Introduction: Anxiety and Optimism about Democracy

DIVERGENT ANXIETIES

A pervasive anxiety characterises liberal democracy in the early twenty-first century. As one leading British politician has put it, 'The public, and particularly young people, now have less faith than ever in parliamentary democracy. We who constitute the "political class" conduct politics in a way that turns off our voters, readers, listeners and viewers . . . Too many people believe that government is something that is done to them' (Hain 2003). It is not that democracy as such is out of favour – on the contrary, it has never been so widely adopted as a political model – but that citizens seem to be increasingly disenchanted by and disengaged from the processes and institutions of the democratic state. There is a widespread public feeling that government is remote, insensitive and untouchable; even if one takes the trouble to speak out, organise or respond to consultations, those who hold power are unwilling or unable to listen. According to the 2007 *Audit of Political Engagement,* conducted by the U.K. Electoral Commission and the Hansard Society, almost 4 out of 10 people disagree with the statement that 'When people like me get involved in politics, they really can change the way the country is run' (EC 2007a: 35). Interestingly, no difference in this low level of political efficacy was found between respondents who were political activists and those who did not participate. As Norris has observed, there are now, globally, 'more critical citizens, who value democracy as an ideal yet who remain dissatisfied with the performance of their political system, and particularly the core institutions of representative government' (Norris 1999: 269).

A shared unease about what has come to be regarded as a 'crisis of disengagement' dominates discussion of contemporary politics. Politicians

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make speeches lamenting their disconnection from a public which is deemed to be, at best, otherwise engaged, and, at worst, irresponsibly apathetic. Journalists bemoan the newest generation of citizens who seem to be more enthused by voting in *Big Brother* than in political elections. Political scientists, who were once content to study who gets what, when and how (Lasswell 1935), are increasingly reflecting upon 'why Americans hate politics' (Dionne 1991), 'the vanishing voter' (Patterson 2002), the 'decline of the public' (Marquand 2004), 'why we hate politics' (Hay 2007), 'the crisis of public communication' (Blumler and Gurevitch 1995), 'critical citizens' (Norris 1999) and 'disaffected democracies' (Pharr and Putnam 2000).

One might expect this crisis of political confidence to pull people together, to somehow strengthen a public sphere in which democratic innovations are tested and citizens devise new ways of making their presence felt. But upon closer inspection, anxieties about political disengagement have taken two divergent forms. For political insiders, such as politicians, anxiety takes the form of nostalgia: a longing for an idealised lost era of democracy, characterised by civic cohesion, dutiful citizens and clear political choices. When invited to articulate their disappointment about public disengagement from politics, insiders often speak about times past – part real, part imagined – when leaders were highly respected and voters paid close and serious attention to parliamentary debate, party manifestoes and press coverage. Politicians worry about what they see as an uninformed citizenry. They are eager to find ways of informing citizens so that they can play their part in making instrumentally rational and morally dutiful social choices. For politicians, reengaging the public entails a return to neglected norms, perhaps using new tools and technologies to recreate a society in which those elected to govern are trusted by the represented.

Citizens' unease with contemporary democracy tends to take a very different form. When asked to explain why they feel frustrated as democratic citizens, they refer to feelings of being unacknowledged and disrespected. Politics is seen as a relationship which is in disrepair, replete with daily failures of communication and unfulfilled promises. For an increasing number of citizens, being recipients of government, party and mass-media stories about the world is only half the story. They are interested in knowledge-sharing, which involves the upstream flow of experiential accounts, local expertise and common sense, as well

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as the downstream transmission of official information. Rather than seeking to restore trust in government, democratic activists are more concerned about the efficacy of citizens, whose experiences and expertise often seem to be diminished or marginalised. They do not look back to an age of deferential representation, but argue that strong democracy requires energetic and autonomous civic activity, beyond the management of the state and capable of shaping the outcomes of governance.

An opening assumption of this book is that any proposed solutions to contemporary democratic ills must start by acknowledging these distinct problematisations. As Blaug has argued, the dilemmas of democracy would be better understood if we were to adopt two models for describing it, *incumbent* and *critical:*

> Incumbent democracy is primarily motivated to preserve and improve existing institutions by maximizing and managing orderly participation. Critical democracy seeks, instead, to resist such management and empower excluded voices in such a way as to directly challenge existing institutions. Incumbent democrats assume that effectiveness is only achieved through institutions, and that participation requires institutionalization in order to be compatible with the central representative structures of the democratic state. Critical democracy upholds a rather different assumption: that effectiveness can arise out of a collective adherence to common concerns. Here, the institutionalization of participation is seen as an attempt to tame radical energy. (Blaug 2002: 107)

We share Blaug's analysis of these two democratic models and outlooks, but take a rather less stark view of their mutual incompatibility. We would argue that for democratic participation to have a meaningful impact upon political outcomes there is a need for inclusive and accountable institutions that can provide a space for consequential interaction between citizens and their elected representatives. Indeed, a key aim of this book is to argue for an institutional innovation that could nurture critical citizenship and radical energy, while at the same time opening up representative governance to a new respect for public discourse and deliberation.

Before we can make that argument, we need to be clear about what we understand citizenship to mean and why we regard the Internet as a potential space for the articulation of democratic citizenship.

BEING CITIZENS

Addressed as consumers in the marketplace, as members of audiences consuming mass-media output and as individual personalities in the sphere of intimate sociability, people have become used to having multiple social identities. The role of being a citizen is one of the more confusing of these identities. To be a citizen is to enter into a promiscuous relationship with strangers within a political community that is not of one's own making. As citizens, we are not expected to know or understand one another, but to form political attachments that require us to abide by rules and norms of civic coexistence.

Citizenship is a fluid and widely contested concept (Marshall 1950; Barbalet 1988; Turner 1990; Roche 1992; Kymlicka and Norman 1994; Miller 1998; Cruikshank 1999; Isin 2002; Sassen 2002; Heater 2004; Schudson 2006). It can be understood in at least three ways. First, there is a legal-judicial conception of citizenship which refers to one's official membership of a political community (usually a nation-state) and its compulsory laws, regulations and customs. To be a legal-judicial citizen is to possess an appropriate passport or right of residency. According to Brubaker (1992: 21), 'There is a conceptually clear, legally conse-quential, and ideologically charged distinction between citizens and foreigners. The state claims to be the state of, and for, a particular bounded citizenry'. In this sense, to be a citizen is to be within rather than without a community; to be subject to its legal duties and socially sanctioned responsibilities, such as paying taxes, obeying the highway code, registering to vote and living in peace with neighbours, as well as being in possession of legally enforceable rights.

Second, there is political citizenship, closely related to the legal-judicial conception, but extending beyond its prescriptive and pro-hibitive terms of normativity. The political citizen is more than just an officially-recognised member of a community, but a potentially active constituent of a body politic, capable of exerting democratic influence upon fellow citizens as well as the political state. This conception of citizenship places great emphasis upon the importance of three kinds of participation: information-gathering, with a view to gaining balanced accounts of political questions from pluralistic sources; deliberation, which, in its most basic form, entails talking with other citizens about political questions in an honest and open-minded way; and active efforts to influence public policies and decisions, which range from putting up posters, voting for a candidate or party, joining a pressure

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group to demonstrating in the streets or breaking unjust laws. In both a normative and empirical sense, democratic legitimacy is dependent upon citizens expressing more than the thin forms of consent usually articulated through legal-judicial procedures. But political citizens do not simply spring into life; they are constituted through complex interactions between their own life experiences, traditions of collective action, structures of opportunity and available discourses of thinking and acting politically. In recent times the project of cultivating political citizens has been buttressed by schemes for civic education, deliberative democracy and local co-governance, all in their own ways intended to democratise the civic relationship.

Third, there is affective citizenship which is primarily concerned to mobilise feelings of civic belonging, loyalty and solidarity. It was with a view to cultivating this kind of affective attachment that the Italian nationalist, Massimo D'Azeglio declared, soon after the national unification of Italy, that 'We have made Italy; we now have to make Italians'. In this sense, citizenship is what Bora et al. (2001) have called 'an ongoing communicative achievement'. That is to say, it is constituted through a variety of symbolic repertoires, ranging from the banal (flag-waving, singing national anthems, commemorating great historical episodes, the Queen's Christmas speech) to the profound (commitment to a way of life, political values, constitutional liberties) (Billig 1995). The intangibility of affective citizenship is its strength, insofar as it draws upon energies that flow from the nerve centres of the lifeworld, but a weakness, insofar as it renders the civic outlook vulnerable to exclusivist and xenophobic perspectives that are not easily contestable in rational terms (Honig 2001; Balibar 2002; Bhabha 2004; Silverstone 2005).

These are not mutually exclusive definitions of citizenship; on the contrary, all three are instantiated in most historical experiences of citizenship, with different degrees of emphasis depending upon the political model of democracy that gives rise to them. In incumbent democracy, citizenship is conceived as being primarily state-centred. That is to say, citizens are imagined and constituted in terms of their relationship to the state. In legal-judicial terms, they are required to understand their obligations as members of a state-centred community; in political terms, they are encouraged to engage with the state within certain parameters of largely-managed participation; in affective terms, they are subjected to processes of formal socialisation (in schools, churches, through the mass media) designed to promote civic pride in the state and its national narratives. In contrast to this passive and clientalist state-centric notion is

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democratic citizenship which, to put it simply, assumes that the space of governance emanates from the demos rather than constituting it. That is to say, the practice of democratic citizenship by people regarding themselves as a collectivity precedes any notion of a bounded political space to which they belong. As Tassin (1992: 189) puts it, in relation to the putative citizenship of the European Union, instead of being the precondition for a public space, the European community is actually its result: it is 'a community resting not upon an amalgamation of interests, feelings and wills, but on the contrary upon a politically constituted public space in which the plurality of political initiatives stand face to face'. Democratic citizens differ from state-centred citizens in their rejection of obligatory commitment towards existing institutions, traditions and values. Bennett (2007) contrasts actualising and dutiful citizens, with the former characterised by a diminished sense of obligation to government; a rejection of voting in favour of other more consumerist, communitarian or transnational forms of participation; and a greater sense of connections to peer networks than conventional social movements or parties. In short, democratic citizens are less willing than state-centred citizens to enter already constituted, managed political spaces; their orientation is towards autonomous civic practices (Coleman 2007).

This does not mean that each generation of democratic citizens is bound to reinvent its social role, but that they are more likely to contest and reshape the three elements of citizenship that we have outlined than to accept them in an essentialist spirit. Indeed, the early twenty-first century has witnessed a flourishing of pluralistic and reflexive performances of citizenship. Legal-judicial conceptions of state-based membership have been challenged by supranational, cosmopolitan and ethnic civic identities, often operating alongside national allegiances, but sometimes in opposition to them. Political citizenship has taken innovative forms which have tended to escape from the institutional imperatives of state rule, radically juxtaposing official-administrative politics with the sphere of the political, in which mundane encounters with power are experienced and negotiated in everyday life. Affective citizenship has likewise taken a late-modern turn, remixing identities, prosaic experience and cultural norms in ways that allow 'the unrecognised' and the 'practically untellable' (Lefebre 1991) to be absorbed into the everyday practices of civic life (Miller 1998).

Unlike state-centred citizenship, democratic citizenship is not parasitical upon or consistent with the spatial formation of the

nation-state. As Lefort (2000) has suggested, in contrast to pre-modern and totalitarian regimes in which power is incarnated in the body of the sovereign, in contemporary democracies 'the locus of power is an empty place'. Within this indeterminate emptiness of democratic space, a tension is played out between two political imperatives: 'the egalitarian universal imperative embodied in the social (the will of 'the people') and the sovereign, institutional imperative embodied in the legal apparatus' (Newman 2004). In other words, at some times political citizenship is defined in terms of the state's requirements for order amongst its subjects, and at others it emerges out of the collective values, voices and actions of the people themselves. Incumbent democracy is served by the former; critical democracy by the latter.

Contemporary political theorists have observed that political policy-making is increasingly conducted within an institutional void. This does not mean that 'state-institutions . . . have suddenly vanished or are rendered meaningless. The point is rather that . . . there are important policy problems for which political action either takes place *next to* or *across* such orders, thus challenging the norms of the respective participants' (Hajer 2003: 175). For example, it is now widely acknowledged that policies relating to health care cannot be promoted solely by governments setting funding and practice priorities at an institutional level. The health of a population is determined by a range of other factors, including 'lifestyle' choices, environmental conditions, stress levels and household incomes, none of which can be 'fixed' by state-driven, top-down policy-making. The only way to arrive at democratic health care policy is to transcend institutional silos by generating debates that cut across established policy areas and seeking to include the widest possible range of social actors. The same applies to most complex contemporary policy-making around such issues as education, care of the elderly, policing and local economies. For such democratising approaches to policy-making to take place next to and across old state boundaries, new spaces of political citizenship are required: ones in which civic energies can coalesce inclusively and productively. Thus far, few democratic societies have been successful in creating such politically vibrant spaces.

The fluidity and indeterminacy of cyberspace makes it a suggestive candidate for becoming the kind of empty space or institutional void in which tensions between state-centric and democratic citizenship can be played out. To what extent should we think of the Internet as a potential space for the articulation of civic democracy?

NEW POLITICAL SPACES

The Internet, which will not qualify much longer for the title of 'new technology', has not tended to be thought of as a political space. Most of the hype and speculation surrounding the Internet has focused upon new opportunities for commerce, sociability and study – as well as its more negative uses for criminality, surveillance and offensive content. Governments have initiated policies intended to deliver services and information online in cheaper or more efficient ways than they could have done in the past; representative institutions, such as parliaments and local councils, all now have their web sites; politicians and candidates feel the need to establish a web presence, with a few of them even launching blogs, MySpace pages and videos on YouTube. But fundamental political questions remain to be answered. Has the emergence of the Internet changed the balance of communicative power within modern liberal democracies? Are citizens more able than they were in pre-digital times to question, comment upon, challenge and influence those who govern them? Has the Internet served democratic ends? There has been no shortage of speculative responses to these questions:

> The new information technologies may, for the first time in the history of industrial societies under liberal regimes, make it possible to recreate the perfect information arena, the agora of Ancient Greece, a meeting place where citizens could go to be fully informed and to participate directly, with no intermediary, in the government of the city, exercising all their political rights unconditionally and without restriction. (European Information Society Forum Report 1999)

> The Global Information Infrastructure [GII] will not only be a metaphor for a functioning democracy, it will in fact promote the functioning of democracy by greatly enhancing the participation of citizens in decision-making. And it will greatly promote the ability of nations to cooperate with each other. I see a new Athenian Age of democracy forged in the fora the GII will create. (Al Gore, speech to the International Telecommunications Union, 21 March 1994)

> Structurally, the Internet has inverted the few-to-many architecture of the broadcast age, in which a small number of people were able to influence and shape the perceptions and beliefs of entire nations. In the many-to-many environment of the Net, every

desktop is a printing press, a broadcasting station, and place of assembly. (Rheingold 1999)

Whether direct Internet democracy is good or bad is quite beside the point. It is inevitable. It is coming and we had better make our peace with it. We have to better educate ourselves so that we can make good decisions. Restricting the power of the people is no longer a viable option. The Internet made it obsolete. (Morris 1999)

Sceptics regard such claims as excessive and deterministic reactions to an overhyped technology. In the name of sober realism, they predict that 'people will mold the Internet to fit traditional politics' (Hill and Hughes 1998: 186) and conclude that 'far from remaking ... politics, the development of cyberspace, and particularly of the WWW, seems more likely to reinforce the status quo' (Margolis and Resnick 2000). Some critics go as far as to argue that, rather than invigorating it, the Internet could seriously undermine the health of democracy, by providing access to individuated information environments resulting in group polarisation (Sunstein 2001) and diminishing the rational level of the public sphere by forcing political arguments to become 'distorted, shrill, and simplistic' in order to be noticed amongst the vast array of competing online messages (Noam 2002). And at the most dystopian end of the spectrum there are critics who contend that the Internet is producing 'market instability, political turmoil and civil unrest, increasing rage and violent actions amongst previously passive people, as well as "immoral" behaviour on a gigantic scale' (Angell 2000).

Rather than subscribing to either of these brands of hyperbole, we prefer to think of the Internet as an empty space of power which is both vulnerable to state-centric (and, for that matter, corporate) strategies and open to occupation by citizens who have few other spaces available for them to express themselves in constructive democratic ways.

OUR VIEW

In this book we seek to avoid the teleological trap of assuming that the Internet possesses any deterministic propensities, but that does not mean that no relationship between the Internet and democracy can be advanced. We take the position that the Internet possesses a vulnerable potential to revitalise our flagging political communication

arrangements by injecting some new and different elements into the relationship between representatives and represented and governments and governed. But we argue that such potential will be squandered without imaginative policy intervention designed to shape and nurture the democratic opportunities provided by the Internet. It is this commitment to policy intervention that saves our argument from the ritual charge in all debates of this kind of technological determinism. We reject the notion of technologies as asocial, neutral artefacts with innate capacities to affect social organisation. We are sympathetic to the social constructivist perspective which regards technologies as explicable in terms of their social origins, the various actors and interests involved in their development and the competing ontologies and epistemologies that surround and define them. Indeed, it is precisely because we take the view that information and communication technologies are constructed, shaped and given meaning by a complex range of social forces that we argue for the importance of subjecting these processes of construction, shaping and sense-making to normatively defined policy. In rooting our assumptions about the democratic potential of the Internet in theoretically-grounded policy choices, we distinguish our position from both essentialist and deterministic accounts of the Internet as an automatic leveller of communicative power and empiricist accounts which downplay political agency and assume that the Internet must become an inevitable victim to political institutionalisation.

The arguments developed in this book rest upon three central assumptions, which we develop in detail within the first three chapters. First, we argue that relations between members of the public and holders of political authority are in a period of transformative flux. On the one side, new expectations and meanings of citizenship are being entertained and occasionally acted upon. People often expect to be heard and heeded on more occasions and matters than the ballot boxes of Polling Day can settle. But this process is sporadic, and its implications for the system of representative democracy are unclear. On the other hand, government is finding it extremely difficult to respond satisfactorily to the many new needs and problems that are continually being thrown up by the pressures of a rapidly changing society. Top-down ways of coping – through established bureaucratic routines, interdepartmental committees, commissioning opinion surveys, and so forth – are simply inadequate. Better ways of tapping people's