by facial features and voice tone, the absence of both feeds the

imagination with images of cyber-tricksters lurking the Web and luring the gullible. The Internet becomes a metaphor for entrapment (a net; a web) and "users", like malleable addicts, surf innocently towards cyber-exploitation.

In contrast to such apprehension, the Internet has also spawned a plethora of utopian metaphors. The conception of cyberspace as a technocratic dream-world follows a long tradition of futuristic visions of humanity liberated from its burdens by omnipotent technology. For William Gibson (Gibson, 1984), the term's orginator, cyberspace constituted

A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators in every nation … A graphical representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the non-space of the mind, clusters and constellations of data.

In 1996 John Perry Barlow published his *Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace,* a veritable constitution for an autonomous, unworldly cyber-utopia (Barlow, 1996).

Cyberspace consists of transactions, relationships, and thought itself, arrayed like a standing wave in the Web of our communications. Ours is a world that is both everywhere and nowhere, but it is not where bodies live.

- *We are creating a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth.*
- *We are creating a world where anyone anywhere may express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular, without fear of being coerced into silence or conformity.*
- *Your legal concepts of property, expression, identity, movement, and context do not apply to us. They are all based on matter, and there is no matter here.*

Our identities have no bodies, so, unlike you, we cannot obtain order by physical coercion. We believe that from ethics, enlightened self-interest, and the commonwealth, our governance will emerge.

Our identities may be distributed across many of your jurisdictions. The only law that all our constituent cultures would generally recognize is the Golden Rule. We hope we will be able to build our particular solutions on that basis. But we cannot accept the solutions you are attempting to impose.

Barlow's was not a lone voice. Other cyber-utopians foresaw the transformation of economic life in a world of e-commerce (Kelly, 1996).

Someday soon, cyberspace – the vast, intangible territory where computers meet and exchange information – will be populated with electronic communities and businesses. In your home, a protean box will hook you into a wealth of goods and services. It will receive and send mail, let you make a phone or video call or send a fax or watch a movie or buy shoes or diagnose a rash or pay bills or get cash (a new digital kind) or write your mother. That will be just the living-room manifestation of what promises to be a radical-and

rapid-transformation of commerce and society, the greatest since the invention of the automobile.

While Kurzweil, described in the *New York Times* as "a leading futurist of our time", has asserted that (Kurzweil, 1999):

By 2019 a $1 000 computer will at least match the processing power of the human brain. By 2029 the software for intelligence will have been largely mastered and the average Personal computer will be equivalent to 1 000 brains.

Metaphors are never neutral. They convey ontological assumptions that are ideologically loaded but rarely decoded. As Lakoff and Johnson warn, to ignore the significance of metaphors is to accept their sub-texts at face value (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). Talk of an Internet "revolution" only makes sense if one believes that history is technologically driven; addressing the "digital divide" is only meaningful if it is somehow different from other social divisions rooted in inequality; the promotion of "virtual communities" comprising "netizens" can be self-deluding without a chain of authentication between online and real-life identities. This is not to disparage such metaphors, but to expose them to intellectual interrogation. The notion of e-democracy should not be free from such scrutiny.

Unearthing democracy

If the Internet is surrounded by linguistic mists of novelty and uncertainty, democracy is spoken about as one of the few remaining sacred concepts of our age. As Graham has well observed, up until the end of the eighteenth century most people knew what democracy meant and most respectable people opposed it; in our century few people know what democracy means but most respectable people are in favour of it (Graham, 1986).

Where within the political topography of civil society is the place of democracy? **Where does one go if one wants to become a democratically engaged citizen?** Where does one go to learn through practice about how to be a democratic citizen? Where does one go if one wants to argue a point of political principle? To whom does one complain if there is too little democracy? Libraries are filled with books describing, praising and setting out conditions for democracy. But go to the information desk and ask where in any city, village or nation-state one goes to "do" democracy and one is met with blank looks of incomprehension. There are polling stations, but these are makeshift, remaining only for one day every few years, requiring no more than a few seconds of activity from each citizen entering them.

The most likely place to be sent on a search for the physical architecture of democratic life is Parliament. But the institutions of the democratic world do not "look and feel" very democratic. The physical architecture of our parliamentary and government buildings reveals a great deal about the

exclusivity of their self-perceptions. Nineteenth-century parliamentary buildings are traditionally grandiloquent, inpenetrable and affectedly aloof from their urban surroundings. It is a paradox that the great democratic legislatures of the world are pervaded by conspicuous imagery of public disconnection. A clue to the public's role in all of this is the title given to them by the British Parliament: Strangers. Citizens are strangers in the house of democracy and are required to swear an oath of silence before they enter the gallery overlooking the parliamentary chamber. This makes sense: parliaments are representative institutions precisely because it is not possible for all citizens to be present and speak for themselves.

Where, then, *do* citizens speak for themselves? Where are the public places in which citizens can set agendas and debate new ideas, inform or challenge those who represent them, or share thoughts and experiences with one another simply because the collective view counts in a democracy? Richard Sennett has observed, "were modern architects asked to design spaces that better promote democracy, they would lay down their pens; there is no modern design equivalent to the ancient assembly." (Sennett, 1977)

The opacity of democratic space coincides with an atrophying civic culture. More people than ever can vote, but fewer than at any time in the history of the universal franchise choose to do so. Popular faith in parliaments and other institutions of democratic representation is declining. A Harvard study entitled *Why People Don't Trust Government* describes and laments the decline of public trust in democratic institutions (Nye, Zelikow and King, 1997). The media of mass communication seek to bring the stories and imagery of democratic representation into people's homes, but the evidence suggests that most citizens would prefer to watch anything else – or nothing at all – rather than endure televised politics. According to ITC research, during the 2001 British general election 40% of viewers switched channels and 8% switched off their sets rather than watch election coverage. 70% of viewers said that they were either completely uninterested (29%) or not very interested (41%) in election coverage. In the US, 53.8% of local TV news broadcasts are about crime, disaster and war, with 0.7% devoted to public service announcements. The average American child sees 200 000 violent acts and 16 000 murders (on TV) before they reach the age of 18. How many democratic debates do they witness?

Democracy without a living space for its enactment becomes symbolic rather than participatory. In a symbolically democratic world, citizens' main engagement with power is in the confined and formally regulated space of the polling booth where they exercise their few seconds of power. As consuming spectators, they enter the electoral arena as targets of sophisticated techniques of public seduction. Once legitimised via the ballot, power becomes mediated through TV interviews, political gossip and grand state

occasions, leaving citizens as onlookers. A citizenry which is disengaged from the policy process and confined to occasional voting for leaders has such a weak relationship with democracy that politics becomes largely managerial.

Inventing e-democracy

The recurrent metaphor of e-democracy is the *agora,* conjuring images of folksy civic gatherings within an all-embracing public sphere. Of course, the metaphor deceives: the Athenian *agora* was far from democratic or inclusive, for it was closed to women, slaves and aliens; and it was mainly a talking shop, with real decisions being made elsewhere. As a political myth, the Internet as *agora* sits well with the rhetorical fantasy of push-button, plebiscitary democracy which pervaded much of the early literature about e-democracy (Becker and Slaton, 2000).

The lure of direct democracy, half libertarian-populist and half romantic shades of Rousseau, served to root the project in the realm of the politically naïve and nostalgic. Rather than seeking to place digital technologies in the service of existing democracy, the highly speculative and futuristic e-democracy pioneers appeared to anticipate the implosion of constitutions and institutions in the face of the new digital paradigm.

At the same time, a utilitarian, bureaucratically rational agenda for e-Government, based upon hopes of cheaper and more efficient service delivery via online transactions, failed to capture the public imagination. **The dilemma of early thinking about e-Governance was that most Internet enthusiasts did not understand or care very much about political democracy and most politicians and government officials regarded the Internet as a one-way conveyor belt.** Parliaments and Government departments went online, but dreaded the consequences of interactivity (Dunleavy and Margetts, 2002). Politicians liked the idea of websites as cheap electronic brochures, but had little understanding of what the public wanted from them (Coleman, 2000). Just as politics in the offline world was grey, archaic and uncool, politics on the net tended to be instantly recognisable by its worthy dullness and incestuous jargon.

Ironically, while e-politics replicated much that was most obsolete in non-e-politics, there were unmissable signs that "politics as usual" would have to be modernised. Twentieth-century political representation was characterised by centralisation of power, based upon elite deliberation. This produced four points of strain: Parliament, as the central institution of public representation, seemed disconnected from public life and in need of modernisation; politicians' obsession with public opinion polling, as a scientific approach to measuring public thinking, failed to reflect the dynamics of opinion or the rich depths of public experience and expertise; the

mass media offered ringside seats for the public to watch the political spectacle, but the spectators became disenchanted, regarding the political and media elite with an equal contempt; and finally – perhaps most intangibly – the public's appetite for seeing, listening to and trusting itself could be ignored neither by politicians nor the media. These were seismic changes in political culture and call for some elaboration.

The parliamentary system of government was founded upon the idea of remote representation. It was assumed that distance, human scale and public competence separated the represented from their elected representatives. A Burkean disdain for mandated delegation discouraged notions of permanent connection between citizens and politicians. **Policy deliberation was for the sovereign elite; the job of the public was to vote for their legislators and then withdraw from the process until the next election.** The problem for parliamentarians, though, was that they are not sovereign and their deliberations rarely count for much. In reality, the legislature is a creature of the executive, its members being little more than whipped voting fodder in response to Government policies. So, by the late twentieth century frustration was manifesting itself from two sources: MPs, who were unsure of their role and felt democratically redundant, and the public who, in a post-deferential age, felt neglected and unheard and demanded a new kind of relationship with their representatives. Proposals for parliamentary modernisation emerged in response to this sense of disconnection, as well as being a spur to greater administrative efficiency.

While Parliament sought to reconnect with the public, the significance of public opinion was being contested. Since the 1930s, when Gallup invented scientific opinion polling, the results of such polling had come to have an increasing influence upon policy formation. Not only were such polls trusted to predict public voting behaviour (in reality, only a small percentage of polls are designed for such a purpose), but they were regarded by politicians as the best available guides to public values and desires in relation to various areas of policy. Critics of conventional polling argued that at best this measures what a representative sample of uninformed, prejudiced citizens think about a particular issue at one particular moment. In a sense, polls provide an instant snapshot of public ignorance. Fishkin and other deliberative democrats considered that this was selling the public short and that two other questions should be added to the polling equation: firstly, what does the public know about a particular issue when it is polled? and secondly, how might the public's response change if they were exposed to balanced information within a deliberative environment? A number of deliberative polls were run, designed to find out how a representative sample group would change its responses to poll questions in the light of exposure to information and discussion. The results were compelling: informed citizens tended to

arrive at different conclusions about policy issues from when they were uninformed (Fishkin, 1997). In traditional Lippmannesque/Schumpeterian political theory, the role of politicians is to appeal to the ignorance, selfishness, and inertia of citizens; **deliberative democracy holds out promise of a more dialogical, evidence-based relationship between representatives and represented.** Beyond deliberative polls, this relationship has been explored in a range of ways, including people's juries, consensus conferences, visioning exercises and participatory simulations.

Politics has always been mediated by professional journalists and editors, but since the 1960s one medium has dominated and reshaped political communication: television. Politicians and parties spent much of the second half of the twentieth century adapting themselves for television consumption. The increased transparency and accessibility of televised politics have undoubtedly been positive for democracy, but another effect has been to encourage a climate of intellectual risk aversion, excessive stage management and systemic co-dependency between media professionals and politicians. As Blumler and Gurevitch (1997), the eminent scholars of political communication, have noted:

> … *the political communication process has been getting into ever deeper trouble. An impoverishing way of addressing citizens about political issues has been gaining an institutionally rooted hold that seems inherently difficult to resist or shake off.*

Energetic efforts have been made by the media over the past two decades to move away from monological formats and to encourage greater interactivity between politicians and the people. Formats such as audience discussion, phone-ins and online fora have facilitated "talkback" paths designed to give space for the public voice, often in dialogue with politicians. But the participating public still do not trust the politicians' motives for talking to them (Coleman and Ross, 2001).

Perhaps the most conspicuous change to occur has been in the public itself. **Citizens have become less deferential and more confident; less politically loyal and tribalistic, more consumerist and volatile; less in awe of experts and professionals and more inclined to trust their own experience.** The public has come to be more interested than ever in seeing and hearing itself via the media; with the growth of affordable video technologies, traditional walls between media production and consumption began to crumble. So-called reality TV, ranging from live talk to fly-on-the-wall documentaries to the videocam environment of *Big Brother,* showed the public engaging in its own conversations, in its own voices, rather than as onlookers on the exclusive deliberations of a seemingly closed elite (Coleman, 2003).

So, by the beginning of the twenty-first century there was a sense that politics should and would adapt. The ripples of change – parliamentary

modernisation and constitutional reform; the growing interest and experimentation in deliberative democracy; the attempt by broadcasters to promote greater interactivity; the growing public interest in "real people" – were not particularly connected to one another, but flowed from a common cause. None of these changes were driven by the emergence of digital technologies. As noted earlier, most of the e-democracy pioneers were far too intoxicated by the heady air of the technocratic future to care very much about existing political institutions and relationships. Where efforts were made to put politics online, these were mainly led by enthusiastic technologists whose primary aim was to replicate routine practices. Small-scale experimental projects, like Minnesota e-politics (founded 1994) and UK Citizens Online Democracy (founded 1996), were exceptional in their commitment to civic networking and the creation of deliberative fora. Some local authorities promoted e-democracy projects (the leading examples were in Scandinavia, Canada and the UK), but few were clearly focused, well resourced or constitutionally connected. Generally speaking, the democratic and digital agendas evolved along different paths, largely unaware of one another.

There is now a compelling case for synergy between digital and democratic developments. The potential to utilise the inherent feedback paths of digital technologies in order to facilitate public policy deliberation and two-way governance is too important to remain confined to techies and e-enthusiasts. Democracy as we have so far known it was a product of an age where effective representation was constrained by disconnections of time and distance. As these barriers are transcended by communication technologies which are asynchronous and global, democratic institutions can only flourish if they become more porous, accessible, accountable and rooted in public space. One is not talking here about e-democracy as the digitisation of mundane administrative tasks, or as a sci-fi gimmick, but as a force for the reinvigoration of democratic politics.

Re-inventing representation

An effective representative democracy requires a five-way information flow:

- Government to Citizen (G2C).
- Citizen to Government (C2G).
- Representative to Citizen (R2C).
- Citizen to Representative (C2R).
- Citizen to Citizen (C2C).

Additional flows include G2G – a fundamental objective of the joined-up government agenda; R2R – particularly important in an era of political subsidiarity; and R2G – enabling legislators to be more in touch with the

processes and knowledge resources of the executive. These are important, but primarily administrative, aspects of governance.

Within the existing model of democratic representation, these flows are somewhat restricted or clogged:

- **G2C takes place largely via the mass media,** principally television and the press. Government distrusts the mediating interpretations of the media; citizens distrust the extent and quality of Government information and tend to switch off when presented with it.

- **C2G is limited.** Government runs many consultations, but few citizens participate in these and there is much scepticism about Government responsiveness to public input. Most citizens believe that whatever views or expertise they possess will have little influence upon Government.

- **R2C is limited outside of election campaigning.** Representatives work hard to win citizens' votes, and make strenuous efforts to use local media to inform their constituents about how well they are being represented, but there are few opportunities to hear what their constituents think about specific policy issues.

- **C2R is very limited.** Citizens can raise issues with their representatives in local surgeries or by mail – in some case by email. But, outside of traditional lobbying, there are few opportunities to feed in to the legislative process by raising new information or perspectives. Few citizens are active members of political parties or lobby groups, so few voices tend to be heard by representatives when policies are being evaluated.

- **C2C is the basis of a healthy civil society, but it is in decline,** consistent with a broader decline in "social capital." In general, citizens do not discuss policy issues with one another – even when those issues matter to them. It is not easy to find places or networks for such discussion. The media provide some opportunities, but these rarely enable citizens to develop communication with other citizens.

This is a rough and pessimistic sketch of existing communication channels for democratic representation. Within this structure there are a number of blockages. Unblocking democratic channels of communication could be one of the most important functions of e-democracy.

How can these channels be opened up?

Trusted space

Democracy, as a collective relationship which unites and aggregates vast numbers of diverse, anonymous people, is highly dependent upon trust. A good example of democratic trust is witnessed when people vote in elections. Even though they know that their vote might not count very much in the

overall scheme of things, citizens trust the polling station as a fairly regulated democratic space. They do not trust one polling station or ballot box more than others, but regard the space itself as trustworthy. There is now a need to create a much more expansive democratic space, beyond the occasional moments of elections, for the purpose of public deliberation.

Jay Blumler and I have argued that the Internet possesses a "vulnerable potential" to provide a democratic space which is open to all and connected to real democratic institutions (Blumler and Coleman, 2001). Just as polling stations are not automatically trustworthy – and were not always so – discursive or deliberative spaces need to be established, funded, promoted and regulated. The upkeep of **a civic commons in cyberspace** needs to become a matter of public service, rather like the protection of fair elections or public libraries or public broadcasting. Trusted spaces will not emerge spontaneously or without effort. Apart from anything else, the commercial command of cyberspace is so strong that it becomes increasingly difficult to think of the Internet in civic terms.

There must be varied levels of entry to an online civic commons, so that not everyone is expected to participate with the same degree of commitment or expected outcome. Some people will want to engage in technical policy deliberations; others will want to exchange views with those sharing their interests; others still will want to formulate rather than respond to an agenda for debate. In a pluralistic democratic space there should be room for all of these approaches to public deliberation. The key to making online public space useful to citizens will be the provision of appropriate tools for consultation, deliberation and decision-making. Such tools would include online libraries, archives and information digests; discussion moderation services; advocacy aids; newsgroups and Web rooms for specialist discussions; and mechanisms for summarising points raised in discussion.

Constitutional integration

Democratic representation is rooted in real-world institutions, such as central Government, Parliament(s), devolved assemblies, local councils, the European Union, the United Nations. The procedural efficiency and public accountability of these institutions is key to their democratic success or failure. E-democracy cannot afford to ignore them or be remote from the process of their structural and cultural modernisation. The debate about the future of Government and Parliament and the debate about the Internet and democracy need to converge.

The failure of most e-democracy experiments to date – as well as earlier initiatives to create two-way governance using cable TV and other pre-digital media – has been their unconnectedness from constitutional power. In a period

of administrative modernisation and constitutional reform, e-democratic structures need to be embedded dynamically within the structure and culture of governance.

Government and elected representatives must not be outsiders to e-democracy initiatives. They should learn to understand them, participate within them and respond to them. They need to recognise that democratic interactivity involves a two-way flow of energy. Without this, the public will regard e-democracy initiatives as a sham and will withdraw from them; treat them with contempt and hostility; or establish their own flows of counter-governmental communication.

As the traditional channels of political aggregation, the parties need to examine and adapt to the e-democratic options that are open to them. As currently organised, political parties are over-centralised and under-utilise the talents and experience of their members. The parties' main use of the Internet thus far has been to replicate an e-commerce model of online campaigning, aimed at selling themselves to voters. Few voters have been much excited by this appeal – nor are they likely to be in the future. Why should citizens look to politically-biased websites, offering them little more than electronic brochures, for their political information, when they can obtain much more critical and reliable accounts from the traditional media? The unique feature of the Internet is its scope for extensive interactivity, and yet the parties have so far failed lamentably to engage interactively with either the public in general or even their own members. This will surely change, with policy deliberation within dispersed national parties taking place far more online. In Hungary, the Liberals have become an online party, running party conferences, leadership elections and members' organisational meetings via their website.

Meaningful interactivity

Feedback is at the core of the democratic potential of the Internet. No information source before the Internet provided such scope for direct responsiveness. Digital communication technologies break down the traditional barrier between producer and consumer; broadcaster and audience. Citizens use the Internet to become informed, but also to inform others. All information becomes susceptible to contestation. Internet users share knowledge about issues that matter to them, ranging from health to travel to recipes to household tips. Participants in these sites tend to be both knowledge seekers and knowledge providers; they respect the experience and expertise of others and expect their own to be respected. But when they go to most Government or Parliament sites they feel peculiarly shut out, as if there could be nothing of value that they could bring to the deliberative process.

Politicians should resist the delusion that e-democracy is simply about making themselves more transparent to the public. Of course, transparency is central to democracy (and the Internet has a major democratic role to play in political cultures dominated by secrecy, corruption and cover-ups), but e-democracy should amount to more than an online peep-show into the institutions of power. For example, webcasting the proceedings of parliamentary committees is democratically laudable, but there is little evidence that this is what the public wishes to see. MPs' diaries being published online might provide minor added value for journalists, but few citizens are likely to feel much empowered by this. The Internet is more than TV for small audiences. To neglect the two-way path of digital communication is to miss its point.

On those occasions when citizens have been invited into the process of policy deliberation, such as in the online consultations run by the Hansard Society for committees in the British Parliament, their response has been overwhelmingly positive. They move from believing that nobody in authority cares what they think to a greater sense of their own capacity to influence policy.

Early writers about the Internet made much of its tendency towards disintermediation. For some, interactivity came to be identified with synchronicity and the absence of mediating forces. But without mediation, how do people know what information to trust? Without moderation, how does the chatter of countless, competing voices turn into an environment for listening and learning as well as speaking? It is surely a mistake to confuse the immediacy of digital communication with non-mediation. Filtration of online information, and entry barriers to deliberative discussion, should be unrestrictive, transparent and accountable, but they should certainly not be absent. **If citizens are to interact with their representatives and with one another, in a bid to inform and enrich policy and legislation, they are entitled to the protection of fair rules and tested procedures.** If elected representatives and Government are to enter into the public conversation and learn from it, they should have access to trusted (independently produced) summaries of the public's evidence and mood.

Zones of silence – Zones of deafness

The Ugandan MP, Dr. Johnson J. Nkuuhe, has referred to "zones of silence": those areas of the globe which appear to have nothing to say because their populations are so disconnected from influential channels of communication. In response to Nkuuhe, others have spoken of "zones of deafness", referring to areas and institutions which are so used to speaking to themselves that they have lost the means of hearing the voices of others. These are powerful

metaphors, appropriate not only to the **global democratic deficit,** but also to that within nation states and regions.

We have tended to think of public silence mainly within the context of political repression. But, as Fishkin (1991) has argued, not having access to the media of mass communication can also amount to a form of silencing:

Crucial voices may fail to achieve an effective hearing without the need to silence any of them. In a modern, technologically complex society, access to the mass media is a necessary condition for a voice to contribute to the national political debate. Unless the media permit the full range of views that have a significant following in the society to get access to the media on issues of intense interest to proponents of those views, then the full realisation of political equality has fallen short.

The democratic theorist, Zolo (1992), goes further still in theorising the political nature of public silence:

…the political effects of mass communication are closely linked with the tendencies towards conformity, apathy and political "silence" which stem not so much from what is said as from what is unsaid, from what the communication filters tacitly exclude from the daily order of public attention. Silence is without doubt the most effective agent for subliminal persuasion in mass communication, and the most suitable instrument for a kind of negative homologisation of an information-based public. The political integration of information-based societies comes about far more through tacit reduction in the complexity of the topics of political communication than through any positive selection or discussion of them.

How might the Internet, as a new medium of communication, transcend these zones of silence and deafness?

Information as a common resource

Paradoxically, as legislation has provided for greater freedom of information, the technical capacity to privatise and filter the flow information has increased. **Data deprivation is one of the main causes of public silence.** To have a say in the affairs of democracy, citizens need access to the widest possible information, not just mediated messages or headline policy decisions. People need access to the resources that will allow them to make up their own minds.

The Internet could provide a significant means of distributing **information as a common resource.** As Rose (2002) argues, in the context of East Asian governance, the Internet encourages greater openness between government and governed; impersonal rules, so that favouritism and bribery in providing information can be reduced; and continuing accountability to citizens and civil society institutions. The realisation of even some of this

potential could only serve to strengthen democratic culture. But, as Rose observes:

> *Where governments have little or no accountability, the capacity of the Internet to promote the free flow of information is likely to create frictions between governors and recalcitrant subjects as it offers citizens the means to publicize activities that governors want kept quiet. Friction is likely to be greater where adherence to these norms is currently least, such as Myanmar, where in 1996 government made it illegal to own a modem without permission, and the ownership of the few PCs in the country is mostly in the hands of government and business elites and foreigners. The People's Republic of China is also vulnerable to increased friction, since its Great Fire Wall policy for controlling trans-national flows of political information is at odds with desire for greater integration in the international economy through membership of the World Trade Organisation.*

For democratising countries, the first goal of e-democracy must be information transparency. Where authoritarian governments are resistant to this, the Internet can be used as a channel for whistle-blowing and irrepressible exposure of corruption.

Liberating information will best serve the public if resources are devoted to filtering and **making intelligible the raw material for useful public knowledge.** The Internet, as we know it, is good at allowing users to download "everything", but poor at differentiating between good, bad or obsolete information. Search engines should in theory provide a way of prioritising current, trustworthy information, but what we know about the priorities of these engines suggests that their selection of "top sites" owes more to cultural and political bias than pedagogical or epistemological integrity. A useful recent study found that search engines "systematically exclude (in some cases by design and in some accidentally) certain sites and certain types of sites in favour of others, systematically giving prominence to some at the expense of others" (Introna and Nissenbaum, 2000). Addressing – and possibly regulating – these biases is far more important for the future of e-democracy than simply allowing freedom of expression to flourish within unknown websites which perish undetected in the vast metropolis of the World Wide Web.

Promoting excluded voices

Active efforts must be made to attract the widest range of voices possible and to monitor the ways in which different social groups are making their voices heard online. The disabled, people who do not use English as a first language, young people, senior citizens and those who are not confident, either with the technology or in dealing with Government, need to be encouraged and helped to use digital technologies in order to be better connected to Government and representatives. There would be little point in

utilising new channels of communication in order to hear from the same people who have tended to be most vocal in traditional consultations. **A key purpose of e-participation is to create opportunities to be heard for those who are not usually part of the policy process.**

E-participation must involve more than simply setting up a discussion forum and hoping that people will use it. Experimentation with online consultations that have purposely sought to include the non-usual suspects suggests that there are ways of flattening hierarchies online, by creating less intimidating and more expansive spaces for public deliberation (See Coleman and Normann, 2000; Hall, 2002). Designing inclusive, accessible, usable and welcoming spaces is just as much a requirement of democracy as universal access to the Internet – and achieving such an end has more to do with social psychology and graphic design than engineering or programming.

Promoting inclusion requires a degree of inventiveness in facilitating different types of public input to democratic debate, including that which is experiential and anecdotal. Storytelling and Web logging offer interesting alternatives to traditional consultation submissions (Coleman and Gotze, 2001).

Representing geography

Democracy is rooted, if not always territorially, then by communal ties of interest and passion. Real-world places can be replicated and shifted in cyberspace; for example, the numerous US and European-based newsgroups for Iranians, Chinese, Kurds, Arabs and other groups for whom national identity is best expressed beyond their national borders. But too much of what takes place online is rootless and lacking in cultural identity. Too often there is an assumption that the cyber-represented world is monolingual and monocultural; those outside its narrow nucleus, for reasons of linguistic, cultural or economic difference, are urged to integrate or lurk in silence. How often has one witnessed French, Spanish or German messages in British or American newsgroups or discussion fora treated as being disruptive or self-obsessed? Yet cyberspace is the quintessential space of a globalised society: it is perfectly suited to the kind of transnational and cross-cultural discussions that have been elusive in the past.

The Internet could be developed to facilitate a form of **communicative subsidiarity,** where public deliberation is conducted at its appropriate level, depending on circumstances. So, there could be local discussions as well as regional, national, continental and global ones. Geo-spatial data systems could help to sort out the sources and backgrounds of discussion contributors, so that there would be a capacity to track what particular demographic groups are saying – or not saying. As well as territorial communication, communities of interest and practice could be linked on the same basis.

In short, cyberspace needs to reflect the global map as it is now, whilst unblocking the gulfs and chasms born of economic and cultural inequality. Authentically global debate could be facilitated. Those who have become frustrated by years of silence shall be invited as equals into the global conversation; those who have grown self-absorbed and arrogant shall be encouraged to listen. This is not a recipe for peace and harmony on earth, but at least it recognises that the most complete democracy involves the whole planet rather than small islands within it.

Towards a policy for e-democracy

Politicians are beginning to realise that connecting directly with the citizens they represent can lead to better policy-making and legislation, informed by public experience and expertise; a new kind of relationship between government and governed, based upon politicians' listening, learning and sharing ideas as well as steering and aggregating; and the reward of enhanced public confidence in democratic institutions and the renewed legitimacy of governance. The former Canadian Finance Minister, Paul Martin, has said that, "Governments must use new technologies such as the Internet to empower citizens and provide them with a greater ability to scrutinize and influence government decisions and actions." (Martin, 2001) Robin Cook, former Leader of the UK House of Commons, has committed himself to the e-democracy agenda, stating that, "We need not accept the paradox that gives us more ways than ever to speak, and leaves the public with a wider feeling than ever before that their voices are not being heard. The new technologies can strengthen our democracy, by giving us greater opportunities than ever before for better transparency and a more responsive relationship between government and electors." (Cook, 2002).

But what exactly is an e-democracy policy? There would be little point in developing such a policy unless it involved using Internet and other digital technologies to seriously reinvigorate existing democratic practices. E-democracy as a tokenistic policy, designed to show government as being e-friendly and to facilitate politically meaningless opportunities for the public to "have a say", would only discredit the relationship between the Internet and democracy.

A successful e-democracy policy should embrace the following principles:

- Create **new public spaces** for political interaction and deliberation. There is a shortage of such space in the offline environment; online offers significant advantages for the cultivation of effective public discussion and deliberation areas.

- Provide for a **multi-directional, interactive communications flow,** designed to connect citizens, representatives and the executive with one another. It

is important to differentiate between the layers of C2R (parliamentary, devolved assembly, regional or local assembly, community, European); the various, not always connected aspects of C2G; and the democratic necessity of enabling C2C.

- **Integrate e-democratic processes** within broader constitutional structures and developments.

- Ensure that interaction between citizens, their elected representatives and government is meaningful. If public input is being invited into the policy or legislative process, ensure that it is **effectively facilitated and summarised** and that response mechanisms exist so that representatives and government can listen and learn.

- Ensure that there is a sufficiency of **high-quality online information** so that citizens can consider policy options on the basis of trusted knowledge, as well as their own subjective experiences. Such information needs to be accessible, intelligible and not overwhelming.

- If the public voice is to be heard more clearly and more often, this must involve **efforts to recruit the widest range of public voices** to the democratic conversation, including those who are traditionally marginalised, disadvantaged or unheard.

- Reflect the realities of geography and social structure within online environments, with a view to providing **equal access to the democratic process** for all areas and all communities.

Beyond the rhetorical discourse of metaphor, hyperbole and disconnected futurology, there is scope for a radical policy agenda in the sphere of e-democracy. E-democracy should not be conceived as a panacea for all the flaws of political democracy and social communication. But it does hold out hope of contributing to the development of two incomplete historical projects: the Internet and democracy.

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Table of contents

PART II
The Future of the Internet
and Democracy Beyond Metaphors, Towards Policy

Professor Stephen Coleman, Oxford Internet Institute,

Boxes

Tables

Figures