The Morning After: Citizen Engagement in Technological Society

Darin Barney
Canada Research Chair in Technology and Citizenship
McGill University

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Democrats have never met a mass communication technology with which they weren't willing to jump into bed. The mass press, radio, television – each of these has been embraced at one time or another as means for overcoming the problems of scale that have undermined the possibility of genuine democratic engagement under modern conditions. But then there has always been a morning after, whence dawns the horrible realization that these technologies are a counterfeit of the common, conversational engagement amongst public-spirited citizens that is the core of democratic practice; a counterfeit that is as readily enlisted in the service of commerce and ideology as it is in aid of deliberative, rational judgment conducted publicly by equal citizens.

But this time it could be different. At least that is the operating premise of those who look to new information and communication technologies (ICTs) as a potential instrument of more genuine democratic engagement. What is *engagement*? The choice of this word suggests that it is something other than mere consultation, something more than experts and interested parties being summoned before policy and decision-makers to give advice, or to be advised. To engage is to bind by promise or contract. Engagement is a bond between citizens and their government. What is the nature of this bond? Liberal societies imagine this bond to be defined by *consent*, but our societies are democratic as well as liberal, and the promise that binds democratic citizens to their government is the promise of meaningful participation, as equals, in the decisions that matter. Disengagement is the breaking of this bond due to the betrayal of this promise. It is this situation – with all of its liabilities – that has given rise to renewed appreciation of the imperative of citizen engagement in liberal democracies.

This all sounds fine, but it does seem to cast engagement as an end in itself, rather than as a means to other ends. Citizens shouldn't be bound to their governments through active participation simply *so that* they can be bound to their governments: this bond and the participation that fixes it are not desirable in themselves; they are desirable because of the outcomes they produce. This is what Susan Philips and Michael Orsini have in mind when they define engagement as "interactive and iterative processes of deliberation among citizens and between citizens and government officials *with the purpose of* contributing meaningfully to specific public policy decisions in a transparent and accountable way" (Philips and Orsini 2002, 11). The phrase '*with the purpose of...'* is crucial. It's not just the *fact* of engagement that matters, but rather its *purpose* or *end*. And while the purpose of providing a meaningful contribution to public decisions is certainly among the highest for engagement, it is certainly not the only one that we can imagine.

Citizen engagement can be used:

- to apply the veneer of democratic legitimacy to policy development and decision-making undertaken through elite consultation and accommodation;
- to 'educate' the public and significant stakeholders, increasing their 'awareness' surrounding contentious policy issues in the hope of mitigating 'uninformed' opposition;
- to gather strategic information about how various constituencies might be expected to react to specific policy outcomes; and,
- to test and optimize public communication strategies surrounding particular initiatives, programs and policies.

In each of these cases, engagement serves strategic, managerial purposes that are part of broader strategies of legitimation and discipline. On its best days, citizen engagement can also be for the purpose of enabling meaningful participation in public deliberation and decision-making, by a broader range of citizens than has become the custom in contemporary practice, because it makes for better government.

The point is, new information and communication technologies are open to enlistment in the cause of citizen engagement for any and all of these purposes. In fact, enlisting the Internet for the strategic, managerial and disciplinary purposes of citizen engagement is probably a lot easier than deploying it for more

genuinely democratic purposes. This, of course, is the great temptation with these technologies: they make the easy stuff even easier, and they don't really make the hard stuff that much easier at all. This is because the hard stuff has requirements that can't be satisfied technologically. The commitments and conditions that support engagement for genuinely democratic purposes are political and material, and they can be neither fabricated, nor replaced, by a computer network.

Can digital networks be used as instruments to mediate meaningful citizen engagement? There is no reason to think they cannot be, and there is a growing body of expertise concerning how to best configure online consultations so they conduce to satisfactory democratic outcomes. But the real difficulties with online engagement exercises always arise beyond or beside the technology: they have to do with the social and material conditions that support inclusive, egalitarian, deliberative participation and with the political commitment to transform the results of citizen engagement exercises into public policy.

These are complex material and political problems that do not readily admit of technological solutions. Indeed, technology should rank as highly on this list of material and political problems associated with the prospect of citizen engagement as it typically does on the list of potential solutions. It is at least ironic that the faith in technological mediation as the solution to the problem of citizen engagement in large-scale polities is most pronounced in societies that more-or-less systematically exempt technology itself from democratic judgment and control.[1] For the most part in our societies, decisions about technology are made by some combination of scientists and engineers, large-scale corporate interests, the privately-interested interplay of vendors and consumers in markets, and technocrats. As the Canadian physicist, activist and public philosopher Ursula Franklin once noted, "we now have nothing but a bunch of managers who run the country to make it safe for technology" (Franklin 1990, 121). If this is true, and if technological decision-making is, to a large extent, also political decision making, then its isolation from democratic processes is a considerable normative liability for polities that understand themselves as democracies.

This normative problem is easier to identify than it is to solve. It is possible, after all, that this problem represents not so much a failure as a deep and intractable contradiction between the logic of technology and the logic of democracy. Our societies have become very good at identifying democracy and technological progress at the level of popular discourse. We generally believe, for example, that something called democracy is an essential precondition of technological

advance, and that the advanced state of our technology is proof of the vitality and strength of our democracy. But this might just be ideology: when the chips are down, it is very difficult, and maybe impossible, for a society to hold its commitment to effective democracy, and its commitment to technological advance as a condition of material prosperity, with equal tenacity. The demands of robust democratic practice and the demands of dynamic, unfettered technological advance are just too much at odds to be met effectively (as opposed to rhetorically) at the same time in the same place. In a society that understands itself to be existentially and morally committed to both technology and democracy, only one of these commitments can really be material, the other merely sentimental.

One view of modern societies like ours is that while our commitment to technological progress is clearly material, our commitment to democracy is merely sentimental, a fact revealed in our consistent failure to subject the progress of technology itself to the rigors of democracy in any systematic or institutionalized way. There is, however, trouble down this road: in short, we might say that accepting that there is an essential contradiction between democracy and technology that disallows these two things from really coexisting in a material way concedes too much ground to those who are quite happy to pursue technological development unfettered by democratic intervention. The argument that the very logics of technology and democracy are fundamentally irreconcilable has a performative deficit attached to it: accepting it makes the proposition that technology must be exempt from democratic political intervention become decisively true. This argument, ironically borne of a critique of technology's impact on human affairs, ultimately unleashes technology to develop free of political contest. The charge that technology and democracy cannot co-exist transforms from the technologist's worst nightmare into his dream come true.

This is the agony of living in a society that wants, at once, to adhere to the norms of democracy and to realize what is perceived to be the power, prosperity and ease offered by technological dynamism. On the one hand, there is the sense of at least a tension between the demands of democracy and the demands of technology, despite the latter's clearly political character; on the other hand, there is the recognition that retrieving democratic politics in a technological society requires that we strive to overcome, rather than concede to, this tension, by trying to come up with ways of treating technology as an object of democratic politics that are more material than sentimental. This is a greater challenge than

optimizing a particular set of new technologies as means of democratic participation, because it raises considerations of the broader conditions that support or undermine democratic citizenship more generally.

Democracy is a form of self-government in which citizens enjoy a more or less equal ability to participate, meaningfully, in decisions that closely affect their common lives as individuals in communities, and in which duly constituted political authorities act in response to those deliberations. Democracy of this sort can only exist under certain conditions. These conditions are potentially many, but among the most important, one might list the following: a democratic constitution; an equitable economy; a culture of citizenship; and a politicized public sphere.

The first material condition of a genuine democracy is that its constitution (and by constitution here I mean the comprehensive organization, distribution and institutionalization of effective political power in a community, some of which may be codified in a constitutional document, some of which may not) distributes meaningful political power equally amongst citizens. This means that a democratic society will be resolute in separating effective political power from material wealth, social privilege, prestige and other forms or sources of systemic and prejudicial advantage or disadvantage.

Democracy also requires an economic system that distributes the material resources of effective citizenship relatively equally. When material wealth translates into unequal political power, democracy is offended. So is it also offended when material circumstances make it impossible for people to exercise effectively their political capacities as citizens. One of the consistent lessons taught by Western political philosophy is that citizenship, democratic or otherwise, requires material security and leisure. In order to engage in public-spirited deliberation over the common good, citizens must be free from the sort of serious material insecurity that quite naturally leads to an overriding concern with one's own self-interest. Citizenship also requires leisure -- time liberated both from the obvious necessity of working to survive and the necessity of recreating to survive work. An economy that fails to distribute the practical resource of leisure equitably is one that cannot serve as a material basis for a democracy, because it leaves most people without the time or inclination to engage in citizenship. A crucial mark of a society in which leisure is maldistributed is the professionalization of political life – in which the only people capable of exercising citizenship are those for whom it is also paid work.

A democracy is a society in which citizenship is not only possible but also practiced habitually. That is to say, one of the requirements of democracy is a culture of democratic citizenship. Citizens are the bacteria of politics: they grow in cultures that nurture them. For a democracy to merit its name it must at least attempt to support a culture that nurtures democratic citizenship and habituates people to its practice. A society whose culture habituates its members to self-interested privatism, individuated pleasure-seeking, consumerism or cynicism (to name but a few possibilities) in place of democratic citizenship has only the most tenuous claim to being a democracy.

Democracy requires not just a culture of citizenship, but also an arena in which it can be exercised. This arena is the public sphere. Since the time of the democratic polis in ancient Athens, through the Bourgeois and into the postmodern periods, the public sphere—the sphere beyond the private household—has been understood as a site defined in its publicness by democratic citizenship. A democracy cannot exist unless it maintains a public sphere given over to rational deliberation upon political matters, or even other non-dialogic forms of communicative or political action, by citizens engaged, to the greatest extent possible, as equals. That is to say, democracy requires for its functioning a politicized public sphere of freely-exercised citizenship. A society in which political deliberation is conspicuous by its relative absence from public life lacks a crucial requirement of a healthy democracy. If the public sphere is exhausted by activities—such as, for example, employment, consumption, and recreation—that leave little or no room for citizenship, then it is difficult to describe that sphere as substantially democratic.

Absent these conditions, democracy has scant hopes of being much more than imaginary; and contemporary liberal, capitalist democracies such as Canada and the United States have quite a distance to travel in meeting these conditions. However, given the contemporary pace of technological development in the fields of nano-, bio- and genetic technology, this distance will have to be traveled in something like a hurry, at least if we wish to salvage the ground for citizenship amidst all this improvement and perfection.

The question remains as to whether ICTs can help us travel this distance. The answer to this question depends on the nature of the obstacles that stand between the current situation and a more democratic alternative, and on the extent to which ICTs can help surmount these. For the most part, these obstacles are not

specific to the application of these technologies. Instead, they center on the extent to which the material conditions of democracy in general remain unmet. These obstacles include:

- a *constitution* (again, not just the written document but the actual distribution of political power) *in which the distribution of effective power is dramatically inegalitarian*, in which power is conjoined to wealth, expertise, race, gender and other indexes of material advantage on a systematic basis;
- an *economy which also systematically maldistributes the resources of leisure and security*, in which too many people are routinely denied the material basis of public spirited, disinterested citizenship, and in which the majority of those we could legitimately call 'citizens' (in the sense of being effective participants in decision-making) are professionals;
- a *popular and institutional culture which conspires against citizenship* and in favor of various forms of privatism, in which a life of even moderate levels of political engagement (in whatever form) is exceptional, and disengagement from public life (for whatever reasons) is the norm; and,
- a *highly depoliticized public sphere*, given over to laboring, consumption, recreation and entertainment (all of which are private activities conducted in public, and more or less reducible to commerce) and to bureaucratic administration.

One might add here another, commonly cited obstacle to democratic engagement and citizenship in the contemporary context, one which is particularly salient in relation to questions surrounding technology, and that is complexity. As Ron Beiner puts it in a recent book on citizenship: "few people living in the kind of societies we now have possess anywhere near the kinds of expertise one would need in order to weigh alternative policies for the regulation of a modern economy, or the regulation of international affairs, or most other issues with which contemporary states must wrestle" (Beiner 2003, 6) – and he lists biotechnology as first on his list of 'other issues.' (We should be cautious about this construction of the relationship between complexity and citizenship. In a way that is very similar to the argument about an essential contradiction between technology and democracy, the proposition that contemporary political issues are simply too complex for most citizens to handle fairly easily slips into a self-fulfilling prophecy – a sort of apology for technocratic rule by experts as the price of living in the modern world. It is hard to square this pessimism with the

surprise one routinely feels when confronted with the remarkable capacity of everyday people to arrive at reasonable judgments on complex issues.)

The question is, to which of these obstacles do ICTs address themselves? Is it reasonable to hope that ICTs will help us to overcome any of them? It is definitely not entirely unreasonable to hope so. Communication technologies participate in the structuring of political possibilities, and the technical capacities of these particular communication technologies are formidable to say the least. There is no reason to dismiss prejudicially the possibility that ICTs might undermine the nexus between wealth and the distribution of political power; that they might be deployed in a way that contributes to a more equitable distribution of leisure and material security; that they might serve as an instrument for cultivating the habits of citizenship, and that they might serve as the medium of a politicized public sphere (or spheres) in which citizens might engage one another in communicative action.

Much of this hinges on the utilities ICTs present for vertical communication between temporally and spatially dislocated citizens and decision-makers, for horizontal communication amongst citizens (in forms that include deliberation, mobilization and organization) that are also distanced by time and space, and for inexpensive, widespread access to politically relevant and empowering information. There is good reason to be skeptical of the proposition that a lack of opportunity to communicate, or insufficient information, have been the primary obstacles to democratic politics. But one cannot simply dismiss the formidable utilities ICTs provide in this regard, or the good work that is being done – both practically and theoretically – that seeks to optimize these utilities for the benefit of a genuinely democratic politics.

Still, while it is not unreasonable to hope that ICTs might make a positive contribution to meeting the conditions of democratic politics and citizenship, it would be unreasonable to presume that this outcome is prefigured in the technology itself, or to ignore the very real possibility that ICTs will serve to emphasize rather than minimize the obstacles highlighted above. It is quite conceivable, and maybe even likely, that the dominant mainstream deployments of ICTs will serve to reinforce and even extend the disproportionate power enjoyed by economic and other elites; to diminish the already minimal leisure enjoyed by the vast majority of people while heightening their experience of material insecurity; to enhance the culture of disengagement and private diversion from public citizenship; and to accelerate the privatization,

commercialization and administration of the public sphere. Democrats probably have no choice but to get into bed with ICTs, but mitigating the disappointments of the morning after demands sober expectations and an honest assessment of what we are up against.

References

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[1] The canonical works on this theme are Andrew Feenberg's *Questioning Technology*. London: Routledge, 1999 and Langdon Winner's *The Whale and the Reactor: A Search For Limits in an Age of High Technology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986.