DEMOCRATIZING THE CYBERSPACE

The current period of rapid economic and social changes, accompanied by the recent growth in Information and Communication Technologies signal an emergent information age with newer possibilities. One of the important features of the information age is the rise of the `Network Society'. It has a specific propagandistic orientation of the content and messages of the discourses that accord a privileged role to the technology. It assumes that the extensive use of information and communication technologies is the means as well as ends of information society. The pro-technology arguments identify access to cyberspace with democratic potentials. The state-funded `awareness raising initiatives' support this ideology and considers these technologies as vital for healthy and sustainable democratic growth and polity. It is believed that the `effective participation, enlightened understanding and the setting of political agenda' are indispensable requirements for good governance. In fact, the new technologies can facilitate this process.

Democratic countries view information as an empowering force in the hands of people. That is, free and open flow of ideas, news, and opinion fuels deliberative democracy. The struggle over information has emerged at a time when democracies are under increasing pressure from within and without. The new great-power competition won't necessarily take place on battlefields or in boardrooms. It will happen on smartphones, computers, and other connected devices and on the digital infrastructure that supports them. The typically hands-off approach that many democratic governments take to information will make it hard for them to compete.

The users of the ICT and the constituent members of the information society are configured as consumers. Their major influence on social development is to be exercised via individual choices in the marketplace of competing information, goods and services. The result is citizenship and other social collective identities are being eroded and highly marginalized by the social economic and technological development. All this amounts to no less than a paradigm shift in the process of the understanding of democratic governance.

Some writers question the scenarios that lean too much towards technological determinism. They stress on the importance of recognizing the role of the new technologies and their applications. They take a dialectical perspective to assess the technological role and its democratic prospect. The new technologies emerge out of the dialectical interaction between technology and society and they are subject to social shaping. The policy network is influenced by such factors as technological precedents, political culture, legal framework etc. They emerge through the complex interaction between different agencies of state with NGOs and private companies. With the internet some recognize the emergence of new forms of agency and community that challenge the global capital and its current forms of alienation. The dialectical nature of new technology, especially internet fosters:

1. The domination that leads to alienation and the freedom to pursue progressive social transformation and
2. Overcome domination and alienation.

In this context, the major justifications for revisiting democratic practice in the light of an emergent Information age are twofold:

1. The first concerns a growing perception that current political institutions, actors and practice are in frail condition and are held in poor public regard, especially in the

western developed democracy. The relevance of new technologies is being examined at a time when people are demonstrating dormant political activity and developing growing cynicism towards politics.

2. The second concerns a belief that the current period of rapid social, economic and political change, which may signal an emergent Information Age. It provides opportunities to rethink or if necessary, radically overhaul or replace those institutions, actors and practices.

In such a context, society is undergoing paradigmatic change. As Castells says, 'We are living through one of these rare intervals in history. An interval characterized by transformation of material culture by works of a new technological paradigm organized around information technologies. It is against this background we have to assess where the notion of cyber-democracy or digital democracy fits in'. It is important to determine whether the new technologies, especially internet, will revolutionalise the political space or they are adopted mostly to the current neo liberal regime.

In general, the debate on Computer-Mediated–Communication (CMC) and democracy has been dominated by two key frameworks: plebiscitary and deliberative.

In the **plebiscitary framework** it is envisaged that individuals directly express their opinions through an expanding electronic marketplace. It is a form of direct democracy where sum of individual opinions provide indications for the common will. `The justification for this model is that the free development of all can only be achieved with the free development of each'. With an emphasis on the liberal and market-driven political economy since 1970s and 80s, coupled with corporate media vision, plebiscitary mode has been encouraged. It is now embraced by populist conservative initiatives that project the image of electronic communication as a democratic end in itself.

The **deliberative models** seek to strengthen representative democracy and to render it participatory, affording citizens roughly equal opportunities to be involved in political processes. Such an approach advocates the use of CMC (Computer-Mediated–Communication) as a means of strengthening democracy, as a medium of education for enhancing participation in the political process. Deliberative models have stressed the importance and desirability of citizen participation in public discourse.

Both the definition of **democracy and access** issues are linked with the particular ways in which electronic democracy projects came into being and developed. In each case, different actors (such as local authorities, grassroots movements, software, hardware and telecommunications companies, central governments, and even transnational bodies) with different interests and aspirations have negotiated and confronted each other in order to inform and influence the projects. The perceived crisis of political communication and of democracy is clearly reflected in these different conceptions. The goal, however, is to rejuvenate democracy. Now the question is whether in the information age, with the introduction of digital democracy there can be any difference to this conceptual status of democracy. The problems related to representation, accountability, increased political awareness, ability on the part of the people to engage in free and collective decision making remain the central concerns. The variety of models aim at improving the qualities of democratic participation.

Michael Benedikt, for instance, asserts that computer-mediated communication technologies would facilitate the formation of new communities. He contemplates the coming

of a new world, `a world that must, in a multiple of ways, begin at least as both an extension and a transcription of the world as we know it and have built it thus far'. The interactive characteristics of the Internet supposedly foster more deliberative, discursive democratic form which reflects a mutual recognition of the centrality of any strong democracy is what Robert Putnam calls `social capital', which promotes civic engagement and interaction between citizens concerning matters of common concern. Cyberspace has the potential to emerge as an essential focal point for communal activities and political participation. This development would help counter several negative trends. Information technology in general and the Internet in particular have the potential to form new links between people and marshalling these connections to increase collaboration in democratic life.

Electronic democracy, in its advanced form-the Internet, is now conceived as an electronic forum comprising a vast network of liberated and equal citizens of the world. It is capable of debating all facets of their existence without fear of control from national sovereign authorities. The key features of this interactive media as outlined by Hague and Loader, for instance, are interactive on a many to many reciprocal basis, global Network of free speech and association enabling users to construct and share information with limited control and state censorship. It enables the users and producers of information society to adopt subjective identities at the global and local level, even at the cost of breakdown of national boundaries. Given these conditions, one may argue that electronic democracy is about more than voting or providing better public information to citizens. Its info kiosks that are equipped to provide more information would fulfil the substantive goals of democracy to a great extent.

Assessment

- Criticizing the prospect of electronic democracy, Bryan says, `no amount of high-tech wizardry will convert the pushing of a button or the dialling of a telephone into an act of deliberation' unless the social conditions provide people with a stake in the outcome of the deliberation.

- Technologies-defined as knowledge, practices and artifacts emerge essentially from social, political, and economic contexts and hence reflect specific relations of power. Penley and Ross point out that like all other technologies, computer mediated communication technologies are developed `in the interests of industrial and corporate profits and seldom in the name of greater community participation or creative autonomy'.

- To some feminist scholars the World of Computers and their connections are increasingly male dominated. The users are predominantly white, male, and middle class.

- For Travers, in public sphere people must be able to participate as diverse individuals rather than in accordance with universal norms. In that sense, the history of the western public sphere is one in which inclusivity has been largely illusory . Just as access to and participation within the dominant public spheres historically has been restricted to dominant elites, there is evidence that cyberspace also is elite dominated. The traditional relations of domination are replicated in the `new' social space. In this so-called new public sphere, `the alleged transformations in power relationship between individuals, government and social institutions as they are emerging are what are becoming known as cyberspace'.

- The implications of this on the production and reproduction of the culture of cyberspace are likely to be significant. Communities produce and reproduce themselves as those in power create boundaries between insiders and outsiders.

- Some critics argue that the prospects for electronic democratization will depend on whether information is packed as an easily accessible `social good' or sold as a costly `consumer product'. The most obvious challenge to the democratizing potential of computer-based communication technologies is in terms of 1. material access to the hardware and software required for participation, 2. the education required to make use of it, 3. the information required to get on board, and 4. more importantly the sense of entitlement required to produce public written statements and to take up social space.

- The potential of new technologies to facilitate the practice of democracy must be seriously questioned if people are systematically denied access based on economic status, gender, geographic location, educational attainment and so on. The primacy must be given upon existing information needs, patterns of information retrieval, and barriers to accessing information and attention must be paid to provide relevant information. For this, communities themselves must be involved in considering how the new technologies might be applied to meet their information needs. Communities and groups can be empowered by enabling them to create pressure on the relevant information providers across private, public and voluntary sectors.

- The ease with which the national borders are now breached by social, cultural, political and economic processes in this era of globalization there are now increasing opportunities for developing, selling and buying services anywhere in the world. Criticizing many of these initiatives taken by respective state agencies some critics suggest to move away from information age rhetoric about the value of new technologies per se, and scare tactics concerning the social and economic exclusion awaiting individuals and groups and communities that do not `get wired'.

Already captive audiences inside a commercially mediated maze are easily targeted with advertising appeal. Problems here are not so much related to access or social inclusion/exclusion; misgivings lie more with the difficulty of moving outside heavily commercialized sectors. What is to be concerned about then is the nature of media-information, controlled by a hegemonic market force that invariably concentrates on presenting trivial and sensationalist material and largely ignores important social and political issues. Pointing out the arenas of politics at the level of the state and civil society Held suggests that the unequal gaps that already exist between rich and poor in civil society will widen dramatically if new technologies are designed primarily in support of information held as privately owned property for sale in a highly commercialized and competitive electronic public sphere. Recognizing this problems Sclove reacts saying that while there are few ways in which citizens can influence the process of choosing or designing technologies, they should not adapt compliantly to whatever technologies happen along. The consumers should commit themselves to supporting technologies that are compatible with citizenship and democracy.