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Introduction

This essay aims to compare and contrast the cyber-optimist and the cyber-pessimist accounts of the impact of new media technologies on politics. Because this topic is both too big and complex to elaborate on in a short essay it will focus on discussing the big lines in the historical and current debates. The essay is divided into three chapters where the first will look into the role of political communication culture and how it can be applied when contrasting the two strands – cyber-optimists and cyber-pessimists. The second chapter will shortly position the debate in a historical context and then contrast the two strands dispute over technological determinism. The last chapter will focus on the debate regarding the public sphere where the strands will be compared using the current events in the Middle east and North Africa as examples.

Political communication culture

When assessing new media technologies and its impact on politics several variables have to be taken into consideration. Most commonly the debate is focused on technology as such where cyber-optimists and cyber-pessimists argue over the inherent capabilities of technology, whereby the pessimists think that the optimists give too much importance to technology and its impact and capability to improve society and its politics in a democratizing manner. Though the dichotomy is more intricate and complex than this, it roughly gives an outline of the two strands serving as a backdrop for the pessimists' most frequent used argument against the optimists; namely, that they are technological determinists. This approach, though, is single sided, and to understand the impact new media technologies have on politics it is essential to be aware of the fact that politics are communicated in various ways depending on what sort of culture it operates within, which consequently affect the debate between the cyber-optimists and cyber-pessimists.

Barbara Pfetsch's (2001) article "Political Communication Culture in the United States and Germany" analyzed the interaction between political spokespeople and journalists in two different countries. Her findings suggest that there are fundamental culture differences between the two when it comes to how politics are communicated. While the American model is based on a media-oriented communication culture, the German model springs out of a party-oriented model. The Americans focus on favourable media coverage and unspecific support from the media audience when communicating their politics, while the Germans on the other hand aim to portray their political actors in a favourable position against the opponents through the media (Pfetsch, 2001). So how does this cultural difference concern how the new media technologies impact politics? And why is it important when contrasting the cyber-optimists against the cyber-pessimists?

The term “politics” can be unpacked and applied to almost any aspect of society. It concerns everything from state governance and political actors to freedom of speech and democracy. They are all intertwined in what we understand as the society – a network where one is connected to all - an analogy that is highly descriptive of today’s “networked” society. New media technologies play according to some the lead role in this development, and some argue the opposite, while other scholars think technology and society has a mutual influence on each other. This chapter however highlight yet another dimension to this debate, namely the role of the political communication culture. This aspect is essential to keep in mind because it determines how the impacts of new media technologies are understood in a certain cultural context. Lincoln Dahlberg (2001) divides Internet-democracy rhetoric’s and practices into three broad camps: Liberal individualist, communitarian and deliberative. By applying these to Pfetsch’s (2001) findings on political communication culture; United States can be seen as putting more importance to individual empowerment through new media technologies, while the Germans relate more to the communitarian camp where new interactive media is regarded to help the creation of communities where shared values and concepts are fostered through democratic deliberation, which is seen as the opposite of the centralization that mass media facilitates. These minor, but all so important factors are important when contrasting the cyber-optimists and cyber-pessimists, since it can explain the two strands reason for putting forward their arguments in certain fashion.

The main contribution that awareness of political communication culture brings to the debate is the role of values when contrasting cyber-optimists and cyber-pessimists. The cultural context that they operate within or address is essential to be aware of when comparing them up against each other. So by contrasting the two strands through a “culture” filter based on Pfetsch’s (2001) article, this essay aims to describe their argumentation in a clear and nuanced way.

The medium is the message

One of the core disputes between the Cyber-optimists and Cyber-pessimists is whether new media technologies will bring anything “new” to increase political and civic engagement and interaction between citizens and political actors. Michael Margolis and David Resnick (2000) argue that “[...] the democratic hopes attached to the Internet resemble those that have been hitched to other communications media when they were new” (p. 103). They refer to the popular press and cable television that had an impact on political and civic life, but failed to provide the enlightened democratic participation that some “optimists” had hoped for. Most cyber-optimists, however, acknowledge this historic observation, but argue that a new medium such as the Internet, which facilitates a two way interaction, differs fundamentally from previous media technologies – most commonly referred to as the mass media – by offering a two way interaction where the citizen is no longer only a consumer but also a producer of content in the public sphere(s). Cyber-pessimist on the other hand argues that Information Communication Technologies (ICT) reinforce fragmentation and divergence, and deepens the digital

divide (Ludes, 2008). The two strands has different views on the capabilities of new media technology, and as mentioned earlier in this essay, cyber-optimists have been labelled as technological deterministic because of their “naive” belief in technology as a democratic liberator. This is of course an oversimplification of the debate, but nevertheless, it has been used and still is being used by the two strands to contrast their arguments up against each other.

Marshall McLuhan and his theories on the media in the 1960’s were caught in this crossfire. “The Medium is the Message” was wrongfully understood as a technological determinist due to his focus on the medium as such (Levinson, 2001). Today scholars generally agree that technology both shapes and are shaped by its social context, and that new mediums are constantly developing into new mediums based on hybridization of both current and new technologies. Instead of understanding technology and its impact on society as exogenous, where it is regarded as nothing more than a tool, the endogenous view see technology as an integral part of society and important for how power is expressed politically, economically and sociologically (Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2006; Youngs, 2007). McLuhan’s story illustrates the polarization and historical setting for which today’s debate spring out from. But still today the debate is polarized, though slightly centred on an endogenous view. So do new media technologies mean that there will be “new” politics? Can Internet improve democratic processes?

Distributed public spheres

Zizi Papacharissi (2002) makes the following clarification between public sphere and public space:

"It should be clarified that a new public space is not synonymous with a new public sphere. As public space, the internet provides yet another forum for political deliberation. As public sphere, the internet could facilitate discussion that promotes a democratic exchange of ideas and opinions. A virtual space enhances discussion; a virtual sphere enhances democracy." (p. 11)

Based on Papacharissi’s distinction; cyber-optimists believe that the Internet can help facilitate this virtual sphere that not only provide a space for deliberation but also an environment where a democratic exchange of ideas and opinions take place. Cyber-pessimists on the other hand argue that the internet is not capable of providing the democratic sphere required moving beyond just a deliberative space of discussion. But what makes a virtual sphere more democratic than a virtual space? What kind of ideals should be fulfilled for it to be a virtual sphere? What is it that cyber-optimists think is achievable, and the cyber-pessimists not?

Understanding the political communication culture can help differentiate what kind of values cyber-optimists and cyber-pessimists, alike, believe is required for it to be a virtual sphere. Europeans might put more emphasis on the possibility for online community building where citizens participate in democratic terms so to in unity reach a common understanding of the “correct” opinion. Cyber-pessimists argue against this by claiming that just as in the real world people are not equal in the virtual world. Factors

such as ethnicity, gender, social position etc are also transcended on to the virtual sphere, which in turn corrupt the idea that new media technology can create a true democratic forum. In North America there might be a slightly different approach which focuses more on the individual as a rational autonomous individual who does not need to challenge his or her ideas in a group so to reach a better opinion. Cyber-optimists might argue that the Internet can provide the individual with better and more up to date information, and consequently be able to reach a better opinion based on self-interest. In other words, they believe technology can be an empowering tool for the citizen. Cyber-pessimists in this case argue that people does not know how to utilize these tools, either because they have no interest, or that the digital divide create a “status quo” where the existing power structures within the society remain the same online (Hindman, 2008; Ludes, 2008). Ultimately this is a debate about the reasons and consequences of the digital divide both on a national as well as on an international level. The Cyber-optimists may not agree fully on what is most important when envisaging a virtual sphere, but the cyber-pessimists seems to agree that issues connected to the digital divide is their strongest argument against the virtual sphere.

The recent North African and Middle Eastern uprisings has been heavily debated among cyber-optimists and cyber-pessimists both in the media and among scholars. The cyber-optimists has hailed it as evidence that new media technologies can lead to real political change, while the cyber-pessimists argue that social media has none, or very little, to do with the toppling down of for example the Egyptian president. Michael Margolis and David Resnick (2000) argued, years ago when the Internet was still very new among the average citizen, that “[...] the Internet might facilitate the particular style of democratic politics favoured by activists, a style that, unlike that of traditional political parties, does not concentrate on voting and elections.” (p. 17) Howard Rheingold (2002) introduced the idea of online smart mobs arguing that new media technologies empower individuals to create spontaneous networks to achieve a specific goal (Pickard, 2006). Some cyber-optimists argue that the North African countries has leapfrogged Europe when it comes to e-democracy, meaning that they have utilized the Internet to bring about actual change in difference from in the Western world. From a European cyber-optimist perspective the virtual community is praised for its capability to engage people for a common cause. Traditionally the cyber-pessimists has argued that online engagement lack the solid commitment which consequently negates its potential (Papacharissi, 2002). But with the recent events in the Middle East they have been forced to modify their argumentation. Instead of discarding the efficiency of online social movements they question the motivation behind it. By acknowledging the “smart mob” potential of social media, they argue at the same time for its limitations for engaging in real political engagement. So what about the Egyptian revolution? When the citizens of Cairo were rioting in the streets, was it not real political engagement?

According to the pessimists it was not a real political enlightened engagement, and they claim that it was a group of individuals who joined for a common cause which was frustration over their current social conditions. This “smart mob” was able to gather momentum not because of a virtual sphere where each individual participated in a democratic exchange of arguments, but rather because the internet, and social

media in particular, is such an efficient organizing tool. Their argument resonates with what Margolis and Resnick argued above; that Internet favour activist politics. From a North American perspective the uprisings has been praised for the empowerment of the individuals – those who through social media can make their voice heard. Internet facilitates in this sense a forum of free speech for those who are normally oppressed. Cyber-pessimists argue that just as much freedom of speech the internet brings to the citizens, it also brings to state surveillance. Evgeny Morozov (2011) claims that the cyber-optimists and the media's appraisal of the Internet as a determining factor in the uprisings only have a counterproductive effect by saying that; "[...] most disturbingly, a self-negating prophecy is at work here: The more western policy makers talk up the threat that bloggers pose to authoritarian regimes, the more likely those regimes are to limit the maneuver space where those bloggers operate." (p. 26)

What both cyber-optimists and cyber-pessimists seems to agree upon, to a certain extent, is that the Internet is an efficient tool for organizing people to join a common cause. Manuel Castells (2001) argues that the Internet facilitates a new way of protesting where people and Non Governmental Organisations (NGO) from different backgrounds converge for a specific purpose so to reach a common goal. Dahlberg (2007) call this the autonomous strand where he argues that the multitude get power through commonalities. By looking at this from a European perspective, cyber-positivists will praise the creation of cyber communities where ideas and opinions are shared in a democratic environment. Cyber-pessimists on the other hand will point out that politics shift away from ideology due to the temporary smart mobs and fragmentation of the public sphere. Virtual communities foster spaces where individuals promote their own interests, and the fragmentation of the public sphere leads to the exclusion of those who disagree (Bennett, 2003; Margolis & Resnick, 2000). So what differentiates the virtual space from the virtual sphere? Is it a utopia to believe in a virtual sphere online? These are questions that not only the two strands disagree upon, but also within the strands themselves. Political communication culture can help explain some of these differences by highlighting the values that they build their arguments on.

Conclusion

This essay has portrayed the two strands, cyber-optimists and cyber-pessimists, in relatively straight forward terms, meaning that the debate has been presented in a mainly polarized fashion where both strands has been contrasted up against each other. Either strands share several similarities and touching points which complicates the debate. The essay chose to narrate the debate by looking at the political communication culture – in the United States and Germany - so to be able to contrast the two strands, the cyber-optimists and cyber-pessimists, not only up against each other but also internally within the strands. By adding different political communication culture values into the equation, this essay has hopefully succeeded in depicting the debate in not only an optimists against pessimists, but also how the internal discussion within the strands is unfolding, and how that influence the debate as a whole.

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