Technological Euphoria and Contemporary Citizenship

Langdon Winner
Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute

Perhaps the main reason why there is so little study of the relationship between the practice of democratic citizenship and the prevailing arrangements of technology in modern society is that few people take the matter seriously. In the country I know best, the United States, the much of this disinterest stems from a long standing euphoria about technological advance that precludes serious reflection about whether the arrival of a new technological device or system will truly be beneficial to political freedom and democratic governance. From the founding of the republic to the present day the rhetoric of American politicians, businessmen, educators, and journalists has always praised the coming of new tools and systems, predicting that they would contribute not only substantial benefits in the power, efficiency and profit, but also revitalize democratic society, enabling citizens to command the political and economic resources to become more effectively self-governing. The building of canals, railroads, factories, and electrical power plants as well as the introduction of the telegraph, telephone, automobile, airplane, radio, television and other instruments of modern society have all been accompanied by enthusiastic proclamations that the innovation would give ordinary folks greater access to resources, more power over key decisions and broader opportunities for political involvement.

It is not difficult to appreciate why Americans so readily embrace extravagant expectations about each new technology. The attitude the country prefers in general is a heavily ritualized optimism—"The American Dream" and "the power of positive thinking"—in its view of future prospects. Things are getting better, we like to believe, and the cultivation of an upbeat mindset is the best way to stimulate the growth of a better society. Because technologies of various kinds promise to change how people work, communicate, travel, etc., the most direct path to the good life is to endorse technologies enthusiastically as they emerge, adapting to their opportunities and requirements as quickly as possible. In contrast, criticisms of any serious kind or requests for wider debate about policy options in technology are often regarded as negative and obstructive. Especially when explore the problematic social, political and environmental consequences of technological choices, critical voices have often been labeled backward looking and unhelpful. As Benjamin Ide Wheeler, President of the University of California, summarized the nation's optimism in the early twentieth century, "America [is] producing a new race characterized by vitality, energy, good cheer,

high faith—bearing for its motto in golden letters on a field of blue the celestial bidding, 'Boost, don't knock'" (Brechin 1999, 303).

In another place I have discussed specific instances of technological euphoria in the U.S. and their effects upon public discourse and public policy (Winner 2003).[1] My purpose here is to discuss some contemporary manifestations of this mood and offer a suggestion about one pathway forward.

Today the most prominent focus for the recurring dream that technology will somehow revitalize democracy is the personal computer and Internet. Unlike some earlier episodes of techno-political enthusiasm, e.g., nuclear power, this one is at least superficially plausible. It is perfectly clear that the Internet has already become an important feature in contemporary political culture. Networked computing offers a space of symbolic practice in which people give meaning to their personal and public lives. This space is used by growing numbers as an opportunity for lively and diverse means of expression. In this respect it strongly resembles other domains of popular culture—entertainment, sports and consumerism among the more important—that have played what is arguably a democratizing role in modern society. Consumer goods, by comparison, have become a means through which people see themselves in what they buy, what they wear, what they possess and use, a fact central to today's economy. In one way or another, the market must respond to popular tastes, desires and preferred identities. Hollywood films and television programs, similarly, reflect a democratic culture as they continually mirror and inform the fantasies of a mass audience. A substantial portion of the organization and content of Internet communication at present can be placed squarely in the same category, a contribution to a culture of widely shared, but highly commercialized symbols and meanings.

But do these cultural manifestations of democracy also become a genuine contribution to democracy in an explicitly political sense? Is the mobilization of people's attention and activity effective when it comes to matters of power and policy? Does the Internet improve the quantity and quality of citizen participation?

Asking questions of this kind, one recognizes that the Internet cannot be seen as an entity that exists by itself, something isolated from other political practices and organizations. Enthusiasts of Internet democracy often argue in the following way. On one side we find the dominant patterns of politics as usual, the politics

of statecraft, political parties, and the like that used to be the focus of power. On the other side, the Internet side, there are wholly new patterns of computer networks where hierarchies have vanished, where power is up for grabs, where new expressions of citizenship are forming. This argument seems appealing until we notice that, of course, two political realms clearly occupy the same political space. If the activities of online communication do not substantially modify patterns of influence over key decisions making such influence more broadly shared than previously, then announcements of a democratic revolution are at best premature.

How these developments will work out in the longer term cannot be known for certain. The interpenetration of the Internet and political society is still in process and the outcomes highly uncertain. Who knows what our politics will look like in another twenty years? But one can take note of patterns that exist today which suggest that continuity, not rupture, is characteristic of the influence of online structures and practices upon politics and configurations of social power.

As regards voter turnout in the United States, for example, the Internet seems to have had little effect so far on the numbers of people who actually go to the polls. In the U.S., turnout is usually 50% or less. Even in the hotly contested presidential election of 2004, some sixty-one million registered voters did not bother to go to the polls. This means that between roughly 25% of the populace becomes an effective governing plurality while some 75% to 80% of the adult populace does not vote for the person who takes office. Swing voters in many elections—typically middle class men and women, concerned with tax rates, military spending, and "values" (anti-abortion and opposition to gay marriage, for example)—comprise an even smaller slice of the populace yet today receive a disproportionate share of the candidates' attention. These trends in American elections are both worrisome and the occasion for a great deal of cynicism, a mood of embittered contempt for politics that skillful politicians manipulate to their advantage. Surely, voting trends of this kind cannot be counted a healthy development in what is nominally a democratic society. So far, the coming of the personal computer and the Internet have done little to alter the increasing tendency of a great many citizens to avoid going to the polls and of politicians to maneuver in ways that further reduce voter turnout.

The tendency of technology enthusiasts is to ignore such deeply ingrained problems and to shine the spotlight upon particular hopeful instances in the application of new technology. Thus, while proponents of computerized

democracy were enthralled by the possibilities for computer mediated citizen communication, small donor fund raising on the internet, candidate web sites with chat rooms, web logs ("blogs"), alternative news sources, and the like, the most powerful, lasting, and democratically debilitating uses of digital technology have proceeded almost unnoticed. For example, in drawing lines for redistricting congressional districting, the use of computer models enables predictions about voting preferences within a region to be accurate down to the level of particular street intersections in specific neighborhoods. As employed by political parties (especially by conservative Republicans) in processes of redistricting, decisions based on such data have shrunk the number of districts that are at all competitive in American elections to fewer than 40 of 435 seats in the House of Representatives. While tactics of "Gerrymandering"—district shaping for partisan ends—are as old as the American Revolution, new computer programs give this practice an especially lethal sting. Because most Americans live in districts that are consistently represented by only one party, many citizens conclude, reasonably enough, that their vote simply does not matter, so why bother? In this way, the miracle of digital technology has contributed to something widely evident in the U.S.A. at present, the enervation, not the widely predicted revitalization, of citizenship in actual practice.

But perhaps the evidence of sagging participation in voting is not as significant as it first seems. It may be that that people are finding new arenas for lively public discussion and citizen activity, arenas focused on particular interests, issues and campaigns, especially at the local level, using computers and the Internet in novel ways. There is something to be said for this argument. Indeed, the Internet-centered campaign of Howard Dean and subsequent efforts by his supporters to revitalize participation through "meet ups" and other varieties of direct, local involvement show considerable promise. But, again, such initiatives must be seen in broader perspective. If one considers overall levels of participation in American civic life, there does not seem to be an increase in the age of the Internet as compared the era of television or the newspaper. Indeed, Robert Putnam's (2000) studies of civic culture show a steadily declining involvement of citizens in public life since World War II. The numbers of people who are willing to engage in citizen activities beyond paying their taxes and obeying the laws is dwindling. The vast majority of American adults are evidently not available to join what were once the organizations and activities crucial to community well-being. Yes, there remain the highly visible and vocal minority who fill in the space that others have left, a minority that now finds the Internet a godsend. Putnam considers many factors that have contributed to the

decline of public involvement, not the least of which is the tendency to stay home and watch television.[2] Evidently, people feel their politics can be expressed by just watching the screen. But if democracy means widespread involvement of ordinary people in matters of governance, current trends do not seem especially hopeful, unless one takes widespread torpor as a sign that people are basically contented.

What of the idea that democracy is experiencing a revival at least as regards the energy of political discussion, debate and information gathering within the online realm? The early reports are also not especially promising. The ideal of democratic discourse, as seen in the ancient polis, in the New England town meeting and celebrated in the writings of John Dewey and Jürgen Habermas, suggests that people with different commitments and points of view come together to discuss, argue, deliberate and, ultimately, decide on a course of action. In truly democratic settings it is the diversity and of participants, as well as their commitment to engage persons whose ideas differ from their own, that holds the promise good government at the end of the day.

Alas, the creation of forums that are open and diverse in their workings is not what characterizes habits of participation on the Net. Both anecdotal and more systematic social scientific studies suggest that what people typically do is to "customize" the sources of information that interests them, selecting for example only news stories on a particular business interest or their favorite sports team. The Net makes possible far greater selectivity than old fashioned newspapers allowed, papers that presented readers with a fairly wide range of topics because the editors had to appeal to a broad range of possible readers. Today, those who read news on the Web can eliminate the broader array of stories to focus on just what concerns them at the moment. Give me news I can use, just the information I like.

The same intellectually narrowing selectivity can be found in Internet chat groups and listservs. Like-minded people share information and ideas, reinforcing opinions they held in the first place. What we see here is not the cultivation of the kinds of broad-minded, well-informed persons found in textbook descriptions of the democratic citizen. On the Internet, as in face-to-face political settings, people are often uncomfortable with ambiguity, disagreement, and expressions of diverse points of view. But in face-to-face meetings there is sometimes a moment in which people feel the need to come together and seek compromise. Indeed, this is one of the great prizes of political

communication in democracy, a desire to speak one's mind, to listen to other points of view and then to seek common ground. Unfortunately, to this point it seems that many online forums lack this quality. Most of the time one finds people of similar persuasions talking to each other, making peremptory judgments about those who hold different views. When diverse viewpoints do emerge, there is often a nastiness characteristic of online discussion. People stay around long enough to deliver a few shots and then vanish, a luxury that the Internet allows, but that geographically situated communities often make less likely because one has to get up the next day and face one's neighbors. To this point, the Internet seems better suited for venting, flaming and withdrawing from politics than for seeking democratic solutions. I know of no conversations or practical initiatives that tackle this widely noted phenomenon.

A crucial element increasingly absent from American politics—on line and off line—is any direct, sustained engagement with persons in communities of concern to you and about issues and controversies that affect one's life. For many decades the political party system in America satisfied this condition to some extent, although in ways that were often less than fully democratic. Ordinary people would on occasion meet the local political party boss who organized forces for the party and who paid some attention to the needs of people in his ward. Party leaders at higher levels and in legislatures would then work out the deals that provided at least partial response to people's needs.

In this light, the Internet increasingly resembles television (a failed techno-political utopia) in that it serves as a replacement for direct contact between ordinary citizens and political leaders of sort formerly manifest in ordinary party politics. Although the Internet is to some extent "more interactive" than television in politics, it shares with TV a strong tendency to disconnect the everyday lives and immediate needs of everyday folks from the political process. Most Americans lack any immediate, face-to-face contact with those who are directly involved in politics or governance. The vast majority of citizens are simply not engaged in the substance of important pubic issues of the day; neither do they speak with persons who are.

Problems of waning participation are strongly connected to important, endemic structural problems in U.S. politics. To this point, personal computers and the Internet have done little to alter patterns of deeply entrenched economic power that have long defined the real workings of government. Powerful elites with home bases in the corporate and financial sectors strongly influence the choice of

candidates, shape the ideas of political parties, finance electoral campaigns, and ultimately control the outcomes of government policy making. The continuing lack of widespread citizen engagement is the underlying condition that allows contemporary varieties of oligarchy, plutocracy, imperialism, and even incipient neo-fascism to flourish in the "the land of the free." Especially in the fear-ridden, security obsessed climate of post-9/11 America, the term "democracy" is fast becoming the brand name for political forms of a distinctly anti-democratic complexion.

The task of restoring democracy and revitalizing citizenship in our time is truly daunting. There are countless steps that must be taken in institutional and policy reform, especially those that would seek to diminish the power of corporatism and militarism, the most obvious causes of disease in the body politic at present. In this light a recurring opportunity presents itself—public involvement in choices that guide important emerging technologies and the policies that influence these choices. One domain in which debate, deliberation and broader experiences of citizenship are available (at least in principle) is in instances in which publicly supported, politically regulated technologies are taking shape. While participation in such activities is certainly not the only and probably not even the most important pathway for addressing major ills in American political society, it would certainly be a start.

Since change is clearly on the horizon, since our tax dollars support this change in important ways, and since we the citizens are arguably the ultimate stakeholders in the outcome, there are reasons to demand a larger, more effective role for citizens in technology-shaping.

A techno-political episode of this kind presented itself in the 1980s and 1990s. As a scholar and citizen who had pondered earlier cases in the relationship between technological change and the quality of public life, I decided to enter the debate. As it became increasingly clear that networked computing was an occasion for altering many of the practices and institutions of society, I argued to anybody that would listen: "What a great opportunity. Why not talk it over? Let's open up the discussion to all parts of the polity. If our society is, as everybody says, undergoing an upheaval brought by digital electronics, let's try to steer it in more favorable directions. Since a wide range of social practices and social structures are undergoing change anyway, we should use this moment address some of the sources of inequality and injustice, looking for ways to renew the fabric of social political life."

My suggestions and those of other reformers were eventually answered in a particular way in Silicon Valley and in other places where the digital revolution was afire. It came as no surprise to find that the answer arose from the nation's grand tradition of techno-euphoria. Enthusiasts of digital technology argued, in effect, "Don't you see, computers and the Internet revolution are inherently democratic and do not need to be steered through deliberation and planning. There is no need for widespread political debate, citizen education or any steps that would bring greater involvement of government in our lives. We need to let the market work. Just allow the new technology to infuse society. There is no value in focused deliberation, imagination and discussion about the future of our political culture."

The ideology that surfaced to mold the conversation—the libertarian or, cyberlibertarian philosophy—is one now preferred by many business people and technical professionals in high tech industries, including those in Silicon Valley. It is now one of the counterfeit coins used to replace genuine freedom and democratic citizenship in today's political currency. Its message is: "Don't bother us with the challenge of thinking about the relationship between the shape of new technology and the condition of contemporary democracy. Let innovators innovate and entrepreneurs work their wonders. It will all work out fine." Originally considered a novel, progressive standpoint by many of its advocates, the cyberlibertarian position has now become a standard feature of the reactionary political language characteristic of American politics in the early twenty-first century.

In sum, during the 1980s and 1990s I found myself among the minority of thinkers who have long insisted that we needed a wide-ranging debate and important well-focused public decisions. Among such voices one could include the industrial reformers, utopian thinkers, populists, early twentieth century progressives, and writers in the tradition of Lewis Mumford, Theodore Roszak, Murray Bookchin and others who believed that intelligent choices about the form of technological society were both possible and urgently needed. As computing power reached into every corner of society in society and as the Internet was being constructed, requests for widespread debate about desirable and undesirable outcomes of these developments were, once again, not welcome among those in the relevant industries and political corridors. The consequences of this warped conversation became apparent at one key policy juncture—the drafting of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, a law that "deregulates" much

of the ownership and control of electronic communications in the U.S. Cyberlibertarians of the period—Esther Dyson, George Gilder, Alvin Toffler, and others—praised the legislation, largely because it promised to usher in the era of low cost broadband communications, a boon to freedom and democracy, in their view. Alas, conditions established in the Act immediately fostered a pungent concentration in the ownership of all communications media—newspapers, radio and television—in the hands of a few media giants, drastically constricting the range of social and political views that most people hear. Power of this kind, of course, has been a godsend for the oligarchic business and political coalition that dominates the U.S.A. at present, shaping consumer and political preferences, limiting dissent and debate on major policy issues. Then again, many households now "have broadband."

What is to be done? While it is by no means the only or even the most important domain in which the claims of renewed citizenship need attention, there are is both a need and opportunity to involve much greater portions our populace much earlier in the shaping of social technical institutions, placing questions about the overall public good at the forefront of attention.

How could the technology contribute to general wellbeing, including people excluded from technological benefits in the past? How could social costs associated with it be handled? How can new technologies in energy, transportation, communication, education, and so forth be designed in ways that reflect our best understanding of freedom, social justice and the ongoing creation of a good society?

We cannot leave questions of this kind to eager technology promoters in the private sector; they have obvious conflicts of interest. We can no longer leave such questions solely to elected officials; they are all too often beholden to narrowly defined private interests. And we can no longer respond to crucial world-altering technological developments by channeling the rapture of techno-euphoria; its debilitating effects upon political speech and action are now all too obvious.

Finding ways to involve the public as a whole in processes of deliberation and choice about the dimensions, character and organization of emerging technologies, is an avenue for reform that few political societies have explored. Yet the promise of this political innovation is considerable—creating better technologies for widespread use while cultivating better citizens in the process.

References

Brechin, Gray. 1999. *Imperial San Francisco: Urban Power, Earthly Ruin.* Berkeley: Univ. of California Press. Originally published as ""Benjamin Ide Wheeler's Speech at the Annual Dinner of the Chamber of Commerce." *University Chronicle* 12, no. 2 (April 1910): 190.

Putnam, Robert D. 2000. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community.* New York: Simon and Schuster.

______. 1995. "Tuning In, Tuning Out: The Strange Disappearance of Social Capital in America." *PS-Political Science & Politics* xxviii, no. 4 (December).

Winner, Langdon. 2003. "The Internet and Dreams of Democratic Renewal." In *The Civic Web: Online Politics and Democratic Values*, eds. David Anderson & Michael Cornfield. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 167-183.

---

[1] The present essay is adapted in part from this source.

[2] In an earlier article Putnam searches through several possible causes for the decline of community involvement during the last half of the twentieth century. He writes, "I have discovered only one suspect against whom circumstantial evidence can be mounted, and in this case it turns out, some directly incriminating evidence has also turned up…The culprit is television" (Putnam 1995, 677).