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December 1999

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### Recommended Citation

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# Critical Social Theory and Teledemocracy

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Teledemocracy is the relatively new area of research for IS scholars. Most of current research regarding teledemocracy are from political scientists. People have been discussing about teledemocracy for more than a decade. At first, people thought that there could be a teledemocracy implemented through TV and telephones, which turned out to be not very successful(Bowser, 1998). In recent years computers were introduced in creating teledemocracy infrastructure. By utilizing computers, computer-mediated communication can be regarded as the core concept of teledemocracy. Thus nowadays the prospect for successful administration of teledemocracy infrastructure is bright thanks to the advent of computer and telecommunication technology. Now that teledemocracy has become a viable research topic for IS researchers, we need a fundamental theory on this topic besides conducting case studies of numerous teledemocracy infrastructure implementations. Current IS researches are mostly concerned with introducing novel approaches in creating teledemocracy infrastructure and reporting the field test on the particular teledemocracy implementation(Becker, 1993). As a new IS research area, teledemocracy lacks theoretical foundation. The special difficulty in establishing theoretical foundation for this area lies in the fact that the concept of teledemocracy requires the combined view from IS and Political Science. In IS, the relevant theory could be computer-mediated communication theory and in Political Science, we propose Critical Social Theory; we are aware of the fact that there are tons of research done on democracy, but teledemocracy can not be easily explained by using traditional political science theory on democracy. In this paper, we advocate the use of computer-mediated communication tool such as e-mail as a tool for achieving the goal of teledemocracy since according to Habermas' communicative theory which is one of CST, emancipation from the mental pollutants can happen through critical reflection during communication of information. And we posit that computer-mediated communication tool such as e-mail should facilitate the critical reflection more than other means of communication if it is used in a proper way since communication richness including emancipation can happen during the use of e-mail(Ngwenyama, 1991).

## 2. HABERMAS' THEORY OF COMMUNICATIVE ACTION

Habermas' theory of communicative action explains four types of social action such as instrumental, communicative, discursive, and strategic. Habermas suggests that while performing these social actions, humans can be critical of validity associated with the

information being disseminated through communication. Thus humans are capable of critical reflection which can lead to detecting distorted communication such as false, incomplete, manipulative, and insincere information being transmitted to them such that they can emancipate themselves from these mental pollutants(Ngwenyama, 1991).

The doubt on validity of information disseminated through communication can happen at a different degree according to the respective social action. In any social action, it is imperative that critical reflection can happen easily in order to emancipate humans from mental pollutants. Thus if a communication medium can facilitate critical reflection while delivering information, the medium should be regarded as a facilitator to democracy too. When true democracy is thought to be achieved by eliminating physical oppression as well as mental pollutants, in contemporary society where physical oppression is rare, the role of communication medium that can foster critical reflection among citizens while delivering information should be essential in the success of the democracy which relies on the communication medium for the information exchange and dissemination. And this democracy is none other than teledemocracy.

## 3. TELEDEMOCRACY AS COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

According to Habermas(1984), the four conditions must be met by a rational discourse. These conditions are also said to define an "ideal speech situation" or a communication community. In other words, the environment where these four conditions are met should be the one for ideal democratic participation of people. We posit that these conditions can be met by properly administered computer-mediated communication and that this democracy should be called teledemocracy since true democratic ideals are fulfilled by computer-mediated communication, rather than face-to-face meeting. The conditions are as following:

1. All potential participants of a rational discourse must have an equal opportunity to begin a discourse at any time and to continue it by making speeches and rebuttals, and by questioning and answering. Habermas calls this an equal chance to use communicative speech acts. In computer-mediated communication such as electronic town hall meeting, the equal chance to use communicative speech acts are guaranteed if the moderating of such an electronic meeting is done automatically, i.e., without human bias in selecting who and when somebody expresses his/her opinion.
2. For all participants there must be an equal opportunity to interpret, to assert, to recommend, to explain and to justify as well as to question or to give evidence for or

against the validity claim of any of these forms of speech. The purpose of this condition is to assure that in the long run, no presupposition or opinion can escape from becoming the center of discussion and criticism. In computer-mediated communication such as group support system meeting, when the moderating is done automatically the participation to criticize others' opinion in order to test the validity claim can be guaranteed for every member of the meeting especially because anonymity can be provided for every participants when they express their views through group support system.

3. All participants are presumed to be equally able to express their attitudes, feelings, and intentions. These Habermas calls representative speech acts. They serve as a guarantor against self-deceit, illusions, and insincerity of members among the speech community towards one another. In computer-mediated communication such as group support system meeting, due to the protection of anonymity and if no human bias is put in moderating the discourse, the participants will have the capacity to clarify and expose any illusions and deceptions. But how the automatic moderation is programmed will influence the degree of critical reflection which exposes the deceit and illusion. Namely, critical reflection needs time to occur, i.e., most people need time to reflect on information that is given to them. When too many pieces of information flow so fast during group support system meeting, the degree of critical reflection can decrease, which makes the particular computer-mediated communication form unsuitable for the ideal democracy (teledemocracy).

4. All participants are presumed to be equally able to give and refuse orders, to permit and prohibit, to promise or ask for promises, to account and ask for accounting, etc. Habermas refers to these as regulative speech acts. They guarantee that the formal chance of equal distribution of opportunity to begin or continue a discourse is realized. To begin or continue a discourse in computer-mediated communication such as group support system meeting can be done automatically without human bias so that every participant has the same chance to start or end conversations. When a human moderator is present, the participants have to follow the regulation of the moderator, which means that the inevitable bias will occur in distributing equal chance of starting or ending a discourse. However an automatic moderation should be carefully programmed so that the meeting will not degenerate into anarchy. The moderating function of computer-mediated communication should calculate the ratio of speeches made by individuals and try to let less-spoken members be given more chance to start a discourse. A Human moderator can do the similar job but when the number of participants are large, it is impossible to do the job fairly.

We argue that the ideal democratic environment where these four conditions are met can be achieved by computer-mediated communication such as electronic town hall meeting and group support system meeting. In

the real world, it is impossible to achieve these conditions due to human bias; perfect democracy is, in fact, impossible in the current face-to-face or mass media-to-mass format. But in teledemocracy, since the discourse is computer-mediated communication, it is possible to build an environment where the perfect democracy can be achieved. However as indicated above, the ideal computer-mediated communication environment needs fine tuning in terms of moderating. Thus if a teledemocracy is implemented in a computer-mediated communication format, the success or failure of the teledemocracy implementation depends on how well the moderating function is devised.

#### 4. SUCCESS/FAILURE FACTORS FOR TELEDEMOCRACY

Following the findings from the previous chapter, we can now identify the success/failure factors for teledemocracy. Since teledemocracy is implemented through computer-mediated communication, the specific computer-mediated communication system should have following characteristics in order to facilitate the ideal democratic environment which was described by Habermas.

< Success Factors for Teledemocracy >

1. The teledemocracy infrastructure should be a computer-mediated communication system that has the automatic moderation facility.

2. The moderating facility of teledemocracy infrastructure should be able to provide reasonable time for critical reflection for every opinion expressed to the public. In other words, instant delivery of too many messages is not very effective for enhancing democracy. Instead a reasonable number of messages should be delivered with a time interval such that the individual has enough time for critical reflection.

3. The moderating facility of teledemocracy infrastructure should be able to provide equal chance of starting a discourse to every participant, i.e., the moderating facility should track the lengths and frequencies of messages generated by each individual so that it can decide to block some members who are considered to express too much and to encourage other members who are not very active to participate.

Following factors can be considered to be failure factors for teledemocracy.

< Failure Factors for Teledemocracy >

1. The teledemocracy infrastructure involves human moderation which will inevitably introduce a bias in regulative speech acts by participants.

2. The moderation even if it does not involve human bias, i.e., is automatic, does not have a feature to give time for critical reflection for members, or does have a feature to give too much time which can result in loss of thread of consistent thinking.

3. The moderation even if it does not involve human bias, i.e., is automatic, does not have a feature to distribute speech act chances to every individual. In other words,

the moderation function does not have the tracking scheme of each individual's speech acts and thereby, does not have regulating mechanisms such as blocking certain individual's chance to speak or facilitating silent others to speak up.

Thus we can now utilize this principle in building a teledemocracy system that truly functions as the ideal democratic environment.

## 5. AN ANALYSIS OF A TELEDEMOCRACY IMPLEMENTATION CASE

Using the success/failure principles identified in the last chapter, we are analyzing a real-life case of teledemocracy system so that we can prove the validity of the principles we found through critical social theory such as Habermas' theory of communicative action. O'Sullivan(1995) describes the teledemocracy system for the city of Santa Monica, California USA. The teledemocracy system for the city is called PEN(the Public Electronic Network) which is a government-sponsored interactive computer network that allows citizens to interact with public officials and each other. PEN is a computer-mediated communication system that has a many-to-many and horizontal format. This feature fits the first success factor of teledemocracy system which is that the moderation should be automatic. It is reported that PEN was able to achieve pluralistic political participation which is the goal of ideal democracy. O'Sullivan(1995) also reports that other electronic town hall meeting systems which have a one-to-many and centralized format which means that there exists human bias in moderating discourse. In other words, only the politically powerful can dominate the discourse while ordinary citizens' feedback is restricted. This feature is one of the failure factors that are identified in the last chapter. Thus we can now argue that the principles derived from Habermas' theory of communicative action are applicable in the real world case. However the moderating function of PEN is not refined enough to provide adequate time for critical reflection and to track individual's speech acts for the purpose of regulating them. Thus PEN is not a perfect teledemocracy system from the perspective of critical social theory. No known teledemocracy system was implemented to accommodate these functions such as providing adequate time for critical reflection and tracking individual's speech acts for the purpose of regulating them.

## 6. CONCLUSION

We argue that the currently implemented teledemocracy system is not perfect in achieving truly democratic participation of people since no current systems satisfy all of the success factors of the teledemocracy principles that we found. Thus we propose that the practitioners who will build teledemocracy systems in the future or will augment the existing teledemocracy systems should bear in mind that the automatic moderation function of teledemocracy

system must include features such as providing adequate time for critical reflection and regulating individual's speech acts by tracking them.

References are available upon request.