

Can Democracy Survive in the Age of Google?

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Abstract

Much of the literature and reflections on the evolution of democracy in the digital age written in the past decade already appear dated and belonging to a different era. Democracy is old and digital technologies are evolving at an extremely rapid pace. Thus, much of the literature on democracy in the digital age is already pre-Facebook, pre-Twitter, pre-Wiki, pre-WikiLeaks, and pre-whatever is around the corner that will take us by surprise. So be it.

Rapid evolution of digital forms notwithstanding, core implications, or lack thereof, are perhaps coming a bit into focus. Thus, the question I have been given in this conference “Can Democracy Survive in the Age of Google?” The answer is an unequivocal “Yes, it can” and “No, it may not.”

The point of this paper is to argue that as of 2010, there is no clear relationship between the digital age per se, and democracy. The rise of digital culture in China, the example of Iran, and the contests that have arisen in democratic digital powers, gives evidence that the promise of digital revolution is not necessarily a promise of democratic evolution. The obvious points of such an argument are that democracies and their institutions have existed far in advance of the digital revolution. Likewise, the current lament over the collapse of investigative journalism, the corporate consolidation of media, and the lack of “public good” policies and regulations in the United States are all observations of the lack of intrinsic democratizing qualities of the digital revolution. The main point of this paper is that an obsession with measuring the forms of communication and their social functions may not actually alter the distribution of power arrangements in society. That is, they may or may not have democratizing impacts depending on deeper cultural and institutional forces at play.

The Assumptions of Digital Democracy

With the maturing of the internet, humanity is clearly experiencing an unprecedented increase in interconnectivity, communication options, and access to information. The manifestations of open source, uploaded, peer reviewed phenomena such as Wikipedia is certainly a digital revolution. I am fan of Wikipedia. Wikipedia does not claim to be what it is not, but there are those who may understand such breakthroughs in information

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distribution and peer to peer structures as democracy itself. (Goodman: 2007). The fundamental reaction I have with respect to those who see the digital revolution as an intrinsic catalyst to democratic politics is that communication, regulated or unregulated, does not equal democracy. As noted by FCC members in the United States, the role of digital broad band with respect to sustaining democracy, may well depend on practices of regulations and public guidance that are inspired by deeper notions of democratic values as opposed to obsession with quantity and technique of communications.

During the President Bush years of the first decade of the 21st century, the lassie faire attitude found in U.S. regulatory agencies such as the FCC demonstrated this simple faith in democracy as the “market place.” The consolidation of media, the comparative lack of funding of public media institutions, the lack of guidance to a comprehensive digital infrastructure has resulted in the United States with only a second tier position in broad band penetration, but one also that has seen a rapid collapse in the traditional watch dogs and investigative journalist functions found in yesterday’s media. When contrasted to the highly evolved democracies in Europe, one can see that the digital revolution has manifested in very different ways with respect to its support of democratic culture and institutions. Such contrast with the club of evolved democracies in Europe demonstrates that the survival of democracy in the digital age is not a question of the digital platforms themselves, but a question of the sophistication of the political cultural understandings and debate with respect to the role they play in supporting or not supporting democracy. Such questions can be applied to the mature democracies of Europe and North America, as well as to non-democratic cases such as China and Iran.

Democracy First, Digital Second

Without being too pedantic or simplistic , it seems necessary to review our notions of democracy if we are to measure the impact of the digital age on democracy. The core concepts are clearly enough guided by a few very basic questions:

Question #1

“Is democracy to be direct with all citizens able to participate in the rules they make for themselves; or is it to be indirect, with freely chosen representatives deciding the rules to society?”

With respect to this first question, the digital age holds what some call the “third great era of democracy” (Ferdinand, 200). If we follow the line from Classical Greek to modern representative democracy to a “third digital age democracy,” we can see the digital implication for this first question. That implication is that the digital technology breakthrough for direct mass participation in forming and approving all decisions for any jurisdiction is possible and thus desirable. This is certainly a contending vision for the future (Noveck, 2009). While referendums, as examples of a type of direct democratic process, exist in modern representative democracies, they also come with the historic criticism of reflecting the “passions of the mob.”

The two roads of democracy (representative and direct), are no longer an abstract question in the digital age. The peer to peer dynamic vetting of reality as manifested in Wikipedia is aimed at producing a “neutral” outcome as an information tool for humanity.

There are no leaders in this version of reality. It is an open accessible direct participatory device shaping the knowledge which may inform the decisions we make in the present and future. By design, it also marginalizes expertise and seeks a common neutral ground over time. If we use Wikipedia as a model for a potential uploaded direct democracy, classic questions addressed at the constitutional founding come back into play regarding the extent to which human nature in mass can be trusted. Again, any equation that simply sees digital opportunities for more participation as producing more democracy may miss many other questions associated with our understanding of democracy. These questions pertain to democratic culture in leadership and elite groups as opposed to masses, institutional cultures, and authoritative enforcement of democratic values. The current Tea Party movement in the United States, which is more appropriately seen in terms of Shays' Rebellion as opposed to the Boston Tea Party, exemplifies a modern demonstration against representative democracy. Likewise, MoveOn.org, during the tenure of George Bush, saw representative democracy as failing of democratic values. Both movements reflect discontent with representative democracy and call for more popular participation and input using the new tools available to communicate, organize, and impact power relationships and the traditional practices of representative democracy.

The evolution of representative democracy, which could also be seen as "trusteeship" or "guided" democracy, is now highly influenced by the digital revolution. The ability of direct and instantaneous communication from elected official to the public circumvents the traditional media gate-keepers. The WikiLeaks notion of everyone as a potential investigative journalist and the ability for the slightest faux pas to become instant viral news demonstrates the double-edged sword of representative democracy in the digital age. As an active participant in local politics, I place yellow caution tape around informal gatherings of elected officials and declare a digital free zone. While half tongue and cheek, such displays make the point to all gathered that nothing will be recorded in voice or picture. In other words, you are free to be human instead of always being "on" as a representative. This was recently manifested at the national level in the U.S. with President Obama responding to the demands of transparency in the health care debate. Human political practice at times demands both privacy and honesty that cannot be had in a wholly transparent environment. Again, the capacity to have such transparency does not necessarily add up to better representative democracy, better policies, and a better democratic society.

The gravitational force that comes with digital technology to both contribute to arguments for more direct democracy and more transparent and accountable democracy are part of the information capacity explosion we find ourselves in. It is hard to find clarity while in the middle of such an explosion. With respect to both representative democracy and direct democracy implications, the digital opportunities should be cast into many of same arguments made at the very founding of the U.S. and in the evolution of democratic practice. Again, this always starts with a discussion of what we mean by democracy in the first place.

Question #2:

If we are to maintain and grow representative democracies, how does the digital revolution serve that purpose?

Again, my primary observation here is that the fact of digital revolution itself is unrelated at this point to the success or failure of democracy in the coming decades. Such success or failure at this point rests on deep democratic cultural values and democratic institutions which manage or do not manage the direction of the digital platforms. Why such a topic is as controversial as it is rests on discussions that reflect different opinions regarding digital impact on democracy. Prominent leaders argue that without comprehensive and equal broad band for all, we will have a diminished democracy (Copp: 2010). Like the post office, the market place does not deliver such an outcome; it is political will and law that does. Such observations see the direction of digital broad band evolution as having as much implication for democracy as discussion of free speech, free assembly, and competitive elections had in the past.

These attributes of evolved representative democracies reflect observations drawn from the past that, “free speech” is free somewhere. And, of course, the “where” in the 21st century is in the digital world. Thus, my experience in the former Soviet Union or in China, where many an observations was made by hosts such as, “I have free speech, it’s that it is only in my apartment between midnight and 4:00 a.m. and not on the street.” Such anecdotes represent an argument for our current situation that the street or the soapbox is not where your voice makes a difference any longer; it is online. In this respect, the access to free and equal broadband is crucial as a component of modern democracy. Who decides if that is to be the case or whether access will simply be a matter of the market place with all its differentiation? Again, the political decisions that developed a comprehensive postal system serves as a model that supported a more democratic communication system as opposed to one that was highly differentiated. One can examine canals, turnpikes, telegraphs, rail, telephone, and television in the same light. The degree to which such transportation and communication infrastructures were approached with an eye to their implications for democratic outcomes or non-democratic outcomes in the past, can inform us as to the democratizing or non-democratizing approaches to digital broad band in the present. That democratizing eye is brought to bear by the broad mass of public input on such topics as well as the current regulatory and legislative institutions which should be representing the good of the public and the good of the democracy. The dynamic tension and conflicts between the interests of the market place and the public good are as apparent and profound as any of these previous infrastructures, and perhaps more so. At the moment, as we live within the explosion, there are multiple trends within evolved democracies, let alone in the world. It is difficult to tell where the dust will settle as we take snap shots along the way.

Snapshots of Transparency and Participation: Evolved Democracies and Authoritarian States

A full discussion of democracy and the digital age is minimally book length. I would like to take the remainder of this conference paper to focus on two aspects of democracy. These two receive the majority of attention with regard to digital impact: participation and transparency. Both topics rest on the shoulders of very old questions associated with any discussion of democracy. Democracy at some level is tautologically participation. The question is, of course, how much participation. For the purposes here, we must ask what substantial direction does the digital age take us with respect to the practice of democracy?

With regard to transparency, the argument is similar but less tautological. If the ruled are to elect their rulers, the ruled must know how rulers are making rules, what the rules are, and, in the end, be able to approve or disapprove of the rules made by keeping or replacing the rulers. While easy enough understood as a conceptual point of democracy, transparency, as related to participation, becomes a genuine “devil in the details” matter in the digital age. The point being how much does one need to know to participate? On the one hand, the trite but true answer is “next to nothing.” On the other hand, the digital age introduces us a wiki thinking of transparency that can lead to demanding everybody have access to everything at any moment. While profoundly attractive in the form of Wikipedia, it may be far less attractive in the form of WikiLeaks. The capacity to have exponential leaps in transparency does not negate the discussion of the role of confidentiality as part of democracy seen through the lens of human nature and personal relations.

Some examples from within the digital era and prior to the digital era illuminate the relationship between transparency and participation on the one hand, and democracy on the other. As a former free lance journalist in the pre-digital world, it is quite easy to reflect on any article written or not written with the question, “so what difference did it make?” or “so what difference might it make?” With a focus on democracy, such questions become all the more complicated. The classic response to these questions in my circles in the 1970’s was, “it’s not up to me to decide whether a story makes a difference or not, it’s up to the reader.” Of course, it used to be that there was also an editor involved as a gate-keeper. This era has all but past. This fits under the general category as carried forward in Wiki-leaks of “the more information, the better” and “every person is a potential investigative journalist.” The point is, as the explosion of digital culture continues, many of the same questions that confronted democracy and technology in the past are still here. Because there is exponentially more information, because it is infinitely faster, what significance does that have for democracy?

While in Chile during the authoritarian years of the 1970s, I had several conversations that went like this, “the generals do not care what we know, who we know or what we think, they care about what we can do.” Democratic traditions rest on the ability to turn information into power and outcomes. Through the capacity to communicate, organize, and compete under a fair set of rules, citizens can transfer power and change rules. Clearly modern economies and modern societies demand the capacity to communicate and organize. But do such demands also demand democratization? Rapid advances in digital culture have produced two current stunning experiments that test hypotheses generated from such a question. Both China and Iran provide laboratories for digitization without democratization. Russia is also an important case, but will not be the focus here.

China

In 1978 China started to open to the world. In the 1980’s China started to actively dismantle the totalitarian state and invite the world to participate in China. By the 1990’s, China was considered an emerging global power, by the end of the first decade of 21st century, China is a great power with an advanced digital culture that promises only to have greater influence in every corner of the world. Of course, China squashed a democratic

uprising at Tiananmen in 1989 and went right back to tremendous growth rates and a modernization program that has included a comprehensive digital future. This policy of comprehensive digital culture which includes terms such as “toutingdu” (transparency), also reflects the decisions of an authoritarian regime which has succeeded in becoming one of the greatest economic success stories in history. This is without the benefit of democracy and without a vision that western-style democracy will ever replace the rulership of the CCP. When the dominant economy of the 21st century, and the focus of nearly every country’s own economic interest and problems is also not a democracy, we should pause with regard to any conclusion regarding digital evolution and democratic outcomes.

My own experience as one of the first foreign hosts of a Chinese television show in the pre-internet 1980’s demonstrated China’s capacity to control content. While it is clear that a communications technology revolution has occurred, does peer to peer communication and an uploaded digital world necessary mean a substantial change in the political power question in China? Again, my own recent experiences in Tibet and Xinjiang have demonstrated that the digital world does not necessarily preclude democratic evolution or revolution. The gate-keepers to information not only control the on-off switches as was demonstrated in Tibet in 2008, they also have all the means of coercion at their disposal. This is also apparent in the current tension between China and Google (Fenby, 2010). In the case of China at large, and in the specific cases uprisings in Tibet and Xinjiang, information did not rule the day. The ability to control the gates of information and raw power did. Again, China is not just a marginal case that will succumb to democracy because of digitization, it is 20% of humanity, a great economic power, and on the road to be a super-power. As much as the world reflects the *modus operandi* of the powerful, Chinese “management” of the digital world may well be the model many governments follow. One can imagine a Tiananmen 1989 movement that was fully digitized and hypothesize democratic success out of such a movement. I, myself, was on the phone to various acquaintances in China during the Tiananmen movement and massacre. This is pre-internet, but I was communicating with groups in China. The line went dead. It is still true that the line can go dead. It is still true that even if you are fully informed and participating in the description and interpretation of events, you may not be able to impact the direction of political outcomes.

This is seen also in the case of Iran, where an educated and youthful digitally organized political movement (Etling: 2008) has been thus far beat back by a less sophisticated but violent force aligned with the state. While the Iranian state is perhaps less sophisticated than the Chinese state, the point is the same. Evolved digital capacity and digital communication practices in society do not necessarily translate into political power.

Conclusion

There is certainly strong reason to associate increased capacity to communicate and increased transparency with democratic outcomes. As noted above, communication and the assembling of opinion and political action are crucial aspects of democracies. The levels of transparency that the digital age affords us leads us down a WikiLeaks road of means and ends that may well be overzealous in attaching too much significance to the means and not the ends. A democratic society that is at the height of digitization and transparency may not

necessarily be able to sustain democratic institutions. Thus, a Wikileaks world, where all citizens are “investigative journalists” with access to mass audiences instantly, does not necessarily produce a better outcome for sustaining democracy than a well thought out and measured editorial in a major newspaper. If the institutions which have historical tempered information through editing, are now gone or simply seen as censors, we may be missing the boat regarding a cornerstone of what has sustained modern democracies in the first place.

Again, in answering the question, “Can Democracy Survive Google?” the response is, “Of course, it can and it may not.” The digital age provides amazing new tools to inform and participate. This leads to a critique of the well worn axiom, “information is power” with the comment, “information and authority” is power. Democracies legitimize power, authoritarian states do not test for legitimacy through open elections, but simply lay claim to popular support and legitimacy. Iran and China both produce examples of rapidly evolving digital cultures that do not seem to be on the road to democracy, but do seem on the road to further digital penetration of the culture. While I agree that much of what we see during the digital revolution is like living inside an explosion, the short pattern of “digitization without democratization” should give us pause with regard to what actually sustains democracy. For me, the questions of culture and institutions that interpret and enforce rules on society, democratic or otherwise, remain at the heart of the question in the digital age as they did during any period of technological leap. One can imagine arguing with Moa Zedong as he points out, “Political power grows from a barrel of a gun.” The counter argument is “The pen (your I-phone, Blackberry, laptop, whatever is next) is mightier than the sword.” For my money, if democracy is to grow in concert with the digital age, it will also have to have “the gun” on its side.

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