E–Collaboration: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools, and Applications

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this article is to examine how the inequalities of participation in network society governmental systems affect the extent that individuals are empowered or disempowered within those systems. By using published data in conjunction with theories of communication, a critical secondary data analysis was conducted. This critical analysis argues that the Digital Divide involves issues concerning how democracy and democratization are related to computer-mediated communication (CMC) and its role in political communication. As the roles of CMC/ICT systems expand in political communication, existing Digital Divide gaps are likely to contribute to structural inequalities in political participation. These inequalities work against democracy and political empowerment for some people, while at the same time producing expanded opportunities of political participation for others. This raises concerns about who benefits the most from electronic government in emerging network societies.

INTRODUCTION

As the roles of computer-mediated communication (CMC)/information and communication technology (ICT) systems expand in political communication, existing Digital Divide gaps are likely to contribute to structural inequalities in political participation. This is true for both within-nation and across-nation gaps. These inequalities work against democracy and political empowerment and produce social injustices at the same time as they produce expanded opportunities to political par-
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ticipation. Rather than assuming that increasing networking of societies leads to democratization, the broader relationship between the two needs to be examined.

Our examination responds to the larger question of how the structures of advanced societies are becoming increasingly networked and the role that CMC plays in both creating new social networks and restructuring existing ones, particularly in the political arena. We first present these structures followed by a discussion of the existing global Digital Divide, in which we point out the ethical concerns raised by allowing groups who could most benefit from connectivity to remain disconnected. Finally, we raise the important point that universal access may not be enough to solve the structural inequalities created by allowing segments of the population to remain disconnected. Rather, it is important to go beyond access and ensure that technology is used to reduce structural inequalities in the best ways possible by marginalized groups. By using published data in conjunction with theories of communication, a critical secondary data analysis was conducted. In this critical analysis, we conclude by offering recommendations for electronic government analysis and research from existing data and theories.

Network Society

Jan van Dijk (2006) defines network society in terms of communication networks that shape the most important forms of organization in a society. In what we have known for decades as mass society, citizens have been informed and entertained by mass media and somewhat disconnected from people outside of their primary (e.g. family, friends) and secondary social groups (e.g. workplace). In those nations that appear to have an emergence of network society characteristics, increasing numbers of social structures involve interconnected individuals using computer networks to seek out information, relationships, and networks of influence. In these societies, political power and politics are more about relationships among people than characteristics of individuals (van Dijk, 2006). Dimensions of geographical space are accompanied by a technological space. This space is sometimes referred to as social geography, wherein social networks rather than physical space become the basis for closeness or distance. Political systems, which traditionally have been modeled as top-down organizational charts, may be changing into polycentric systems of power in which political power is based more on network position than traditional roles (van Dijk, 2006).

The consequences of people being connected to the new communication networks of network society are becoming more significant as participation in these networks is increasingly linked to tangible benefits. Network society perspectives of social organization and communication technologies include economics as well as politics. Indeed, economic reorganization is seen historically as the main impetus for the emergence of network societies (Stalder, 2006). Globalizing trade and finance make up an informational economy with the center of the global economy as finance (Stalder, 2006). Organizations become more flexible to meet changing markets and governments where changes and discontinuities constitute a new focus. As Castells (2001) notes, the organizational changes were enabled but not caused by communication technology innovations.

Power in network society social, economic, and political contexts can be viewed more as matters of position and network relations than of material or content advantages. Power in previous paradigms like Fordism or Weberian organizational assumptions was about getting others to do one’s will. In contrast, power in networks is more about flows of influence, investment, and planning (Stalder, 2006). Barney (2004) argues that “access to networks and power to determine what flows over them is a significant marker of
systemic advantage and disadvantage domestically and globally,” (p. 178).

Communication technologies have always been central to both the exercise of power by the state and to the formation of public spheres of deliberation made available to citizens (Barney, 2004). While there is little evidence that CMC yet has strong empowerment effects for those without extant power, there is a sense of democratic potential that does have some empirical support.

The Annenberg Digital Futures project notes several interesting trends in the use of the Internet by Americans. Sixty-five percent say that they are more involved with social activism (Digital Futures Project, 2007). Approximately 75% view government websites as reliable sources of information. A majority (59%) of Americans online believe that Internet usage can help them learn about their political system (Digital Futures Project, 2007). However, only 19% believe that their Internet usage gives them more voice in government (Digital Futures Project, 2007). The Pew Research Center (2008) reports that about 24% of Americans are now using the Internet as a major source of information about the 2008 United States presidential election—a number that is nearly double that of the election of 2004.

The Embedded Infrastructure

As Wellman and Haythornwaite (2002) indicate, the Internet is increasingly becoming embedded in the everyday lives of its users. This means that the Internet is incorporated into daily routines and provides a platform for numerous personal, social, economic, and political forms of communication and action. Its convenience facilitates many of the activities that were previously done offline. Thus, those who use the Internet are afforded an additional avenue of communication to facilitate important activities such as working at home, doing research for school, contacting friends, conducting commercial transactions, and communicating with government representa-tives. Howard, Rainie and Jones (2002) show that levels of usage experience accounts for the most significant differences between access and use of the Internet across groups. Those who have been using the Internet the longest are most likely to have access to it and to use it more heavily (Wellman & Haythornwaite, 2002). Longer-term users tend to find ways to incorporate the Internet into all aspects of their lives, including personal and work environments.

The critical realization regarding CMC embeddedness is that a means of communication that was once necessary for a minority of citizens in a given population is now important for many, if not most, people in both developed and developing societies. This assumes that these societies are taking on the characteristics of network society. As the Internet and CMC become embedded with economic, social, and political activities, citizens are likely to develop stronger needs to use the networks in order to maximize their abilities to participate in online opportunities or social formations. Those who become most skilled and active with CMC networking are more likely to gain power than those without these skills and activities. This means there may be accelerating gaps in network sophistication. As van Dijk (2002) notes, digital skills are cumulative. Accordingly, the inequalities resulting from their increasingly embedded nature are cumulative as well. Holderness (1998) argues that the Digital Divide gaps that we have been discussing may become self-reinforcing. Those individuals and nations who accelerate their use of CMC systems build their communication capital at rates that perpetuate how far they stay ahead of others in networking.

Exclusionary Forces

It is generally accepted that the increasing organization of societies with the use of CMC technologies facilitates the importance of information and knowledge for economic growth and a shift of importance from densely-knit bounded groups to
computer-supported social networks (United Nations, 2004). The emergence of network societies entails social and organizational formations that are constructed in relation to flows of symbolic interaction more than in relation to traditional institutional, governmental, and organizational boundaries (Contractor & Monge, 2003).

Networks are comprised of nodes; these nodes are connected by communication and join together to become influence networks (Castells, 2000). When a node does not connect to other nodes, it may be dropped from the network. Such nodes are then excluded from exercising influence on social organization. Those who are part of the networks that exert influence on society can work to increase the impact of their influence by stimulating changes in, or reinforcing, existing patterns in the social structures that are beneficial to them.

Those with the most power and resources tend to be the early adopters of new technologies, and their influence shapes the evolution of technological changes in society (van Dijk, 2006). Thus, social inequalities may be perpetuated as those who use the technologies are increasingly organizing social networks around them. The inability to access or make effective use of the Internet and computers becomes increasingly significant as those with power make their use increasingly prominent in all areas of society. Those who do not have access to new forms of communication technology are increasingly excluded from the organization of society on many levels. This suggests that increasing networking that is accompanied by increasing gaps in usage for government and political communication may disempower many citizens in any nation moving toward network society status.

The notion of disempowerment with such a participatory means of communication may seem paradoxical at first blush. However, once one realizes that new power in network societies is strongly linked to influence over system configurations, position within networks and control over information flows, it is no longer surprising that those with greater connectivity, centrality, and interactivity are those in a society that will benefit the most from network technologies of communication. Moreover, simply being connected to new communication networks does not assure any degree of influence or power. In fact, connection without power is likely to assure that the connected person is subjected to new forms of domination by those with more control over the information flows and configurations of the networks (Barney, 2004).

**POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE DIGITAL DIVIDE FOR ELECTRONIC GOVERNMENT**

There are two major categories of electronic political communication that are gaining increasing attention today: electronic government (e-government) and digital democracy. According to van Dijk (2006), e-government concerns service provision and communication between government agencies and citizens, while digital democracy concerns participation in political deliberation.

There is little indication that CMC is drawing new people into democratic political processes, but there is substantial evidence that people who already participate are becoming more enabled in their participation (Bimber & Davis, 2005; van Dijk & Hacker, 2000). It is easier for CMC users to contact governmental officials, obtain government documents, and join political discussions with people they do not know (Pratchett, Wingfield, & Polat, 2006; van Dijk, 2004). Indeed Weerakkody & Dhillon (2008) note that in the U.K., electronic government now exists in a transformational phase that could allow for increased civic participation. Bimber & Davis (2005) argue that CMC is providing effective tools for political activities and mobilization, but that “the divide between those who are political activists interested in electoral
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Campaigns and those who are not will expand” (p. 168).

Without the knowledge and ability to evaluate policies and potential leaders, citizens cannot engage in the democratic process in its true sense (Barber, 1984; Yankelovich, 1991). However, as Yankelovich (1991) maintains, information given to citizens in a downward flow means that they possess only that information passed onto them by elites. Receiving information in this type of downward flow pattern does not necessarily empower citizens; rather, it can serve to reinforce existing power structures as citizens maintain the passive role of consumers of information generated by the elite, who maintain control over all information (Bordewijk & van Kaam, 1986; van Dijk, 1996). If high CMC users have more multilateral political communication than low CMC users, the latter are less likely to develop empowering roles for themselves in the polycentric power structures that appear to be part of network societies.

Political movements have been employing the Internet to organize their struggles, and some of these users are developing a practice known as “self-directed networking” (Castells, 2000, p.55). Self-directed networking involves people inventing personal ways of organizing and disseminating information. As more formal political structures such as civic organizations have less public membership today, political movements can employ CMC to effectively mobilize political action (Castells, 2001). Those who are involved with online politics have an advantage over those with less involvement since online politics are becoming more common and influential.

E-government can be used in any type of political system. Issues of digital disempowerment may not be weighted highly in totalitarian societies that use e-government solely for efficient delivery of information and collection of information from citizens. In democratic systems, those who administer e-government must confront the expectations of citizens concerning active influence of the people on how their government reaches decisions, sets policies, and interacts with citizens. Structural inequalities work against democratic governance because structural inequality is related to positions in networks that privilege various groups of citizens over others (van Dijk, 2006).

THE NONTRIVIAL NATURE OF LOW PARTICIPATION IN NETWORK SOCIETY

Communication researchers now know that old media concepts, theories and research paradigms are no longer adequate to explain networks of electronic communication, CMC, and the interconnected and interoperable systems of communication technologies that make up the Internet and World Wide Web. The old media, which assumed a linear source-receiver process, led to deterministic accounts of media effects. These accounts fail to explain newer media technologies, which are characterized by interactivity, interconnectedness, and complexity that is simply not present in the isolated old media paradigm. With increasing use of the Internet and network communication systems, individuals, groups, organizations, and nations are able to develop many-to-many forms of interaction with networks that have shifting configurations. The essential point in understanding network society as a sociological and communicative concept is that individuals and groups are now creating new social formations. This is sometimes referred to as social morphology in the ways people make contacts, establish connections, and regulate interactivity and feedback. This allows people to build affiliations that facilitate the flow of social, cultural, and political capital. As van Dijk (2006) notes, the statistical pattern thus far for network societies is that a small percentage of a population becomes the center of the most important economic and political networks. These people have the most power and influence in the network society and
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unless the center expands to include increasing numbers of citizens, electronic government systems may empower those already empowered. At the same time, however, the cumulative nature of CMC skills acquisition and development leaves out many people. This leads to a stabilizing of structural (network) inequalities over time, ultimately resulting in the disempowerment of those with little or no connectivity.

People with influential network positions and flows are more likely to be more interest-bound than place-bound in how they associate and work with others. Those who are left as more place-bound become less and less important to those who are sharing capital flows in cosmopolitan networks of association and influence. Barney (2004) argues that the less connected are likely to be passive consumers of communication content rather than active creators of messages and content.

E-governments can exacerbate the problems just described when they do not add political value to service provision. In other words, e-governments have opportunities to encourage more political participation in governance as well as more transparency in decision-making, but they rarely seize these opportunities. For example, Norris (2001) observes that government websites rarely publish information like citizens’ reactions to policy proposals. E-government is more likely to be used to enhance the efficiency of information access than the democratization of governance (Barney, 2004).

THE GLOBAL DIGITAL DIVIDE

United Nations research indicates that the Digital Divide has narrowed dramatically between member nations of the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and developing nations, from 80.6:1 to 5.8:1 in the past decade. The gaps persist, however. “In 2005, half of all OECD citizens were Internet users, compared with just one in every twelve citizens in developing economies and one in every one hundred in Least Developed Countries (LDC’s)” (International Telecommunications Union, 2007, p.22).

Additionally, as gaps close in one area, they shift to others. The “quantity” gap is being replaced by the “quality” gap, a phenomenon addressed by early Digital Divide researchers who argued that closing one gap would simply open another. Although the gap in the ratio of broadband users in OECD and developing countries has shrunk, “the absolute gap measured in percentage points has grown almost tenfold between 2000 and 2005,” (International Telecommunications Union, 2007, p.23). Thus, with the increased dominance of broadband in the marketplace, this gap becomes increasingly significant (OECD, 2007).

There are dangers in the acceleration of a broadband divide that follows the existing Digital Divide gaps among people with the same forms of Internet access. Broadband is projected to become more important as Web sites will increasingly be designed for broadband, and services like Internet telephony become more commonly used (Vanston, Hodges & Savage, 2004). Along with increasing bandwidth capability and speed, CMC users need to have personal computers with increased amounts of processing speed and memory (Vanston, Hodges & Savage, 2004). As computing and CMC become more ubiquitous, devices will continue to become more sophisticated, interconnected, and operable as nodes in personal communication networks.

Users in high-income countries accounted for 74% of broadband users globally in 2005 (International Telecommunications Union, 2007). China alone accounted for 87% of broadband subscribers in lower-middle income economies, while India and Vietnam accounted for 94% of subscribers in low-income countries. Though there is availability in many of these regions, the price makes access difficult. For example, the 2007 World Information Society report maintains that broadband access in Cape Verde is available for over 2,000 USD
per 100 kbits/month, while the same access in Japan is available for less than 10 USD/month. On average, users in low-income economies can expect to spend 900 times their average income on broadband access, while those in high-income countries spend about 2% of their average monthly income for the same access. While Internet access will not fix non-technological problems, it can increase information sharing, knowledge accumulation, and work collaboration through networking. Indeed, the United Nations report states that “developing countries risk being left further behind in terms of income, equality, development, voice and presence on an increasingly digitized world stage” (International Telecommunications Union, 2003, p. 4).

It is important to recognize the fact that there are many areas of Digital Divide gaps that involve much more than the commonly referenced ones of physical access (computer and net access). Kotamraju (2004), for example, notes that women tend to be employed in Web sites design more than in Web sites programming even if they have both sets of skills. While schools are more connected to the Net, studies show that few teachers know how to use the technology to augment their classroom instruction. The students attending Internet-wired schools may not be developing the skills they need to function well in an Internet-based economy. The gaps in ethnic and social class levels of learning may be worsened by this pattern of poor teaching proficiency. While there is expanding diversity, there are also gaps in usage and skills as well as in abilities to pay for what is becoming less free in new media and moving toward conditional access (pay-per-usage) models of network access (van Dijk, 2004).

Norris (2001) argues that access to the information and communication opportunities offered by the Internet may be most consequential in the poorest nations. The lack of distance barriers and relatively cheap implementation of the Internet (once access is possible) allow business owners in countries such as Mexico the opportunity to participate in the global marketplace. Health information and education are available via the Internet in areas like Kolkata, India as they are to doctors in New York. Physicians in developing nations can network and share information and resources with those in more developed nations through the Internet. Distance education allows increased access to sophisticated educational tools, enabling universities in disenfranchised nations to offer educational tools and training comparable to those in industrialized nations.

According to the OECD (2004), the results of natural disasters, such as the earthquake and accompanying tsunami that struck nations around the Indian Ocean in 2004, are also lessened by new communication technologies. These are thought to provide important tools to warn of the impending catastrophe, mitigate its impact by speeding information and relief efforts, and provide a place for victims and family members to post messages and pictures regarding the missing.

Additionally, Norris (2001) maintains that the Internet may increase the mobilization of grassroots campaigns and their visibility, enabling groups to network and share resources in order to impact policy makers at a higher level. “Foreign policymakers...can no longer assume that the usual diplomatic and political elites can govern political affairs with a passive ‘permissive consensus’ without taking account of the new ability for public information, mobilization, and engagement engendered by the new technology” (Norris, 2001, p. 2). In the former Soviet Union, for example, the Internet network Relcom is credited with playing a significant role in the dissemination of information during the coup attempt of 1991 (Press, 1993).

Marginalized societies can become more marginalized as societies become more globalized and information is increasingly the most valuable commodity (Norris, 2001; Norris & Curtice, 2006). The differences in economic growth between those nations that have reliable, high-speed access to the Internet and those who do not may...
be exacerbated as the affluent nations are able to profit from increased visibility and productivity. Low literacy levels, language barriers, and income are key obstacles to Internet adoption for those in developing countries (OECD, 2004). Floridi (2001) argues that members of these societies are marginalized by the Digital Divide because they “live in the shadow of a new digital reality, which allows them no interaction or access, but which profoundly affects their lives” (p. 3).

Education and attitudes about the importance of connectivity may be as significant as lack of access globally. In China, about 10% of the population uses the Internet, and the majority of these are young (70% under age 30) and male (60%) (Fallows, 2007). Farmers and peasants comprise about 0.4% of Internet users. One in three non-users in China reports insufficient skills to use the Internet, and one-third of non-users lack access. Fallows (2007) quotes a farmer from rural China who compares computers to aircraft carriers because neither has any significant relevance to his life.

Implications of the Gaps

van Dijk (2004, 2006) argues a “Matthew Effect” (2004, p. 20) for CMC adoption. This effect (based on the Bible passage “unto every one who hath shall be given”) indicates that those who already have high-quality Internet and CMC access and usage patterns are gaining more and more network power while those who do not are losing their ability to catch up (van Dijk, 2004). As information becomes more important in jobs and everyday routines, the Matthew Effect becomes more deleterious for those with less CMC usage experience. Digital skills and usage are becoming more important for increasing numbers of professions and jobs. Thus, those with access and enhanced usage tend to become more valuable to their employers in the workplace. As distance education and online learning become more common and accepted, those with online usage and skills have easier access to educational courses and degrees. Research shows that those who combine online communication with offline social interaction expand their social networks and increase their social capital (van Dijk, 2004; Wellman and Haythornwaite, 2002).

Because of the distributed nature of network organizations like international corporations, division of labor becomes more selective, which means that employers can hire people in remote locations. This is why an American insurance company can hire typists in Ireland and save wage costs in contrast to hiring typists in the U.S. (van Dijk, 2006). The best quality jobs will be those that involve activities related to what people most connected to the centers of emerging networks are doing. The jobs of the least quality will continue to exist on the periphery of networks and will involve individuals with low connectivity, usage, and positioning (van Dijk, 2006). Digital disempowerment is likely to increase for those employees who fall behind in learning the technical skills for which there is increasing demand.

The data regarding Digital Divide issues show three important generalizations which when added together indicate the likely digital disempowerment trend for many people in the world. First, CMC usage continues to accelerate the expansion of networks that link people to economic and political influence. Second, CMC usage is related to tangible benefits such as increasing one’s social capital. Third, CMC usage gaps and poor positioning in network society networks are related to diminished opportunities in advanced societies when compared to high usage and effective positioning.

THE EMERGENCE OF STRUCTURAL INEQUALITIES

Globalization increases as economic, political and cultural activities of nations become more
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interdependent. Within one globalization structure, a nation’s position can be determined by its pattern of interactions with other nations (Barnett, 2001). This formulates a three-tiered structure of nations and societies such that those with increased interconnectivity and potential for interconnectivity represent a core group, with other nations representing “semi-peripheral” and “peripheral” groupings accordingly (Chase-Dunn & Grimes, 1995). Those nations that are most central in the global network are also those with the highest GDP. Barnett’s (2001) network analysis of international telecommunications from 1978 to 1996 indicates that the global network has become more centralized and more integrated. Moreover, the study showed that more information is flowing through the core nations (USA, Canada, Japan, and Western European nations) rather than being exchanged with nations at more peripheral network positions (Barnett, 2001).

The inability of subpopulations to have access to the global network infrastructures is diminishing their abilities to be as competitive and influential as those populations which do have input and position in the expanding networks of capital, influence, and power. Each developing economy becomes more dependent on CMC networks for commerce, government, education, and various social services (Montagnier, Muller & Vickery, 2002). The most educated citizens may also leave these countries for the economic opportunities offered by core nations, causing a “brain drain” that further inhibits progress (Bridges.org, 2003/2004).

There is some support for the mobilization hypothesis (Norris, 2001), which asserts that some traditionally less active groups may be mobilized to engage in political activity by the low communication costs of the Internet. For example, Muhlberger (2002) found that, if given the opportunity, online discussion is employed at a slightly higher rate by those with less education, women, those who do not own a home, and those who are young, all of whom are generally less involved in political activities. Thus, there is evidence that previously uninvolved citizens might take a more active political role if access and usage obstacles did not exist. If left without access, however, those members of uninvolved and marginalized groups will continue to lag behind those of other groups, creating new forms of inequality as the opinion of those who participate in online discussion influences policymakers.

When a new avenue of access becomes available that would facilitate citizens’ ability to make informed decisions about policy, to communicate with representatives, and allow for more equal opportunities to influence decision-making, it would seem to follow that governments should take measures to enable access to this important platform of social and political communication, serving as a check to ensure equal access to the process. Muhlberger (2002) argues that if the
Internet enables citizens to exert political influence and obtain political information, then its representativeness is at issue. “Those concerned with the development of a democratic public sphere need to be aware of the representativeness of Internet political activity,” because “…an Internet that over-represents some political views advantages those views relative to others” (Muhlberger, 2002, p. 2). If we accept that the possibility of increased political influence exists via the Internet, then we must consider that the potential for power imbalances to be created (or exacerbated) also exists when some members of a society may exercise this influence, while others are excluded due to economic, educational, and other social factors.

It is important to note that closing Digital Divide gaps might do more for e-commerce than for democracy in situations where there is no strong political will for democratization. We should also recognize that political will to close gaps in power exists at various levels of a political system, including those who govern and those who are governed. When both of these agree that increasing political participation is necessary for democratization, CMC can be substantially useful for democracy. Democratic systems without strong political will of their citizens are not likely to benefit from political CMC. If CMC is not politically useful, the gaps in various divides do not raise the ethical issues that they might otherwise. In other words, the more important CMC is for the democratic nature of a system, the more unethical it is to have social exclusion for CMC access, usage, and content.

The research on the Digital Divide makes it clear that connectivity remains an unsolved problem for realizing digital democracy. Within the United States, there are pockets of Americans who are living more and more on the periphery of the network society. Hoping that digital democracy can repair the problems of offline democracy is a strong issue for intellectual debate. However, the longer significant groups of people lack meaningful participation in their political system, the more likely that the system will not change for the better and that structural inequalities will stabilize.

Hacker (2002a, 2002b, 2004) argues that the issues of Digital Divide gaps, whether national or global, will not be resolved without political will that is deliberately aimed at increasing citizen participation in digital democracy. Political will stems from political culture and the abilities and willingness of leaders and citizens to make practices match values. Naïve notions about digital democracy can emerge when one does not address political culture and the differences in democratic systems. For example, the political system in the United States contains a form of elitism by which most Americans remain mildly involved in politics and trust their leaders to do most of the actual policy making. Thus, to understand why most American leaders are not encouraging digital democracy past the point of e-government and freedom for citizen discussions, one has to examine American political culture and its history. Today, we usually think of a political system as being democratic if political decisions ultimately must be accounted for to the people of the nation in question (Scruton, 1982).

A global economic infrastructure, as envisioned by Bill Gates and others, is not the same thing as the public spheres for democratic communication envisioned by scholars of political communication. Couldry (2003) argues that most developed national governments have focused more on global digital economies than on digital democracies. This focus holds more concern for expanding markets than concern for making sure that citizens are not socially excluded from important spaces of political deliberation. This focus also neglects the need for content that helps disadvantaged people find sources and spaces to improve their social and political positions by helping them with job training, job searches, and other information that is useful for them. As Menou (2002) maintains, the focus of many efforts by the private sector to close the Digital Divide...
is to make consumers out of the poor. “What should really be at stake is social change and not the marketing of ICT’s” (Menou, 2002, para. 3).

Couldry (2003) observes a scale-extension/scale-reduction effect of CMC. While CMC expands communication, it also create a gap between the literate and nonliterate. Just as the nonliterate people would stay in the market squares while the literate deliberated in the coffee houses, experienced CMC users may develop exclusive spaces for deliberation that, by their nature, simply are not inviting to inexperienced CMC users. Couldry draws attention to ethical concerns regarding presence light CMC users do different things than heavy users. Heavy users, for example, are less passive in their use of the Internet and are more likely to disseminate information and create content (Couldry, 2003).

One problem with research done on the Digital Divide as well as with governmental approaches to implementing e-government has been a lack of communication theory as well as political theory (van Dijk & Hacker, 2000). A deliberative design model of political CMC could build upon theories of deliberative democracy from which ethics concerns emerge which say that it is wrong to have people non-connected, absent, or socially excluded by hierarchies in political CMC. Deliberative democracy theory says that citizens should have the opportunities to actively participate in decisions made about policies that affect them (Couldry, 2003; Dryzek, 1990). Dryzek’s (1990) deliberative design principle says that citizens should have spaces for recurrent social interaction about politics where they can communicate only as citizens and not as representatives of any governmental, corporate or hierarchical organization. This principle can now be realized more easily today than in the past with the increasing prevalence of CMC such as political blog usage. This concept differs from Habermas’ concept of the ideal speech situation in that it recognizes that much of deliberation about politics will involve emotional interaction and not always appear rational (Couldry, 2003).

Hacker and Mason (2003) argue a strong nexus which links issues of political power and issues of ethics. Political policy is often formulated on the basis of factual information and observation, but values serve as the filters through which those facts are used to implement policy. Research is done and facts are generated about social problems, but values inform what is done about them. Ethics considerations are a necessary component of policy making because ethics establish whether or not something is a problem and, if it is, what the best course of action is to remedy it.

Those who argue that digital exclusion is not a problem because some groups do not actually need access take an ethical position that says it is morally acceptable to allow some groups to be excluded from the social networking that the Internet enables. Social inequities are legitimized by arguments that some groups do not need access or are not being adversely affected by digital exclusion in the face of documented and potential benefits of connectivity. Additionally, policies implemented to facilitate access are not free of ethical considerations. It may be unethical, for example, to argue that some groups are unable to become digitally connected on their own, without governmental assistance. This may also further extend stereotypes about some groups among the groups themselves and society in general.

DIRECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Public spheres of deliberation are vital to democratic political systems. Electronic government technologies which add more citizen deliberation, political interactivity between leaders and citizens, and greater debate about various issues, are likely to help citizen motivation for getting involved with electronic government and digital democracy (Chen & Dimitrova, 2006). However,
studies show that governments rarely use their network technologies to do these things (Barney, 2004).

Market-based arguments assume that digital inequities go away with continued adoption and diffusion of communication technologies. This ignores the fact that computer-based communication technologies are more interdependent and more cumulative in usages, networking, and required skills than old media which were functionally independent (van Dijk, 2004). Universal-access arguments assume that governments must provide access to everyone because they cannot function in modern society without such access, and the markets are insufficient to provide affordable access. These arguments ignore the fact that some people can prosper without CMC and that market independence does, in fact, help high-technology companies innovate new communication products and services.

Where particular groups of people appear to be marginalized in CMC networks and creation of content, there should be efforts to give them voice from a perspective developed here that brings together political theory and communication theory. The United Nations 2004 Human Development Report argues that “unless people who are poor and marginalized—who more often than not are members of religious or ethnic minorities or migrants—can influence political action at local and national levels, they are unlikely to get equitable access to jobs, schools, hospitals, justice, security, and other basic services” (United Nations Development Programme 2004, pg. v).

According to Bennett and Entman (2001), “access to communication is one of the key measures of power and equality in modern democracies” (p.2). As a form of communication that offers democratic potential unique from previous types of media (Bentivegna, 2002), such as the telephone, access to CMC and the Internet is arguably such a measure. CMC and the Internet offer citizens the opportunity to exercise control over content, offer opinions, exert pressure on the government, and actively participate in its politics. Additionally, they offer both citizen-to-citizen and citizen-to-official communication opportunities, reduce the role of the media as gatekeepers of information and allow citizens access to previously unavailable (or very difficult to obtain) information. Also unique from previous forms of media, the Internet and CMC allow small groups and movements to acquire visibility that would have been unavailable to them in media such as television due to high costs. Finally, the speed and absence of boundaries offered by the Internet allow for quick mobilization of citizens with similar concerns and unlimited contact and communication among them. However, if groups most in need of these access opportunities continue to be excluded, their marginalization may be increased. In such a case, digital disempowerment is realized.

High CMC exclusion does not mean that people have no voice in governance, but rather that they have less than they would if they were able to employ CMC as a key resource in creating or changing social structures related to political issues and causes. The provision of universal access, similarly, does not guarantee radical social restructuring. Menou (2002) argues that the focus of the Digital Divide debate should not be how to bring the technology to the marginalized, but to discover the best ways for those who need the technology to put it to use and improve their network positions. It is important to keep in mind that online inequalities often mirror offline ones, and existing social problems will not be undone by technology. It is also necessary to understand the role of CMC in political structuration and how it may magnify or mitigate inequalities.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have attempted to present an argument saying that CMC/ICT systems continue to have democratic potential and can be useful for
extending political deliberation that is necessary for democracy. This has profound implications for the conceptualization and implementation of e-government systems. This position holds that it is morally wrong to have these systems develop and expand in ways that give more political power to those who are already ahead in how much political influence they have while not providing more political access to those who tend to lag behind in political power. The key, we argue, is to have political will among leaders, among citizens, and within various social groups, to provide CMC access, training, content creation, usage opportunities, and encouragement in order to make e-government and digital democracy more open to newly participating citizens. This kind of will can also facilitate citizens having more meaningful political deliberation that has actual and viewable effects on political governance. By understanding the way that technology can be used to change and/or exacerbate existing power structures, we shed light on the Digital Divide that goes beyond issues of haves and have-nots and considers the implications of connectivity from a network society perspective. The argument presented here is not just that gaps should be closed, but that allowing the gaps to persist exacerbates structural inequalities, and this possibility is an important consideration for citizens and leaders alike in democratic societies.

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