REVIEW ESSAY

THE INTERNET AND DEMOCRACY: PARTICIPATION, CITIZENS AND POLITICS

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Andrew Chadwick. 2006. *Internet Politics. States, Citizens and New Communication Technologies.* New York: Oxford University Press, 384 pp, $41.25, ISBN-10: 0195177738.

Lincoln Dahlberg and Eugenia Siapera, eds. 2007. *Radical Democracy and the Internet*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 272 pp, $85,–, ISBN-10: 0230007201.

Peter Dahlgren, ed. 2007. *Young Citizens and New Media: Learning for Democratic Participation*. New York: Routledge, 320 pp, $120,–, ISBN-10: 0415395992.

Michael Keren. 2006. *Blogosphere. The New Political Arena*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 165 pp, $26.95, ISBN-10: 073911672X.

Brian Loader, ed. 2007. *Young Citizens in the Digital Age. Political Engagement, Young People and New Media*. London: Routledge, 216 pp, $41.85, ISBN-10: 0415409136.

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Introduction

In this essay, I review five recent books about the role of the Internet in democratic societies. In times when commentators observe a worldwide "crisis of democracy" (e.g., Flew 2005; Gibson et al. 2003; Scheufele & Nisbet 2002), the question looms large whether the Internet can form a meeting place for citizens to converse or inform themselves, and to prepare or carry out individual or collective action. In this context, the five books reviewed here contribute to a sub-industry that has burgeoned on the uses, effects and potentials of the Internet, discussing, in particular, how the Internet can revitalise public debate, increase the political interest of (young) people, or enhance the legitimacy of governmental authorities and other institutions (e.g., Bennett 2003; Coleman & Rowe 2005; Lenhart et al. 2004; Montgomery et al. 2004; Norris 2003; Papacharissi 2002; Smith et al. 2005; Stern & Dillman 2006).

As this debate continues to swell, there is ample reason to evaluate how the books contribute to studies of the Internet and democratic society, and to consider the further research questions that the books call attention to. I look at three themes that occur in all five books: participation, citizenship, and political contexts. Civic and political participation forms are in most of these studies understood as prerequisites for citizen-based democracies to flourish and, as such, participation is assumed to be the nucleus of citizenship.[1] Ideas about participation, therefore, also entail ideas about citizens. Lastly, participation and citizenship are articulated within their political context. Thus, participation, citizenship and political contexts occupy central analytic positions in the five selected books, which is why the books are reviewed along these themes. The three themes are strongly intertwined as are the sections below. The sections assess different thematic focal points, but the observations support and merge naturally into one another.

Participation

Each of the five books in question elaborates on the idea of citizen participation. What is participation? Which forms of participation are beneficial to democracy? Does or can the Internet facilitate participation that is beneficial to democracy? In this section, I discuss how the books focus on different aspects of such questions, and I describe and reflect upon the normative tendencies of the conclusions drawn by the respective authors.

In *Blogosphere: The New Political Arena*, Keren argues that, in the last few years, blogs have been influential primarily because of the growing amount of attention they get in the mainstream media. On some occasions, Keren notes, blogs even seem to have had direct political impact. For example, former US Senate majority leader Trent Lott was forced to resign in late 2002 after bloggers emphasised the story that he had made racist comments at a birthday party (p. 6). Keren's aim is to assess whether the blogosphere – "the aggregation of millions of online diaries known as 'blogs'" (p. 1) – is represented by such anecdotes of (mediated) political influence. Paraphrasing a blogger called Dave, Keren asks whether blogosphere forms a "new political arena in which serious concerns about 'the real suffering of real people in the real world' are communicated and acted upon, or rather whether it is a gathering place for the 'low and pathetic'?" (p. 5), as some critics would have it. Keren looks into nine divergent "twenty-first century identities" in blogosphere; his observations reveal not only emancipation, but also, in his words, "politics

and norms of melancholy." Keren argues that the bloggers he investigated are not exceptionally politically active, and that their work is not necessarily politically activating. Rather, the "new arena can be characterised by a unique combination of the fresh voice of emancipation and a deep sense of withdrawal and rejection" (pp. 11-12). Exemplifying this, Jason Kottke ("Cyberspace Celebrity"), one of the bloggers Keren explores, wrote on his weblog that he is "not exactly sure what [to] do … , but I do know that as time passes, I get more and more uneasy about mass media, advertising and marketing in general" (p. 28); based on such postings, Keren indicates the blogger's "tendency toward political passivity" (p. 22). The blogger "Not a Fish" ("Imshin"; "Israeli Woman") wrote that her "blog is not a discussion; you don't like what you read, you go read something else… I need to be around people who see things as I do" (p. 75); based on such postings, Keren arrives at the conclusion that "blogging … is more a means of self-expression and self-exploration than of dialogue" (p. 75). Keren decides that "the test of a conversation lies in the participant's attentiveness, something that the blogging medium does not encourage. Blogging, like other forms of autobiography, is done in solitude" (p. 148). Thus, Keren's assessment of participation reveals the individual endeavour *par excellence*: the social alien pent up behind the screen (as the cover of Keren's book suggests[2]), coacting with nobody, and typing for narcissistic reasons. *Qua* intention, civil entrepreneurism in the blogosphere is, then, not so much a distinct "social" or "political" exercise as it resembles auto-satisfaction by narration.

Quite different from this rather pessimistic proposition are the observations about blogs that Andrew Chadwick makes in *Internet Politics. States, Citizens and New Communication Technologies*. Chadwick notes, for instance, that "particularly blogs [create] a different sort of environment, which appears to have lowered levels of apathy and increased citizen participation" (p. 26). Chadwick also nuances, however, the deliberative functions and attributes of the existing "virtual sphere" in general: "Online talk mirrors talk in our everyday lives; it is often banal, sometimes gossipy, periodically awkward and conflictual, and only sporadically political in the formal sense" (p. 108). This is reminiscent of Keren, who also highlights this particular property of communication in blogosphere: "Blogs are often voyeuristic, gossipy, and creepy. They appear authentic while they are not, and they portray lives we may not necessarily approve of" (p. 11). Blogging is, however, not the main subject of Chadwick's study, nor does he primarily advocate some singular concept of civic participation. Instead, he provides a concise yet comprehensive account of contemporary literature on the subject of "the politics of the Internet." Chadwick's overriding question is whether "the Internet, by reconfiguring the relations between states and between citizens and states, [is] causing fundamental shifts in patterns of governance" (p. 1). He sets his exploration of the answers to this question within a theoretical framework located somewhere between "technological determinism" and "social determinism" (pp. 18-20), and a further articulation of that framework in terms of eight key themes: decentralisation, participation, community, globalisation, postindustrialisation, rationalisation, governance, and libertarianism (pp. 22-36). Chadwick's work based on these themes unveils much of the academic debate on Internet politics, including the debate on citizen participation. Most notably, in chapter five of his book Chadwick considers "e-democracy," that is, the potential of the Internet to enhance "community cohesion, political deliberation, and participation" (p. 83) by providing "horizontal linkages between citizens in civil society as well as

the vertical linkages between civil society and policy makers" (p. 84).[3] Chadwick's conclusions in this regard are mixed. He recognises that the main accomplishment of e-democracy is settled in the vast amount of theoretical speculation it provoked (p. 84). On the other hand, he asserts that the idea of e-democracy has now exceeded the domain of "utopian dreams" and that "its main themes are increasingly embedded in political practise" (p. 84). Referring to a number of experiments around the globe – from Santa Monica to Estonia – Chadwick suggests that e-democracy is slowly but surely becoming purposeful in political life.

Chadwick's account of e-democracy exudes a sense of hope that the Internet could provoke an appetite for participation, and that it should. The same hope is also present in Brian Loader's edited compilation – *Young Citizens in the Digital Age. Political engagement, young people and new media* – which "has the primary aim of critically exploring the role of new media in influencing the democratic acumen of young citizens in late modern societies" (p. 3). Several of the analyses in Loader's volume relate the lack of (online) civic participation among young people to factors that seem to lean somewhat towards what Chadwick labels social determinism. That is, the degree of e-participation is seen not so much as a function of the technological conditions of the Internet, as it is seen as a reflection of political interest (Sonia Livingstone, Nick Couldry & Tim Markham, in Loader, pp. 21-34), socio-economic differences (Gustavo Mesch & Stephen Coleman, in Loader, pp. 35-47), and offline initiatives by political representatives and authorities (Michael Xenos & Lance Bennett, in Loader, pp. 48-67). Furthermore, in the theoretical framework of Loader's book the concept of participation is defined in terms of what matters to young citizens. This is, however, no radical definition, since it "merely" advocates an adjustment of the political process to the needs and wants of young people. Neil Selwyn (in Loader, pp. 129-42), for example, suggests that ICT education would be more efficient if it were more personalised and focused around lifestyle politics.[4]

The issue of education serves as a central theme in Peter Dahlgren's book, *Young Citizens and New Media: Learning for Democratic Participation.* In his introduction, Dahlgren stipulates the concept of participation in nearly similar terms to Loader's (pp. 8-11; see also Ariadne Vromen, in Loader, pp. 97-113), namely, as "formal" *and* "alternative" civic and political activities (Dahlgren, pp. 5-7). However, the contributions in Dahlgren's volume focus not only on civic or political participation itself, but, as the subtitles suggests, also or primarily on "learning for democratic participation." The young are assumed not to be ready for participation, and in need of education. In the various contributions it is, then, assessed whether and how the use of new media, itself a form of participation, socialises (young) people.

While most authors discussed here employ a rather loose and inclusive notion of civic or political participation through the Internet, Lincoln Dahlberg and Eugenia Siapera focus on "radical" participation in *Radical Democracy and the Internet*. The authors claim to have compiled an exploration of radical demands of "progressive" civic actors in regard to participation in decision-making. They aspire "to advance thinking and practices on what can be done to develop radical democratic cultures through networked systems. … The aim of the book [is] to be a significant contribution to moving the field in a "progressive" direction, not just through the particular theorizations of contributors, but by provocation" (p. 13). The civic actors Dahlberg and Siapera refer to – in particular, bloggers, hacktivists,

NGOs, and community movements – "are fighting for both democratic practice and for a strong or radical definition of what this practice means, … [which] requires that the concept [of democracy] become not only a powerful signifier of legitimacy but that its meaning becomes (re-)articulated with liberty, equality, and solidarity" (p. 2). Dahlberg, Siapera, and their contributors then rearticulate the concept of (radical) democracy, and study its relationship with the Internet along four interrelated themes: radical democratic theory, online community, the communicative contestation of power relations, and the systemic structuring of the Internet (pp. 11-13). Along these themes, the different contributors propose various viewpoints on Internet participation. For example – as opposed to what Keren posits – Richard Kahn and Douglas Kellner (in Dahlberg & Siapera, p. 26) present bloggers as the *avant garde* of radical democracy, that is, "technoactivists" who favour democratic self-expression, networking and media critique; Tim Jordan (in Dahlberg & Siapera, pp. 73-88) examines the Internet actions of hacktivists against online communications of anti-democratic forces and for an Internet infrastructure that allows more "online communicative freedom"; and Dahlberg (in Dahlberg & Siapera, pp. 128-47) discusses an "agonistic" theory of public sphere participation, as opposed to the "consensual" public sphere of Habermassian (1962) doxies.

In examining all five books, it is possible to see clear differences in how the respective authors assess Internet participation. Most notably, there are differences in regard to kinds of participation (from individual blogging to e-democracy communication), its intentionality (selfish, social, political or educational), and its purpose (from auto-satisfaction to bringing about radical democracy). What none of the authors centrally do, is assess the question of whether (Internet) participation by citizens is something desirable in and of itself. The authors, thus, seem to share the implicit assumption that participation is beneficial, indeed required, for democracy to prosper.

Citizens

Following from the elaboration of participation, the five books reviewed here necessarily make assumptions about citizens. Who is the citizen? What is the citizen like? What can we expect from the citizen in regard to his or her civic and political participation and engagement in democratic society? In this section, I discuss how and what aspects of such questions are highlighted or implied in the books.

In Dahlberg and Siapera's book, the primary concept of citizen participation revolves around online actions that can challenge paradigms and policies of the capitalist-political order – or, to frame it in terms of an academic imperative, the must of "ongoing reflection on the conceptualization and realization of equality, liberty and democratic community" (p. 7). As the authors argue, it is this reflexivity (i.e., "uncertainty" and "questioning"; p. 7) what would make democracy actually "radical." This comes down to a notion of emancipated citizenship displayed in terms of readiness and competence to convey the *vox populi* vis-à-vis the powers that be, and to insist on a just allocation of "equality, liberty and solidarity." Such a notion draws, obviously, on ambitious expectations of the common citizenry; it fits within what Dahlberg and Siapera themselves describe as "excitement about the possibility of the Internet supporting, advancing, and enhancing autonomous and democratic public spaces, … providing space for the free flow of information,

open debate of problems, and the formation of rational-critical public opinion, all of which enable citizen scrutiny of power and input into decision making" (p. 3).

Dahlberg and Siapera's approach assumes, then, a vocal citizen who is actually capable and willing to debate, scrutinise and decide. Such assumptions are questioned in Keren's case study. On the one hand, Keren portrays bloggers as "newly emancipated individuals" (p. 9) and cultural eccentrics. They are the "colourful," in the words of Sidonie Smith (1993, in Keren, p. 8), who have taken up the challenge to "sing outside the shower" and articulate their idiosyncrasies "vis-à-vis an *ancien régime* consisting of traditional politics and the mainstream media" (p. 9). On the other hand, those who read Keren's book might find it difficult not to pity the very same bloggers, because they are also portrayed as being melancholically. Keren contrasts them with "Underground Man," a figment of Fyodor Dostoevsky, in reincarnation, perhaps, the archetype blogger, "absorbed in cold, malignant, and, above all, everlasting spite" (Dostoevsky, 1960: 10, in Keren, p. 13). It is not, however, Keren's actual intention to equate any bloggers – be they journalists, university professors, politicians, teenagers, or ordinary citizens (p. 14) – with the "low and pathetic." On the contrary, in what seems an attempt to excuse the blogger for his or her inclination to melancholy, Keren combines his remarks on the blogosphere with several reminders to the reader that bloggers can just as well be cheerful and enlightened in the offline sphere. "Withdrawal and rejection," he notes, "identified with melancholy … is not a personal quality of bloggers but a systemic attribute of blogosphere. Bloggers do not live in mouse holes [as Underground Man does] … , but the energy released from their keyboards at any given moment creates the hyper-conscious existence described by Dostoevsky" (p. 15). Keren, however, never clearly explains why and how he reduces melancholy to a "systemic" quality of blogosphere, but, apparently, in Keren's theoretical view, the art of blogging does not reflect the artist's life in the offline environment. "The politics of blogosphere," Keren notes, "is melancholic not because it lacks joy, triumph and exultation but because when these emotions … are present, their relation to real life is incidental. Blogosphere involves journalism without journalists, affections without substance, community without social base, politics without commitment. It replaces action by talk, truth by chatter, obligation by gesture, and reality by illusion" (p. 14).

The somewhat blazing idiom employed in Keren's study cannot be recognised in Chadwick's book. Compared to Keren, Chadwick articulates his view on citizens in far less explicit terms. Yet, his discussion about the "digital divide" debate (chapter 4), "a useful shorthand term of the persistent inequalities that exist between the info-rich and the info-poor" (p. 49), is directly relevant to the role of the Internet in a democracy. Contemplating the work of various academics, Chadwick explains how access is the basic prerequisite of Internet participation, and why it is the case that not all citizens have equality in this regard. He gives, then, an excellent overview of differences in regard to social and physical access, and laments that there are too few studies that relate such differences to "what people are actually able to do when they are online" (p. 51). In other chapters, Chadwick addresses problems of motivation and ability, both of which implying the prerequisites for online citizenship. By and large, however, Chadwick bypasses the citizen. Most notably, in part II he does not take citizenship as a point of departure, but he employs an "institutional" approach. In accordance with the field of existing research

on e-democracy (e.g., p. 92), much attention is paid to the "supply side" of e-democracy (i.e., content, rationale and functions of e-democracy websites) and less to the "demand side" (i.e., the abilities, motivations and experiences of citizens). As a result, Chadwick sometimes underexposes some key questions. For example, do people want to participate in the first place, and why (not)? As a consequence of the focus of analysis being on the institutional and theoretical aspects of this issue, reading between the lines, it is not that far fetched to suppose that citizens do want to participate, but that e-democracy websites are not yet, for example, adopted to the needs of citizens. Whatever the motivational situation among citizens is in Chadwick's view, it is a pity that he, on the whole, does not pay much explicit attention to it throughout his book.

Understanding the citizen's perspective seems, on the other hand, the main purpose of Dahlgren's and Loader's volumes. The latter understands civic participation, or the lack thereof, as a function of the abilities, needs and wants of young people. This function is, then, not fixed in a "disaffected citizen" perspective – the postulation that young people do not participate because they are disaffected with liberal democratic politics – but in a "citizen displacement" standpoint. "Young people are not necessarily any less interested in politics than previous generations, but … traditional political activity no longer appears appropriate to address the concerns associated with contemporary youth cultures," as Loader (p. 1) writes. By framing within this approach the "socio-cultural transitions" of globalisation, social fragmentation and individualisation that citizens are facing (pp. 5-8), young people are depicted as not necessarily debilitated and depoliticised by new media (Loader, p. 10); as replicating their differences in offline socialisation and demographical background in the use of the Internet (Livingstone et al., in Loader, pp. 21-34; Gustavo Mesch & Stephen Coleman, in Loader, pp. 35-47; Vromen, in Loader, pp. 97-113); and, as being enthusiastic about (left-leaning) politics and civic participation, but not about the communication style of politicians (Davide Calenda & Lorenza Mosca, in Loader, pp. 82-96; Selwyn, in Loader, pp. 129-42; Coleman, in Loader, pp. 166-85). In these contributions and in Dahlgren's book, the assertion that young people are apathetic and depoliticised – whether or not because of their uses of new media – is contested by extending the notion of politics itself beyond its traditionally narrow meaning in Western democracies. As Dahlgren notes, "[w]hile it is difficult to get any solid numbers of those involved in alternative politics, impressionistically it seems that alternative forms of engagement are on the rise. … Various social and cultural movements, single issue activists, networks, transnational linkages, NGO's, etc., are emerging outside the boundaries of conventional party politics. Analytically, the various modes of alternative politics seem to address certain needs for young people that conventional politics does not fill" (p. 6).

The way in which Dahlgren and Loader extend the definition of the political sphere indicates that the analytical role of politics is entangled with how participation and citizenship are assessed and conceptualised – whether it is youth who is not inherently depoliticised by age, culture or new media (Dahlgren; Loader); the blogger who is melancholic online but not necessarily so offline (Keren); or the netizens and technoactivists who are capable and interested in interacting with or scrutinising political authority (Chadwick; Dahlberg & Siapera).

Politics

In this section, I look at how the five selected books pay attention to the "formal" facets of the political context.[5] What claims are made in the books about democracy? More particularly, what is asserted about the work of political representatives and governmental office holders?

In Loader's volume, an important part of the analysis of the formal political context reflects a critique of the communicative *modus operandi* of politicians. In the "citizen displacement" scenario, "it is not young people who have become disaffected with politics but rather that our political representatives appear distant and self-absorbed and unable to empathise with young people's experiences" (p. 2). This scenario and, in particular, the problem of "top-down" political communication are amplified in various contributions in Loader's book (e.g., Davide Calenda & Lorenza Mosca, in Loader, pp. 82-96; Selwyn, in Loader, pp. 129-42; Coleman, in Loader, pp. 166-85). Attention is paid to how political communication and socialisation in the online sphere are related to offline political communication and socialisation. For example, Livingstone et al. (in Loader, pp. 21-34) highlight that young people are less interested in politics than older people, but not because they are less trusting of politicians, and not because they are lower on political efficacy. Rather, the problem is that they are unsusceptible to current "political offerings" (the way politicians communicate their messages), whether online or not. Further, in their study of the 2004 presidential election in the United States, Xenos and Bennett (in Loader, pp. 48-67) suggest that young people were more committed to casting votes than they were in previous elections, but not because of an online "technological fix," that is, the use of websites by political representatives. Rather, the authors argue that it was effective offline political communication (for example, canvassing) that proved capable to address the young voter.

Political communication and socialisation and the problematic communication styles of politicians are also recurring themes in Dahlgren's volume. "Young citizens feel remote from the formal political system; that which is discussed does not seem relevant to them personally. … There is a general sense among many that politics consists of too much unproductive bickering, at times cast in a mode of speech that is difficult to follow" (Dahlgren, p. 5). Various aspects of this problem are related to (learning for) democratic participation and, as such, assessed in a range of contributions. In some of these contributions there is also emphasis on non-communicative attributes of the political context. For example, in regard to political communication, Stephen Coleman (in Dahlgren, pp. 21-40) argues that for political authorities there are important lessons to be learned from the multimedia interactivity that characterises the reality TV series *Big Brother*, since that program proved capable of mobilising popular engagement and participation. On the institutional side, Coleman writes that "too often 'engagement' is discussed and promoted in an uncritically normative fashion, as if to engage is an inherently good thing. Non-participation and disengagement are over-simplistically explained in terms of irresponsibility (the need to conquer 'apathy') and cognitive incapacity (the need to teach 'citizenship')" (in Dahlgren, p. 21). So, Coleman's argument is that citizen "engagement" and "participation" cannot be considered good things as such, but things that are good on conditions. "Democratic power is legitimised," Coleman writes, "through mass participation, but when voluntary engagement

takes the form of collusion with manipulative authority, power ceases to be accountable and the autonomous citizen begins to look more like a slavish subject" (in Dahlgren, p. 21).

Keren has his own way of contextualising the blogging activities he assesses. More directly than the authors mentioned above, he views the attitudes, activities, and abilities of citizens as being subject to the socio-political contexts they live in. Keren gives a rather gloomy summary of the world of citizens, them being susceptible to "a general feeling of helplessness and disenchantment … ; apathy and disgust toward politics … ; widespread resort to escapist and delusional substitutes for problem solving … , greater tolerance for idiosyncratic, extremist, or simply void political rhetoric … , and withdrawal of some to urban and global terrorism" (p. 17). All these "symptoms of melancholy" are, Keren suggests, related to the melancholic features of blogosphere. In so viewing, he seems to contradict his theoretical viewpoint that melancholy is a systemic phenomenon of blogosphere, since Keren does not clarify how that viewpoint is related to the influence of offline socio-political contexts, and because he also makes the point that melancholy is not necessarily an attribute of the citizens behind the blogs (p. 15). Simply put, if it is not the blogger that is melancholic, but only his or her blog, how, then, does the offline environment matter in assessing the melancholy in the blogs? Why is it even relevant to mention? Keren does not explain this. Notwithstanding the analytic confusion that follows, Keren sustains the relationship between environment and blogger not so much with an elaborate political analysis, but rather with some general comments. Referring to the public sphere theory of Habermas (1962), for example, Keren invites the reader to "imagine what the bourgeois actor … went through in the last 200 years – being mobilized by grand ideologies, crushed under the wheels of overwhelming technologies, and subdued by huge bureaucratic structures" (p. 10). Not only are times changing, Keren knows, but also circumstances differ between the countries of the nine bloggers within his scope. Keren is quite right to differentiate between the countries, but the evocations he employs to characterise the various political contexts too often sound like arbitrary clichés: packed in general terms, too romanticised from a "Western" point of view, or too politically contentious to put forward as academic fact. This is most clearly exemplified in the chapters on the "Iranian Girl" and the "Israeli Woman" – not surprisingly, concerning bloggers residing in politically controversial settings. "A free voice is coming out of the totalitarian country," Keren (p. 53) observes in the Iranian blog with a sense for tragedy. And, in regard to the Israeli blogger, Keren (p. 68) thinks that "Imshin is neither a 'peacenik' nor a warmonger. She is observing the violence in the Middle East with a sense of moderation that diverts from the rigid categories adopted by both right and left wingers to the situation." However, it is unclear how Keren sustains such a characterisation with the quotes of Imshin he gives as examples. For example, Imshin wrote on 20th of July 2002 (p. 74): "[The Palestinians] don't want to be fenced in, they say. Well, what the hell DO they want?" Of course, this is not to say that every political analysis is subjective, and should, therefore, be excluded; rather, when reading Keren's chapters, one can but be surprised with the ease with which he flings stereotypical one-liners or subtle insinuations about political contexts – not sustained with his own data, nor with references.

Chadwick's academic inquiry approximates the opposite style of Keren's popular writing. Chadwick's heavily annotated work leaves hardly any statement unsupported with a rich selection of academic references. The greater part of his assessment of the formal political context concerns how office holders and representatives could use websites for communication and democratization purposes. For example, in chapter seven, on "e-campaigning" (pp. 144-76), he reviews a great deal of research on how parties and candidates have used and could use the Internet for self-publicity purposes. In the chapter on "e-government" (pp. 177-204), Chadwick discusses the academic viewpoints on self-publicity through the Internet by office holders, and notes that websites could aid them in knowing what people think. However, the political context as defined here – referring to formal power structures – is not given a central position in analyzing the effects of Internet use on politics. More than these formal power structures, it is the notion of "governance" that Chadwick uses throughout his book to assess Internet politics. "The governance approach in political science, which first emerged in the 1990s, insists that power struggles can no longer be understood by a narrow focus on the core executive and the traditional institutions of central government. … State and nonstate political actors are enmeshed in a multiplicity of different ways and at a variety of different levels … . [Emphasising] the multiplicity of policy levels and arenas and the centrality of networks is especially useful for examining Internet politics and policy" (p. 31). With this backdrop, it is conceivable to say that Chadwick hardly contextualises his assessment via a critical view of the formal aspects of political processes. In fact, his analysis elaborates, however implicitly, on a too idealised notion of democracy. For example, a basic assumption exhaled in Chadwick's section on e-government is that office holders are indeed interested in what people think. That is, of course, a contested assumption, as comes to the fore in the volume of Dahlberg and Siapera.

Dahlberg, Siapera, and their contributors do not openly point fingers at particular politicians, and they do not frame their arguments consequently in analyses of political processes in situated localities. Rather, throughout their book one can find an operationalisation of civil action, aimed at examining, among other things, "the way in which the Internet directly strengthens the voice of alternative, marginalised, or otherwise oppressed groups, by supporting the contestation of dominant discourses and power structures" (p. 12). In doing so, the several contributions in the volume are implicitly involved in impeaching "the already powerful." The powerful must be controlled, held accountable and interrogated (e.g., Joss Hands, in Dahlberg & Siapera, pp. 89-107); they must be attacked on their communication limiting activities (Jordan, in Dahlberg & Siapera, pp. 73-88); and the Internet should serve as a basis for organising civil offline actions against worldwide forms of domination (Dahlgren, in Dahlberg & Siapera, pp. 55-72). All of this would, of course, be unnecessary in a perfect political world; thus, by implication, the acknowledgement that there are or could be undemocratic forces within the formal political world is amplified more strikingly in the book of Dahlberg and Siapera than it is in the other books discussed here (except as concerns Coleman's contributions in Loader's and Dahlgren's volumes). Unfortunately, however, most of the contributions in Dahlberg and Siapera's book do not exemplify their critiques of formal political processes and agents further by adding a range of up-to-date and context-specific data.

In fact, it seems that in none of the books reviewed here it is considered imperative to neatly contextualise participation and citizenship in their exact (formal) political localities. Keren, while paying attention to formal political processes in divergent contexts, continuously makes remarks that are culturally or ideologically superficial. Further, his commentary being of too a general nature, it can hardly be considered a matter of serious contextualisation. Chadwick also provides some contextualised examples of e-democracy, e-governance and e-campaigning, but it remains a pity that in his book a too idealised version of formal politics appears to be accepted as the norm. In assessing the educational or communicative aspects of political citizenship, the case studies in the volumes of Dahlgren and Loader are the most notable exceptions.

Discussion

Having said all this, the question emerges as to how the five books reviewed here contribute to academic debates on the role of the Internet in democratic societies. Also, are there any further research questions the books call attention to? The following three issues arise from the discussion above.

First, the arguments in the five books are, by and large, optimistic about the role of the Internet. As mentioned above, none of the authors of these books fundamentally assess the crucial question of whether Internet participation by citizens is something desirable in the first place. Furthermore, most of the time, the authors assume, implicitly or explicitly, that citizens are actually able and willing to participate. Lastly, the writers provide some critical assessments of the formal political aspects of the notional citizen's environment, but, nonetheless, they do not at any point explore the suggestion that the Internet cannot or should not be considered as a viable option with which to revitalise citizen-based democracy. It is, then, not surprising that all five books refer in particular to two (offshoots of) theoretical constructs that are fundamentally sanguine about citizen participation, as something that is possible, desirable or even necessary: the concept of "social capital" – as influentially theorised and employed by Robert Putnam (1993, 1995, 2000) – and Jürgen Habermas's (1962) "public sphere" notion. Chadwick (pp. 87-90, 103-12) gives an excellent overview of the "resilience" of both concepts in academic literature. In the other four books it is primarily Habermas's notion of the public sphere that is used or mentioned as an idea to accept or adjust (e.g., Dahlberg & Siapera, p. 8-10; Darin Barney, in Dahlberg & Siapera, pp. 37-54; Hands, in Dahlberg & Siapera, pp. 89-107; Keren, pp. 9-10; Loader, pp. 9-11). While presuming optimistic ideas about participation, citizenship and politics, however, most of the authors under-theorise the very basic assumptions about democracy on which these ideas are (implicitly) based. In fact, most authors do not elaborate or only very briefly on the democratic (or constitutional) frameworks that they assume. These frameworks, however, are actually of real importance, because different kinds of democratic models assume different criteria in regard to, for example, who should participate and the sorts of political processes that they should participate in (Ferree et al. 2002).[6] Therefore, as a means of "ongoing reflection" on democracy, in the words of Dahlberg and Siapera, it is useful to explicate the theoretical framework that is employed, to relate that framework to the practical peculiarities of the relevant research context, and to question the implications of theory and practice for citizen participation.

A second, related issue concerns the way notions of participation and citizenship are intertwined. As noted above, the main themes of the reviewed books concern participation, and ideas about citizenship follow primarily by implication. It might be worthwhile, however, to ask what ensues if one uses notions of citizenship, rather than of participation, as a primary point of departure for analysis. In so doing, it might be possible to prevent citizenship from becoming but a function of participation enunciated in terms of democratic ideals. For example, in the volume of Dahlberg and Siapera the various contributors succeed in theorising original ideas about participation by fundamentalist democrats, but, counting heads, how many citizens exist who have the ambition for technoactivism, who are ready to embark on "an ongoing adventure that must restore the creative force belonging to all of us" (p. 16)? If only a few citizens have that aspiration, why is it desirable and how is it possible to increase their number? To give another example, the main accomplishment of Chadwick lies in the thorough nature of his research on Internet politics, and his work is, therefore, highly to be recommended for students of social sciences. However, he pays little attention to the conditions amongst the citizenry. Are citizens interested in e-politics in the first place, and why (not)? So, in further research it is valuable to relate assessments of the willingness and abilities within the citizenry more explicitly to the theoretical or institutional aspects of radical democracy, e-politics or still other topics. What are the overall circumstances and backgrounds of those citizens who have been willing to and capable of participation in e-democracy initiatives or technoactivism? Which of those circumstances can be proven determinants of participation? Why should we expect those determinant circumstances to spread equally among the citizenry? Could inequality in those circumstances lead to a sustaining of the "digital divide" in offline spheres?[7]

The need to assess offline skills and motivations among citizens is signalled in some of the contributions in the volumes of Dahlgren and Loader, which rightfully indicate that thinking about online participation (by young people) should be accompanied by thinking about socialisation and civic education in the offline world. Likewise, Keren's main accomplishment lies in refraining from faithfully assuming notions of citizenship "ideal" for democracy. In his assessment of the intentionality of bloggers, the discursive nature of blogging, and the political implications of blogs, he does not build *a priori* on idealised notions of citizenship and participation. Instead, as Joel Migdal notes on the cover of Keren's book, Keren suggests that blogosphere is characterised by a "fetishism of ideas rather than a presentation of interests, solipsistic discourse rather than an orderly exchange, and a lack of clear frameworks of social obligation and political responsibility." Keren's work – as does Chadwick's book – signifies, however, a third issue appealing to the need to "de-idealise" theoretical frameworks more explicitly: the necessity to incorporate locally contextualised assessments of not only the "extra-parliamentarian" aspects of politics, but also the formal side thereof. Political decisions are, in the end, made by political leaders; if political leaders are corrupted, disengaged from the public or unskilled otherwise, it will, obviously, reflect on the decisions they make. In short, formal politics matters in thinking about the role of the Internet in democratic societies. Here appears the academic legitimacy of Dahlberg and Siapera's volume and Coleman's contributions: it is, indeed, imperative to think of ways to question, contest and criticise the existing political order. In this regard, citizen distrust of or disengagement from political leaders should not be dismissed too

easily or blamed on citizens, but could even be considered desirable when citizens find no legitimate reason to extend trust to or cooperate with politicians. So, there is a need to contextualise assessments of the role of the Internet within a critical and locally specific analysis of the role of formal politics. How is extra-parliamentarian participation related to formal politics? Considering the representative integrity of political systems and agents, which processes of formal politics can be considered feasible to engage citizens with through the Internet or otherwise?

These issues may be considered calls for "realism," that is, to advance research within "de-idealised" frameworks; or they may be seen as challenges to what is generally considered to be an "ideal" narrative about participation, citizens and politics. Evidently, this point has not been totally overlooked in the academic field. For example, some of the books reviewed here already reveal an awareness of the need to consider offline socialisation, to acknowledge undemocratic forces within formal politics, and to reflect critically on democracy in general. However, overseeing the academic field in general and the books reviewed here in particular, it is quite clear that more work needs to be done.

Notes:

1. The terms "civic" and "political" are broadly defined and sometimes they are interchangeably used in some of the books reviewed here.

2. On the cover of Keren's book, there is a classic image of an alien (white head, no hair, flat nose, big forehead, narrow chin, large black eyes, and long fingers) typing at a personal computer in a purplish-coloured environment.

3. Chadwick refers to a definition of the U.K. Hansard Society (2003). In academic literature, there is not one uniform definition of e-democracy, but the term generally refers, indeed, to 'horizontal' and, in particular, 'vertical' linkages. In regard to the vertical linkages, e-democracy refers to, for example, dissemination of online party programs, publication of policy results, consultation of citizens by juries, opinion polls, and online voting (Coleman & Gøtze 2001; also in Chadwick 2006, 99).

4. That is, in academic literature it is not considered radical to advocate kinds of communication that are adjusted to the needs and wants of young people. This is, however, not to say that such arguments have no radical implications for how actual political communication, as it generally exists at present, should be adjusted (see, for example, Coleman, in Dahlgren and Loader).

5. Thus, here it is not my primary aim to question if and how the concept of politics itself has been expanded in the five books, because all authors share the 'alternative' politics view, though Loader and Dahlgren take it most emphatically as a point of departure for their analyses.

6. In academic literature, there are various models of democracy distinguished. Ferree et al. (2002) mention four theoretical traditions. The 'representative liberal' model, the 'participatory liberal' model, the 'discursive' model, and the 'constructionist' model. These models have varying implications for theorizing democracy. For example, the representative liberal model does not involve popular engagement and participation, while the other models do.

7. Some aspects of such questions are addressed in the books of Chadwick (pp. 49-80) and Dahlberg and Siapera (e.g., Dahlberg, in Dahlberg and Siapera, pp. 128-47). Yet, the point is that the issues that arise from such questions are not considered throughout the books reviewed here (see the observations in the previous three sections). This follows naturally from a theoretical point of departure revolving around participation instead of citizenship.

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