

The Internet is bad for democracy

By James Crabtree,
Created 2002-12-05 00:00

A dangerous consensus has come to pass. In the language of *1066 and All That* [1], we have come to believe that the Internet will be a Good Thing for democracy. The consensus is caring in intent and unthinking in execution. In intent, it recognises that western democracy is hobbled by disengagement, falling turnout, and disconnection with citizens. But it assumes without thinking that while the Internet might not revolutionise the world, its sum effect will make life a little better. There are good reasons to believe this might not be the case. Contra the consensus, I want to lay out three reasons why the Internet may be a Bad Thing for democracy.

The consensus itself is tricky to define. Its founders include hopeful civil servants, moneyed foundations, and optimistic research institutes. But it is most definitely upbeat.

Former UK eMinister Douglas Alexander is not alone when he argues, 'new technology will help to empower people, encouraging them into strengthening the democratic process.' Falling turnout, declining levels of civic engagement, and the perception of politically disaffected youth can all be reversed somewhat by the canny use of new media.

Why doubt it? Because the Internet may be a democratically 'disruptive technology'. Clayton Christensen, the Harvard academic who coined the term, suggests that new technologies often undermine the success of existing organisations, generally without anyone noticing until it is too late. In *The Innovators Dilemma* Christensen suggests two broad types: technologies that sustain, and those that disrupt. Sustaining technologies make systems work better. Disruptive technologies, on the other hand, eat away organisations to the point of collapse.

Christensen was concerned with commercial systems, and hence disruptions in business. What, then, if we apply his insight to brittle democracies rather than sturdy enterprises? Let me outline some possible ways in which this *might* happen, concerning political individuals, political groups, and the public realm.

For individuals, the Internet changes expectations. Think about e-mailing a bank; we *expect* mails answered in hours, rather than letters answered in weeks. The same will become true in civic life. The Internet lends itself to this type of direct connection, and hence is likely to create demands for more direct forms of democracy. Wired citizens will seek a less interrupted, more efficient, link to political power. Yet traditional democracy just doesn't work this way. Instead, pluralist politics functions by slowly filtering individual preference through groups. Yet, the Netizens still want their answers, in hours not weeks. If they don't get them, because representative democracy doesn't work that way, democratic frustration will surely follow.

Groups face a different problem. The Internet lowers the economic and information cost of group formation. It is relatively easy to start a discussion forum, set up a community of interest, or build an online network. This sounds good, but may actually be problematic. The Seattle protests, for instance, showed that lots of small networked groups, despite their powerful

protests, could not truly *engage* with big institutions. The UK's disparate fuel protests taught similar lessons. Neither the global institutions nor the British Government could sit down with their detractors because they had neither leaders nor agendas. This disconnection was a direct function of their being many small groups. At base, traditional democracies work best when dealing with big groups, such as the British Confederation of British Industries (CBI) or Trades Union Congress (TUC). They don't have the resources to deal with tiny voices. Consequently there is good reason to think the Internet might be a force for balkanisation; groups will become *less* stable, rather than more.

Should we worry? Probably not. The web, after all, is barely 3000 days old. These specific problems – of individual expectation and group fragmentation – are a touch theoretical. But the Internet also changes the way its users gather information, and consequently may also herald significant disruption for our conception of a public realm. The e-Democracy consensus thinks, broadly, that the Internet will have an educative effect on citizens. Information and Communications Technology (ICT) will help Joe voter find information, ideas, and a more active civic life. Again, there is no particularly good reason to believe this.

Last year, respected American legal theorist Cass Sunstein suggested just this. He noted how converged media allows citizens to filter the type of information they receive. In particular, it allows them to choose what they *do not* receive. Sunstein highlighted the danger of the 'daily me', where 'the growing power of consumers to "filter" what they "see" will create information ghettos and isolated citizens.' These enclaves will in turn undermine the idea of a public realm in which a healthy mix of facts, ideas, and opinions, grease the wheels of participatory democracy.

Sunstein's recent book *Republic.com* argues that a 'heterogeneous society' needs two things. First, citizens should be exposed to new ideas through 'unanticipated encounters'. Secondly, we need a range of 'common experiences' to allow a grown-up approach to social problems. These two planks prop up a public space in which social beings work out their differences and cooperate to mutual advantage. Without them, government becomes as factional and splintered as the communities beneath it.

Thus, the way the Internet empowers people – by giving them huge choice over the information they receive – can make them *less* likely to engage in a free debate of ideas. Citizens can use new media to avoid, rather than embrace, new ideas or common experiences.

An analogy might help to explain this. The now defunct satirical website satirewire.com ran a story around a year ago with the headline 'Americans annoyed by all this international crap on Internet'. The article, with the sub-head 'Web's Increasingly Worldly Flavor Threatens Americans' Worldview' suggested that it was impossible to avoid the horror of foreign news online. Sunstein disagrees. He thinks that the Internet allows users to avoid completely opinions they dislike. New media can create perfect and splendid isolation.

In this sense, the Internet could be disruptive to the ideal of a public political space. The stable basis of participatory democracy, the need for something in common to help overcome the things on which we disagree, could be gradually eroded. Politics, the process of getting over these disagreements, could be undermined.

Where does this leave the consensus? I have suggested three ways – concerning respectively individuals, groups, and the public realm – in which the Internet could be a Bad Thing for democracy. Steven Clift, a pioneer of e-Democracy, broadly concurs with this view: 'I do believe that the default may be negative, unless more people, foundations, governments, the media and others roll up their sleeves and ensure that demonstrated successful e-democracy practices are spread and developed universally across all democracies.' I agree. The Internet, as a highly

democratic and participatory medium, can perform democratic wonders. But the *bien pensant* e-Democracy consensus is wrong and dangerous if it thinks this will happen automatically. Let us hope the consensus can be remade.

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[1] <http://www.methuen.co.uk/1066andallthat.html>



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