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Towards the de-Institutionalisation of e-democratic governance?

Discussion of e-democracy should always begin by an attempt to clarify what kind of democratic politics we are building our arguments upon. This is not to engage in some lengthy academic pursuit of conceptual absolutism but rather because different conceptions of democracy provide alternative contexts within which, what I will describe as the *technologies of governance* (ToG), will be envisioned, shaped and diffused. They are also the respective means by which we may judge the 'democratizing' affordances of new media technologies.

For our purposes it is enough to identify two broad theoretical camps which have dominated western political thought since the eighteen century. They are divided between those who favour the widest possible participation of citizens in political decision-making (classical direct models) and those who maintain that citizens in complex societies have neither the time and/or competence to directly engage in the activities of government (liberal models). For the latter group of liberal theorists democracy is seen as an institutional system that enables power elites to be elected in order to represent the interests of the majority. To the participatory democrats this is a very limited notion of democracy and hardly warrants the title. Instead, citizens should be engaged in democratic decision-making in every aspect of their lives with power being devolved to the lowest level. Here, traditional institutions of government at all levels – local, national, global – are only one aspect of democratic governance and their task is to facilitate the participation of citizens in all their diversity of interests and identities.

These two competing premises give rise to quite different notions of how technologies of governance should be used and appraised. Since the limited view of democratic politics has occupied the accendancy for the past thirty years in the guise of neo-liberalism we should not be surprised that it has had the most profound influence to-date. This is not to suggest that it has totally dominated the world's political agendas or to deny that other views and experiments have not taken place. But I do want to assert that the neo-liberal perspective has led to restricted applications of ToG through e-government strategies that see the citizen as a compliant customer of services rather than an active agent engaged in deliberative decision-making. Moreover, the focus of neo-liberal political elites upon crime and security (post 9/11 and the Iraq war) and its privileging of free markets has seen an increasing influence of ToG for processes of surveillance and

social sorting. These trends not only limit the potential for more participatory forms of e-democracy but unchecked they pose a significant threat to democratic governance even in the most limited representational form.

These depictions are a far cry from the utopian proclamations that networked communications technologies like the internet would regenerate our declining democracies and even enable direct democracy. But if the early experiences and experiments in e-democracy are not in ruins then neither are they yet providing robust examples of participatory democracy. The realisation of e-democracy requires not only the re-structuring of our democratic institutions but also a corresponding transformation of our civic cultures. It is in this process which ToG may yet prove to be most influential in the shape of social movements, community organisation, citizen journalism which may all act to induce a more critical, reflexive and engaged citizenship. Such social forces may act to de-institutionalise our modernist democratic governance by both challenging the democratic deficit of power elites and bureaucratic administrations, as well as fostering a civil society responsive to democratic empowerment

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