

MODELS OF DEMOCRACY — BEHIND THE DESIGN AND USE OF NEW MEDIA IN POLITICS

JAN A.G.M.
VAN DIJK

Introduction

It seems safe to say that there is a relationship between the application of information and communication technology (ICT) and democracy. For decades now the consequences of ICT for social and political life are disputed in an ideological way. Some call them technologies of freedom (de Sola Pool 1983), while for others they are technologies of central control and registration. Visions of the rebirth of Athenian democracy are opposed by nightmares of Orwellian proportions. Others again, like the author of this article (Van Dijk 1991/1994), stress the ambiguity of this technology which is enabling as well as defining and leaves opportunities of choice within certain limits. These are theoretical interpretations of the use of ICT which existed before it was practised on a large scale. In the meantime ICT has massively entered organisations, among them political, government and administrative organisations. The effects of ICT on the practice of these organisations can not be denied any more. The interpretations of the meaning of ICT can be specified now and released from some of the early speculations.

This article is about the positive contribution of the use of ICT to the political system in general and political democracy in particular. It deals with several directions of improvement guided by different conceptions of democracy. This does not mean that negative effects of the use of ICT for the political system and democracy, lightly touched upon in the former paragraph, can be ruled out in advance. People who conceive ICT as a technology of central control and registration will not perceive any beneficial effects for democracy and reject particular views of the renewal of democracy, such as notions of

Jan A.G.M. van Dijk is lecturer in Department of Mass Communication, Faculty of Social Sciences, Utrecht University, PO Box 80140, 3584 CS Utrecht.

direct democracy, as utopian or dangerous views. They tend to think that the best thing which can happen is a preservation of the current political system and the present quality of democracy. One type of analysis can not be ignored. Several analysts argue that the field of democracy itself is losing ground together with the declining influence of the political system of the nation state. The American computer scientist Mowshowitz (1992) speaks of the advent of so-called virtual feudalism. This is a type of rule by the fragmented global political power of transnational corporations and other organisations who, like feudal lords, surpass the nation states and undermine their power to take or implement decisions. This could even mean the end of democracy, a forecast made by the French political analyst Guéhenno (1994) in his book *La fin de la démocratie*. Guéhenno observes the crisis of the nation state and the “Libanonization” of politics. All kinds of national and international organisations are filling the vacuum and creating undemocratic or uncontrollable types of political power by means of information and communication networks, informal social networks, corruption and even crime. Guéhenno does not perceive any serious project of a world government. If this dark perspective does not mean the end of democracy, it would surely mean a significant set-back. The democracy within transnational corporations and other global associations is at a far lower level than the democracy of national institutional politics. The power of a European parliament or a United Nations does not match the present power of the nation states with a democratic rule either. The analysis of the decline of the nation state by some other social or political scientists is less dramatic. Ulrich Beck, for instance, in his *Der Risikogesellschaft* (1986; Risk Society, 1992) observes a displacement of institutional politics, not only on global affairs but on civil society as well. The political primacy of the nation state and institutional politics are questioned, not democracy in its own right. Other places and ways of democracy in civil society can replace or add to the institutional democracy of the nation state. This position at least can be located in one of the positive models of democracy to be dealt with now.

Models of Democracy

From the first introduction of the new information and communication technologies, marked by the design and diffusion of interactive and integrative (multi)media, these technologies appeared to be connected to conceptions of democracy. The new facilities of telepolling, telereferenda and electronic elections immediately spurred visions of the rebirth of the Athenian agora and other means of direct democracy and self-representation (Toffler 1980; Becker 1981; Barber 1984). These visions were rejected with equal vigour by defenders of an (improved) representative system and people who were very sceptic about “push-button democracy” (Laudon 1977; Arterton 1987; Abrahamson, Arterton and Orren 1988). The discussion about the opportunities of the new media for direct or representative democracy has lingered for about twenty years. In these decades two things appeared. First, the conceptions of democracy are much more complicated than a simple dualism between direct and representative democracy. Second, discussions have become less theoretical; the media of ICT are maturing and entering into the daily practice of the political system. One can observe stages of experimentation and beyond.

So we will have to do two things: elaborate the conceptions of democracy connected to the practice of ICT and describe this practice with regard to its introduction

