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Agent, Structure, and the Media-based Democratic Politics

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Abstract

Nowadays democracy encounters with this problematic, especially with increasing virtualization / capitalization of society, that whether media acts in the service of citizen’s autonomy, of ideological inductions or a techno-electronic politics in controlling society. Accordingly, the paper question is that from which perspective one can take consider, in spite of pay attention to critical approaches about mass media, the media-based contemporary societies leading to progressive democratic politics? As a response, this paper aims, instead of imaginary picturing the future (whether optimistic or pessimistic), offering a discussion about the conditions needs for realization of real media-based democracy, as an alternative to de-facto democracy, by re-define/adapt democratic theory appropriate to mediated contemporary society, in order to make Link between technological progress and democratic world-life. To do so, the paper taking advantage of the “Agent-Structure” approach, in the sense of Anthony Giddens, for picturing a media-based democracy as an idea that can transcend the debate, about positive/ negative theories of media & democracy relationship, onto focus on necessary conditions for realize the democracy appropriate to new communication technologies.

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1. Introduction

In one of his late articles, Jurgen Habermas expands on democracy; pointing to the incessant presence of normative theorizing, and having an empirical investigation in Aristotle’s Politics, he discusses the gap between the “must be” of contemporary liberal-democracy theories and the “be” of contemporary complex societies, thereby paving the
way for expanding on the possibility of a “deliberative political model” in the media-based age of communications. (Habermas, 2006: 411) Explanation of this model is somehow “mediologic”, in that, as Debray maintains, it deals with the effect of the method of peoples’ communications through a medium, as the independent variable [the new media], on a subject, as the dependent variable [democratic action]. (See Debray, 1996)

In line with this concern, pursuit of a “consistent democratic role” for citizens requires that, in the ever increasingly application of the media in politics, we actively find an answer to the question how one can reflect on the relationship between technological advancement and the life-world, so active citizens could come to an agreement on the power of technological advancements. Answering this concern and, more precisely, adaptation/equipment of the theory of democracy with the current hybrid life-world and the media-equipped culture (the local/national world; the globalized world; and the cyber-world) demands a redefinition of democracy.

Necessity of this redefinition shall better be comprehended once we review Alexi de Tocqueville’s The Old Regime and the French Revolution: the crisis of legitimacy is a product of governments’ failing to respond to the changes brought about in human minds as a result of changes in his/her environment. In response to this challenge, the “direct”, “participatory”, “pluralist”, and “globalist” have been proposed† and it seems that one of their prerequisites is their ability to provide an appropriate interpretation of the contemporary state (broadness, complexity, and media-centrality).

2. Problem Statement

Nowadays democracy encounters with this problematic, especially with increasing virtualization / capitalization of society, that whether media acts in the service of citizen’s autonomy, of ideological inductions or a technoelectronic politics in controlling society. The importance of the problem to be discussed in this study is for the fact that the intertextuality of the cyberspace has increased the possibility of immediacy, interaction, and mutual reaction (sending information by sender, and the interaction between sender and receiver), As Manuel Castells in Communication Power writes: “the same pervasive multimodal communication environment that encloses the political mind in the media networks may provide a medium for the diverse expression of alternative messages in the age of mass self-communication.” (Castells, 2009: 298)

3. Research Questions

From which perspective one can take consider, in spite of pay attention to critical approaches about mass media, the media-based contemporary societies leading to progressive democratic politics?

4. Purpose of the Study

Paper aims, instead of imaginary picturing the future (whether optimistic or pessimistic), offering a discussion about the conditions needs for realization of real media-based democracy, as an alternative to de-facto democracy, by re-define/adapt democratic theory appropriate to mediated contemporary society, in order to make Link between technological progress and democratic world-life.

5. Research Methods

Hypothesis of this study is that we may arrive at a good understanding of how one can have political action in the cyberspace, avoid the negative impacts of determinism and voluntarism in interpretation of the media-equipped politics, and explain the possibility of a media-based democracy. To clarify this hypothesis, Anthony Giddens’ concepts of “Re-structuring” and “Reflexivity” seem to be helpful; advancing the “Structuration” Theory to mix structure with agent to go beyond the conventional consideration of structure (a system of social constraints) and

† The most important of these models include: the “Deliberative Democracy” of Jurgen Habermas; the “Radical Democracy” of Laclau & Mouffe; the “Cosmopolitan Democracy” of David Held; and the “Multitude Democracy” of Negri and Hardt.
agency (creation of society by human action), he found the only way out of this theoretical deadlock is to bridge between these two approaches: recognition of the fact that we actively create and reproduce the social structure in our daily activities. (See Giddens, 1986) This rule may also apply to the recognition of media as one of the social systems and the medium through which various events enter our everyday consciousness. In this place, “reflexivity” refers to the action and role of people in making their own identity, and the open spaces provided by modern technologies, including internet, seem to be in support of this end. However, the mentioned action is performed according to a structural order or a procedure in which the activist lives; an order that changes as a result of the action. With this assumption, we can consider “virtualization”, on the one hand, as the factor involved in the expansion of pluralism in terms of choices facing people and increase in his/her power of activism; on the other hand, the actions of this “selector” human should be considered in the context of the limitations incurred as a result of the separation of virtual field from real life.

6. Findings

The disagreement is “new generation of media” Bring power to which of citizens or governors, in spite of consensus on the effects upon re-structuring public & political sphere:

6.1. Approach 1: Revival of political activism in the form of cyber-democracy

Many scholars believe that the new media facilities (satellite, internet, mobile phone, etc.) would lead to a deepening of democracy, since they will shape political comments, essentially horizontal and void of navigator, thereby challenging the previous rigid conditions that prevented the citizens’ subjectivity and autonomy. In other words, structurally speaking, it will strengthen the plurality of views and decentralization values, and, as a self-selected media, will let people watch whatever they want to see, at whatever time they please; a multi-media system (music, writing, etc.) which, unlike the selective programs of traditional media, has an open and interactive structure in which the communication parties are speakers and listeners at the same time. (Hoogeveen, 2004: 158-165)

Therefore, these media grant the citizens a large power and activism, because the ability to relate their stories will give people the power to influence the political space. An example of this fact is the propagation of “blogging” which, as a public domain, has challenged the hegemony of traditional media, and its activists (as virtual citizens or “netizens”), through group activity, content transfer, and dialogue, have shown that one can also be active in the cyberspace like an informed citizen. (Hauben, 1997: 1-2)

The embodiment of this interpretation of the positive role of the media in deepening the democracy can be traced back to the political literature of such fields as “E Democracy”, “Tele-Democracy” and “Cyber-Democracy”; these fields consider the speed of developments in the age of communications as a stimulus for rethinking the theory of democracy and revitalizing the questions concerning government’s greater accountability, creation of more aware and participatory citizens, and facilitation of consultation in a public domain “with no gate-keeper”, and emphasize the positive role of media in the processes of finding the meaning of events and building identity as a cultural negotiation practice. (See Gibbins & Reimer, 1999)

For example, Howard Rheingold, in Smart Mass, claims that mobile telephone technology, through creating a horizontal communication in social networks, has facilitated the political leadership and supported democracy. From this point of view, although virtual communications (due to reducing the face-to-face communication to virtual interaction) might result in the erosion of civil culture, this floating world of communications based on virtualunities can create a leading “mittelbau”; that is, a structure of political communications (physically absent, but in permanent virtual contact) that is established between government and the civil society, both causing participation from within the local culture and talking to government. In these spaces, people, while coordinating their actions with one another, can create meaningful communities that could act as an influential political action; for example, using SMS (Short Message System) to coordinate the political stances. (Gergen, 2008: 301-308)

It seems as if, with these facilities, the “size” of modern democracies is no longer an obstacle to the classical ideals of democracy, because the possibility of receiving people’s feedback through phones or social networks promises a kind of “direct remote democracy”.

6.2. Approach 2: End of politics and the impossibility of democracy
Critical approaches, with their formal and ideological differences (Modern and Postmodern), are unanimous in providing a pathological analysis of mythologizations over the democratic function of media; the analyses which mainly focus on the “structural aspect” of relationship between citizens and media, and the semi-conscious mechanisms inducing self-censorship. According to John Keane’s Media and Democracy, the problems is not the existence of a world of external realities and lack of a medium, but that the status of the interpreting subjects itself is “structured” by media. (See: Keane, 1991)

The most important wave of this criticism started in the Frankfurt School which analysed the performance of media through a transparent authoritarianism, rooted in the “culture industry”; a systematic barbarianism that developed with the advent of recreational/cultural industries, derived from the logic of capital accumulation, and led to this concern that media, rather than independent judgment, may result in consumerist audience and paralysis of critical thinking.

In the same vain, Pierre Bourdieu (1996) believes that this systematic process of mass befouling originates from the journalistic structure and “field” wherein the competitions resulting from audience-surveys (penetration of commercial thinking into cultural fields) have turned the media into a logical continuation of the market.

From this critical standpoint, we are actually facing a “post-democracy” state in which commercial models have replaced the concepts of political communications, and politics has been increasingly redefined as an item for consumers; (Crouch, 2004: 49) a state that, with the loosening of the traditional “political/non-political” demarcations and excessive reduction of the public good to consumer-oriented personal concerns, might drive the policy-making domain out of the focus of the cyberspace citizens and lead to the refusal of the policy-making domain from representing the public domain. (Benet & Entman, 2001)

This criticism may move even further to a situation where, instead of deepening democracy on the way to the primacy of technocracy, the influence of cyberspace (in the form of electronic government) on the policy-making domain be analysed. According to Gilles Deleuze (1995), this space can be interpreted as a type of transitioning from disciplinary society to control society (cybernetic machines): a society in which control acts within the simulated range of society and, contrary to the disciplinary society, the mechanism of subjugation is much more democratic and inward (inside the brains and bodies of citizens) and, through flexible and volatile networks, it has completely developed beyond the organized domains of social institutions. (See Deleuze, 1995) In this sort of power-exercise, control of the flow of information, extended use of supervision techniques and innovative application of media is very important.

In the continuum of this pathology, there is another wave of criticism that insists on the “impossibility of contact with the real world”. That is, contrary to the modern impression and the Enlightenment paradigm about the risk of information scarcity, the main risk in the postmodern era is the inability in giving sense to a huge mass of information. As Jean Baudrillard maintains, in a world replete with simulacrum, due to the invasion of signs and images to “the real” and the loss of objective “reality/authority”, deterioration of the political and the “crisis of democracy” happens as a result of “political meaninglessness” and not due to the lack of institutions, ineffectiveness of mechanisms, and anti-democratic measures of governments: Instances that shape the political have no longer “equivalence” in a “reality” or a real social essence. There is no longer a social instance, of its classic type (people, class, proletariat, objective conditions), to empower the effective political signs. In simple words, there is no longer a social signified to empower the political signifier. (See Baudrillard, 1983)

This can mean that the system of representative democracy has reached a deadlock in the media-based society, because the aim of democracy is primarily to reflect and fulfill the public demands, but with “the public” losing its sense and the proportion of the political to reality, democracy, as one of the litters of the political, will lose its power.

Besides, there are other approaches that criticize the media-based democracy, as the “dramatized politics”, from a more classic standpoint (loss of civil society and decrease in the role of elites):

a) With transformation of the “party democracy” to “media democracy”, the public political domain has been subjugated to a type of media communication that is lacking in the characteristics of “political deliberation”: a) lack of face-to-face interaction among participants in a collective decision-making; b) lack of reciprocation among speaker(s) and listener(s) in an equitable exchange of demands and ideas; because the media political communications are actually shaped by a group of elites. (Habermas, 2006: 413)

b) Political elites surrender to media formulations and pretend to have the same interests as other people, for the purpose of restore their lost influence. In this sense, politics and media have formed a partnership, so that, on one
side, the public look at politics as an aesthetic phenomenon (and not a community for establishing the norms) (see Meyer, 2002), on the other side, the elites surrender to the populist managerial methods; the happening that is considered by critics as both the ending point of political leadership and the starting point of a type of “technological populism” or referendum authoritarianism derived from populist push-button democracy that has no more value than an advertising/rhetorical function. (Coleman, 1999: 18)

6.3. Approach 3: Conditions for the possibility of a media-centered democracy

A realistic stance on the role of new communication media in deepening or weakening democracy seems to demand a novel interpretation of the ideals of democracy in the media-equipped structure of politics today. That is, the more we are cautious in accepting the optimistic convergence of technology and democracy, the more we consider verdict that “technology rejects democracy” will be untenable. Thus, we must consider virtualization as a positive change per se, which has made a “media-based democracy according to a kind of the deliberative politics that is based on mass communications” more achievable. The media political communication in public domain can be effective in facilitating the deliberative legislative processes, and in order to reduce the gap between “idea” (must be) and “reality” (be), provided it has two main prerequisites: There should be a self-regulating media system that is independent from the external political/social environment; and The audience of this system should shape a feedback process between discourse of the informed elite and the responsible civil society. (Habermas, 2006: 411-12)

In this sense, though communities are shaped in different forms as a result of the setting and framing processes of the media, information is mixed with audience’s mental reactions and, in turn, influences prospective decisions on media goal-setting. This understanding (that considers democracy hand in hand with the corrected model of mass media) will also mean a reflection in current democracy.

However, achieving this status, so far as it relates to the “function of media”, requires a number of prerequisites, so the media leave their one-way status and turn into a product of the cultural diversity of the society: a) Expansion of the inclusion range of representations; (Paying attention to those who do not vote and providing legal/financial support to ensure the access of individuals, groups, and independent program-makers to media), b) Changing the news policies (make the news items more local/more cooperative/pay attention to all obstacles facing democracy, like economic problems), c) Self-regulating or changing the conditions for organizing media production (establishment of independent, public, and non-beneficiary media corporations in civil society and ensuring legal guarantees and privileges, and offering subsidies to them), d) Removing goods from media (by requiring commercial media to pursue their activities within a network of legal duties and responsibilities; for example, establishing transnational regulatory organizations or democratic decision-making processes such as cooperation of employees, forming several boards of directors, and new investment methods), e) Prioritizing the social policymaking to profitability (giving priority to politics rather than profit, in communications), f) Transition from governmental paternalism toward public custodianship of media (independence of media communications from the center of political system).

Removal of these obstacles is one of the vital conditions for resolving current democracy crisis. As Manuel Castells states, if power-making is done through creating images and shaping human minds, this process also depends largely upon communication and media policies; in this case, when there is a systematic dissociation between communication power and representative power (in other words, there is no equal opportunity for the actors and values in the multimedia system), the practice of democracy will be called into question: “The most important crisis of democracy under the conditions of media politics is the confinement of democracy to the institutional realm in a society in which meaning is produced in the sphere of media.” (Castells, 2009: 298)

It seems as if: “The democratic capacity of the new communication technologies are so promising, since, contrary to one-sided technologies of the first wave of media – in which political agenda was not derived from people, they act like bilateral penetration structures or powerful horizontal communications which is circulating in a crowd with no navigator” (Gregen, 2008: 304)

Although this new territory may stimulate apoliticality and lead to the decline of civil society, in the traditional sense, but, it can, on the other hand, pave the way for development of citizen relationships compatible with the media-equipped life today. (Gregen, 2008: 303) Moreover, their relatively low service costs of enables people to empower the selective program-making, based on different tastes, rather than the current models of program-making; the capacity that, if perceived according to the concept of civil society, will take seriously the effect of
cyberspace in removing the gaps, strengthening citizens’ connections, and creation of an independent and powerful public domain. (See Segel: 2001) Though it might seem prescriptive/normative, but thanks to the existence of modern communication facilities and participation opportunities, the above condition is highly achievable and the move toward it - by the sovereignty and people -- has started since the last two decades: the Arab Revolt or the Wall Street Movement revealed that internet can be an effective tool in organizing and coordinating democratic actions. The “Twitter Revolution” or “Online Movement” means the cyberspace facilities to alter the objective reality. The Wikileaks Event is another instance of the cyberspace capabilities for revitalizing democratic forgotten values; in the cases just mentioned, this could mean the public access right or publicity of the information related to actions of the officials, as opposed to secrecy. The results of experiments reveals, with the expansion of communications and increasing peoples’ votes, how the increased access to electronic media in Africa has brought an enormous leverage to civil society and facilitated the project of transitioning to democracy. (See Ott, 1998)

The other instances of this case are those studies that demonstrate the effect of new media in the rise of civil commitment, trust in democracy, and political participation in the US, according to the findings of previous quantitative and experimental studies (Norris, 2000: Ch. 13), or the parliamentary elections in UK (1996) held with exclusive use of new communication media is an instance of a media-based democracy that uses the cyberspace to offer election services and public consultation. (Coleman, ibid: 16) We might take the civil networks of the US and Europe as other example that are making use of new communication technologies (especially internet) to increase their role in local tasks. (Tambiani, 1999: 305-29)

In the light of these considerations, we might exercise more caution in regard to the hypothesis of the theories of Media Malaise about the share of political communications, through new media, in the current civil nonalignment. In a volume, devoted to systematic assessment of the role of political communications in post-industrial communities, the author, having rejected this hypothesis (using various empirical studies and evidences on the US and 15 members of the European Union) mentions that half a century of studies on the US national elections (1948-1998) is demonstrative of the fact that, at the individual level, those citizens who are more exposed to the media have more political awareness and activity, and place greater trust in democracy, and at the collective level, the long-term continuation of common tendencies is indicative of a civil alignment that does not accord with pessimistic perceptions. Therefore, it is better to consider the relation between the media and its audience as a “two-way, interactive” process, by adopting a realistic viewpoint, rather than reproaching the media or its people. (See Norris, 2000)

7. Conclusions
- Contingent to what expect of media, the problematic can be responded: if we take considering media as a structure interacting with agents, then we could facilitate democracy by our subjective media-based activities.
- Media-based democracy is an idea that can transcend the debate, about positive/ negative theories of media & democracy relationship, onto focus on necessary conditions for realize the democracy appropriate to new communication technologies.
- Performativity depends on developments that facilitate it, which seems new communication technologies (e.g. internet, virtual networks like Facebook, mobile networks and etc.) going on.
- Therefore, we should face that as a democracy “facilitator”, not as a democracy “agent”.
- In fact, all decisions made from within different institutions inside a political system are based on an institutionalized deliberation and negotiation processes (regardless of the number and type of deliberators). The problem is how much one can enter a public domain, which is outside the policy-making macrostructure, into this circle. Media communication will act as a catalyst for achieving these aims, provided that there is an independent media system and a feedback process in place between the policy-making elites and the responsible civil society.
- It seems that new communication technologies offer a capacity for this type of communication, since, contrary to the one-sided technology of the preliminary media (radio and television) - in which the political agenda was not issued by people - they act primarily as to-way penetration structures or powerful horizontal communications that
are continually circling within the communities, with no navigator.

- Yet, without parallel endeavours ensuring “public access” to the new media, the current promising landscapes to achieve a “media-based democracy” will be fruitless.

References


