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Of windows, triangles and loops: the political economy of the e-democracy discourse

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Abstract

New media offer unprecedented opportunities of political engagement to a wide range of actors. I argue here that the study of this political potential has been framed, since the '70s, as an 'electronic democracy' discourse. The discourse is rhetorical in nature and builds on political, structural and semantic dynamics unfolding in the cultural domain, promoted by left-wing political entrepreneurs in strange alliance with the forces of high-tech capitalism, mainly amongst academic quiescence. Using material from the US, the UK and other countries this article offers three explanations, or theorems, of the coalescence of the discourse. First, a opportunity 'window' theorem interprets the emergence of the discourse as the encounter of demand and offer of radical change and democratisation in the political marketplaces of idea – the city council, the western polity, the supra-national sphere. Second, a 'triangle' theorem takes into account the role of third interested poles – oppositions and the new media industry – in the consolidation of the discourse. Finally, a 'loop' theorem explains the resilience of the e-democracy discourse to critical and scholarly understanding. A critique of the debate concludes the article.

Keywords

Electronic democracy, new media discourse, information society, Internet and politics

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Science must begin with myths, and with the criticism of myths.

Karl Popper, 1957

One cannot understand the place of computer communication technology without taking account of some of the central myths about the rise of global computer communication systems, particularly those identified by Internet, cyberspace, or the so-called Information Highway ... Myths are important both for what they reveal, in this case a genuine desire for community and democracy, and for what they conceal, here the growing concentration of communication power in a handful of transnational media businesses.

Vincent Mosco, 1998

1 Introduction: the information polity and e-democracy

There is widespread agreement that the introduction of new media shapes the way politics is communicated in the polity. Both radio and television changed the way politics was interpreted, through the broadcast diffusion of political information and the amplification of ongoing political debate. While the political importance of radio before and during the second World War has been long recognised (Craig Douglas, 2000), the Kennedy-Nixon televised duel had profound consequences for the practices of production and consumption of political communication, hence for the wider polity (Schudson, 1995: 116-119). Today, new media, most notably the Internet bundle, present new challenges to researchers and policymakers alike. Not only has Internet adoption in industrial democracies almost equalled traditional media uptake, thus engendering familiar debates on content, distribution and ownership of political communication channels (McChesney, Wood, & Foster, 1998). The Internet appears to offer new participatory opportunities directly to citizens, groups and institutions. Internet demographics crossed with participation data show that Internet users actively participate to

political life and vice versa, political participators consistently use the Internet (Bimber, 2003). Citizens and political groups use new media to obtain political information, discuss political issues, vote in binding elections, participate to community life, and to engage in direct political action (Ward, Gibson, & Lusoli, 2003). The global diffusion of new media transcends national and institutional borders, sometimes engendering novel practices of social and political action (Meikle, 2002; McCaughey & Ayers, 2002). More generally, new media prime change in the way politics is organised, discussed and lived: it amplifies ongoing change in the political process (Agre, 2002), creates virtual sounding boards for citizens' voice (Wilhelm, 1999); nurtures cultural pluralism (Papacharissi, 2002). New media therefore reflect and exacerbate the theoretical contradictions that cross the field of politics, interacting with recent trends of socio-political development in advanced industrial democracies towards individualisation and non-traditional forms of engagement, and the ways these are conceptualised (Norris, 2002; Bennett, 2003).

Given the increasing prevalence of online politics and the fecund implications it bears for political theory, the study of online political processes presents serious challenges to political analysts. In a seminal review of two decades of research on ICTs and politics, Bill Dutton noted that 'teledemocracy is a general concept covering a *variety of visions* of how electronic media could be used to facilitate more direct and equitable participation in politics' (Dutton, 1992: 505, italics mine). Since, the expression 'electronic democracy', or e-democracy, has gained momentum to define these broad visions (Hagen, 1997). Political change qua ICTs has seldom been identified as a change in the practice of governance, hence information politics or information polity (Bellamy & Taylor, 1998). Much more frequently, it has been framed as a change of perspective in democratic theory, hence 'electronic democracy'. In fact, since the inception in the 70s of political studies of 'new new media', democratic theory and visions have become the common stepping stone for different explanations of online politics and, circularly, most often its conclusion. The theory and (best) practice of 'electronic democracy' has become the Holy Grail of political science quest on the Internet. The Internet has all the marks of a democratic myth in the making, a 'story about how ever smaller, faster, cheaper,

and better computers and communication technologies help to realize, with little effort, those seemingly impossible dreams of democracy and community with practically no pressure on the natural environment' (Mosco, 1998: 59). Electronic democracy entails an overarching vision of popular empowerment that conceals as much as it discloses the true promises of the technology. The 'information superhighway', Kubicek and Dutton argued (1997), is a metaphor at the time simple and ambiguous. New media help people make sense of the complexity of modern life, reconcile individuality with longing for community and transform the 'messy complexities of history into the pristine gloss of nature' (Mosco, 1998, p. 59). The myth thus meets popular needs and expectations of control on people's own life, power and a longing for community. Furthermore, the myth is 'inoculated' against its own failures – à la Roland Barthes (1972) – by admitting to venal (but not fatal) flaws in the unfolding of the narrative. The myth transcends history, being the product of an incontrovertible rupture with the past – the coming of the Information Age (Mattelart, 2002). The 'end of history', predicted by Francis Fukuyama with the end of ideology (1989), comes along with the end of geography. Finally, Mosco argues, while it is true that the printed press, radio and television all implied a redefinition of space and time, the 'end of history' described above, the Internet is novel in that it implies the 'end of politics' (Mosco, 2004, esp. Ch. 5), or the end of the 'political', as I argued above.

In this article, I propose to explain the prevalence of the e-democracy discourse in three interrelated ways, defined here as a 'window' theorem,¹ a 'triangle' theorem and a 'loop' theorem. The first highlights the historical emergence of the discourse in the political marketplaces of idea – the city council, the western polity, the supra-national sphere; the second retakes into account the role of interested third parties, mainly the new media industry, in the consolidation of the discourse. The third suggests that the resilience of the e-democracy discourse to critical and scholarly understanding relates to heuristic and semantic dynamics.

2 First theorem of electronic democracy: windows

The 'window' theorem concerns specifically the convergence between supply and demand of 'democratic potential' in a specific marketplace of ideas. On the one hand, there are new technological developments, and their vast communicative power. According to scholars of technology, three mighty laws govern Internet evolution, which regulate the impact of new media on information processing, connectivity and data transfer. Moore's law, predicting that computing power doubles every 18 months, has proved remarkably accurate over the last 40 years. According to Metcalfe's law, the value of a network is proportional to the square of the numbers using it. Hence, each new user contributes geometrically the value of the network. Gilder's law predicts a threefold increase in bandwidth every year for the next 25 years. This ensures that more Moore's and Metcalfe's laws, implying a huge increase in the circulation of data on the network, do not strain a limited physical infrastructure (Lovelock & Ure, 2002: 351-352). Increasingly, information stored on a range of different supports – digital, optical, analogue, magnetic – is distributed and communicated primarily through the Internet (Lyman & Varian, 2003). Properly: new media users are at the centre of an unprecedented flow of information, acting as producers rather than consumers of an increasing and increasingly more digitalised knowledge base (Lyman & Varian, 2000). Although the growth of user base follows more traditional laws, as there are Malthusian limits to the numbers who can access the network, audience growth has followed the steep S-shaped path of technology diffusion typical of traditional media, as the Internet has been adopted at least as rapidly as radio and television before (Bimber, 2003). The concurrence of digitalisation, compression and miniaturisation, boosted by impressive growth rates of consumer and NASDAQ markets performance led industry experts to talk about a 'new economic paradigm and the burgeoning of a knowledge society founded on the new technology and mode of production'.² The 'new economy' is based on four macroeconomic pillars: high rates of sustainable growth, low levels of inflation, the prevalence of ecologic sources of growth, and *ceteris paribus* stable employment rates (OECD, 2000). As

extraordinary as it might sound, this implies that the Internet-enabled economy might have prevented the failure of post-war social democracy to implement sustainable re-distributive policies.

Concurrently, many observers have stressed the urgent need for new modes and models of citizens' participation in politics, what is described as a 'democratic deficit'. Decreasing rates of voting turnout, declining confidence in political institutions (Dalton, 1988), decline in voluntary associations' membership (Putnam, 2000) and other worrying symptoms of citizen disengagement from representative politics via parties, pressure groups and trade unions (Katz & Mair, 1994) have turned the attention of the scholars to the causes and to the possible solutions to this civic debacle (Bennett, 1998; Putnam, 2000). The 'crisis of democracy' is not limited by the boundaries of the nation state but affects the health of transnational civil society and institutions (cf. Offe, 1996). Unsurprisingly, one of the culprits is broadcast media, especially television, which helps generate what was described as the 'video malaise' (Norris, 2000). Broadcast media, it is claimed, hindered the articulation of increased political information in late modernity into increased political knowledge and trust, a process Russell Neuman has defined the 'paradox of mass democracy' (1986). The 'power' of the new medium has thus met the rhetorical needs of the 'democratic deficit' from their very inception. Kees Brants has eloquently described the 'distinctive coincidental and interdependence between socio-political developments leading to up what has been dubbed by many 'politics in crisis' and the different generations of ICT' (1996). A dominant discourse has started to unfold that rests on the convergence of a 'paradigmatic shift in society, due to the introduction of the new technologies, and a urgent need for democratic restructuring' (Hague & Loader, 1999). 'Techno-populism', the technological vanguard of anti-partyism 'is designed to address the multiple economic and social changes within capitalist society after the end of the cold war' (Lipow & Seyd, 1995: 297).

Arguably, the techno-political encounter between democratic crisis and the new media saviour has been in the making from a long time. From its very inception, both the media and scientific research have framed the Internet as a hyper-political technology. The founding

myth of the Internet dates back to the cold war, in 1969, when the distributed structure and redundant transmission protocols of Arpanet were designed by the United States military to 'survive a nuclear attack'. The Internet, the discourse goes, would have preserved the transmission of information and the chain of military command-and-control under fatal conditions for linear, traditional Information, Communication, Command and Control systems. While US political leaders bear most of the responsibility for the public expression of the idea, the making of the rhetoric, Edwards argues, is largely the product of cold-war popular discourse (Edwards, 1996). Ronald Reagan rode the (radio) waves to proclaim that 'technology will make it increasingly difficult for the state to control the information its people receive. ... The Goliath of totalitarianism will be brought down by the David of the microchip' (Ronald Reagan, speech at London's Guildhall, 14 June 1989, cited in 2003: 1). That it was economic crisis, industrial and labour market rigidities and a crisis of political legitimacy rather than information technology relapse and loss of political control that lost the USSR the cold war is a secondary detail.

The denial of history is central to understanding myth as depoliticized speech because to deny history is to remove from discussion active human agency, the constraints of social structure, and the real world of politics. According to the myth, the Information Age transcends politics because it makes power available to everyone and in great abundance. The defining characteristics of politics, the struggle over the scarce resource of power, is eliminated. (Mosco, 1998)

Although recent research has corrected this founding myth (Abbate, 1999), the rhetoric of Internet 'democratic decentralisation' has persisted unabated. Later U.S. leaders were no less enthusiastic about the democratic potential of new media. President Clinton was asked about the 'creative destruction of the Internet', whether it was 'about to hit government', and if next decade was 'going to be as revolutionary and creative a period in American politics as was the period between the Declaration of Independence in 1776 and the Constitutional Convention in 1787'. Reportedly:

I strongly agree that the Internet and information technology has the potential to strengthen our democracy and to make government more open, efficient, and user friendly I think that the potential payoffs are enormous, as will only increase as many Americans gain access to the Internet, and as Internet technology becomes more versatile and powerful The Internet of the 21st century will not only be a global electronic marketplace – it may also become the town square. (William J. Clinton, Q&A with Stateline.org, 26 January 2000)³

Vice President Gore was one of the drivers of the U.S. National Information Infrastructure. ‘Gore’s long held conviction that new technology would be critical to securing the USA’s role as a leading nation in the global economy has been consistently augmented by the belief that ICTs also provide the means for enhancing democratic and civic life’ (Bellamy & Taylor, 1998: 65). Gore expressed Reagan’s ‘the microchip is power’ discourse in a more sophisticated, forceful way:

... the [Global Information Infrastructure] GII will be an assemblage of local, national, and regional networks, that are not only like parallel computers but in their most advanced state will in fact be a distributed, parallel computer. In a sense, the GII will be a metaphor for democracy itself. Representative democracy does not work with an all-powerful central government, arrogating all decisions to itself. That is why communism collapsed. (Gore, 1994)

Britons followed suit. In 1995, the Labour party officially set their policies for the Information Age in ‘Communicating Britain’s future’, a white paper on new information technologies. The paper – the British response to the NII and the EU Bangemann report – was overtly optimistic concerning the importance of ICTs for the future of the nation.

The information society can create enormous opportunities for economic, social and democratic regeneration. It can help to make our society more open and accessible. It can empower people in a world where, increasingly, knowledge is a source of power... Labour will ensure that the information society is liberating, not alienating. (Labour Party, 1995: 4, 17)

The priority attributed to ICTs by Labour, second only to the welfare state in 1995, was not hard to explain. In a leader of the Financial Times, Kevin Brown noted that ‘Information fits neatly into the modern political image being crafted by Mr Blair. And it is an area in which Labour can meld its growing enthusiasm for free markets with a clear role for government planning’ (Brown, 1995). Geoff Mulgan, former director of Demos, the Labour Party think-tank, was known as a keen techno-enthusiast. In various speeches and writings he extolled the virtues of new media to radically change the hierarchical political process, promoting a ‘lean democracy’ (e.g. Adonis et al., 1994). The values associated with ‘New Public Management’ characterised Labour’s vision of the Information Age Government, in ways that ‘at the rhetorical level, at least – avoided ‘going back’ to the old ‘public service’ values that had characterised the British state during the last period when Labour had been in office’ (Chadwick & May, 2003: 288). Over the years, government policy has been closely informed by Labour’s policy position regarding communication since the early 90s, focusing on similar themes: information ‘revolution’ and its ‘taming’, and the importance of the ‘people’ (Lusoli, 2006). These visions consolidated later in the creation of the first E-envoy, operating within the Cabinet Office, with the specific (and daunting) task to provide universal access to ICTs to all UK citizens who want it by 2005 (UK Online, 2001). Within the remit of the E-envoy office participation via e-democracy looms large, again framed as ‘power to the people’ (Blair, 2001: Column 1056W). Although ministerial speech is then more cautiously balanced on the democratic potential of new media (Chadwick & May, 2003), ‘empowering technology’ and ‘importance of the people’ can be traced again.

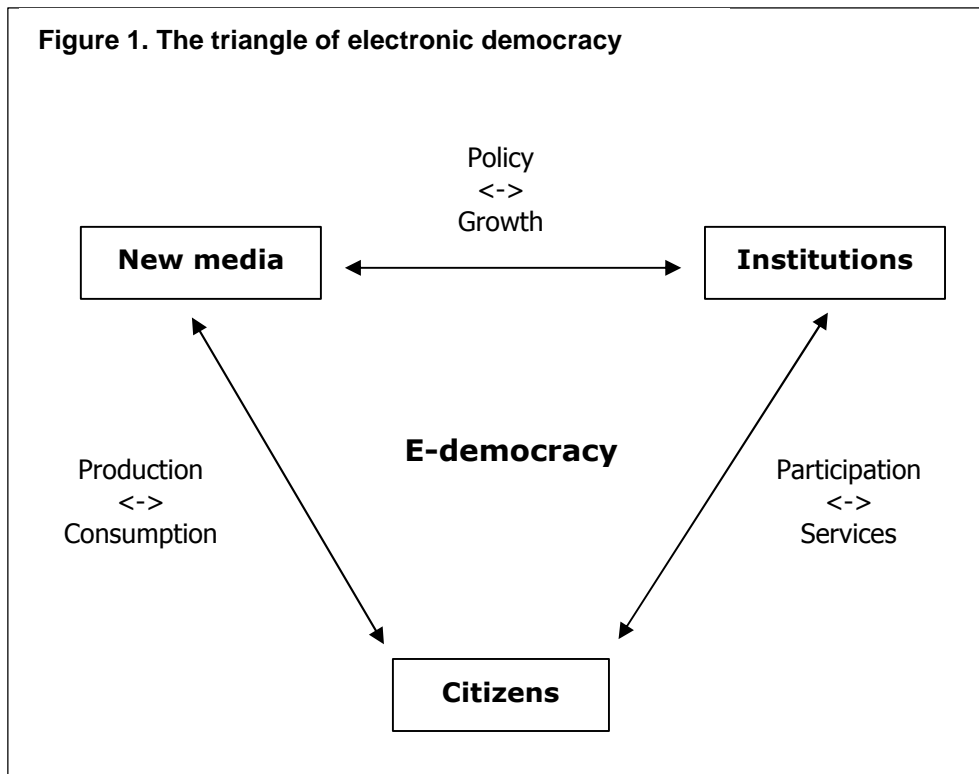
The internet has unleashed huge new opportunities for people to take more control over their lives. And I suspect that will be the biggest driver of political change. E-democracy may come about in quite unexpected ways. (Allan, 2000)

In the Foreword to a consultation paper prepared by the e-envoy on e-democracy, e-voting and e-participation, the Rt. Hon Robin Cook, Leader of the House of Commons declared:

Information and communication technology (ICT) provides a means by which public participation can be increased, and we hope that with an active government policy the potential benefits can be maximised. e-Democracy offers new ways of participating and seeks to complement rather than replace existing structures. The aim must be to give individuals more choice about how they can participate in the political process. (E-envoy, 2002: 5)

These rhetorical dynamics also unfold in more limited political contexts, such as Amsterdam's Die Digitale Stad (*DDS*), Bologna's Iperbole and Santa Monica's PEN community networks (Bryan, Tsagarousianou, & Tambini, 1998). In Amsterdam, the political climate of 'crisis of democracy' in connection with a left-wing administration has favoured experiments in local electronic democracy (Brants et al., 1996; see also van Dijk, 1996). *DDS* was initiated by 'Amsterdam-based people with a media and culture background ... working at the politico-cultural centre 'De Balie' ... in association with members of the Dutch hackers' organization, Hacktic, in order to start a social experiment with new digital media' in the context of 1994 local and national elections (van Lieshout, 2001). The Iperbole civic network in Bologna was designed and inspired by a coalition of the city (then) left-wing political administration and city intellectuals (Guidi, 1998; cf. Tambini in Bryan et al., 1998). Santa Monica's Public Electronic Network (PEN) was initiated by a left-wing joint council-community effort, based on a clear open-access, two-way communication ethic (Docter & Dutton, 1999; Schmitz, Rogers, Phillips, & Paschal, 1995).⁴

In fact, the discourse is pervasive, and touches other advanced industrial democracies such as the Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark, Canada, Italy and Australia. A Council of Europe research report, drawn from a survey of elites in EU countries, extols the 'democratic potential' of the new communication and information services (COE, 2001). A subsequent OECD report, *Citizens as partners*, highlights the importance of new media for information and consultation (OECD, 2001). But the rhetoric extends beyond the select circle of advanced industrial democracies. The democratic implications of the Internet have been discussed in relation with emerging eastern-European democracies in the late 80s (e.g. Kedzie, 1995); with



the democratic transition of Hong Kong in 1997 (Fung, 2002). with the repressive regime in communist China (Kalathil & Boas, 2003). More widely, the impact of ICTs has been assessed in relation to world democratisation and world development (e.g. Norris, 2000, 2001), both of which are sectors in ‘permanent crisis’. According to a World Bank report,

[ICT] is creating economic, social, and political empowerment opportunities for poor people in the developing world ... Connectivity through telephones, radio, television, and the Internet can enable the voices of even the most marginal and excluded citizens to be heard, promoting greater government responsiveness. ICT can thus help to overcome poor people’s powerlessness and voicelessness even while structural inequities exist in the distribution of traditional assets such as education, land, and finance. (Cecchini & Shah, 2002).

These techno-political dynamics, spanning from the local council to advanced industrial polities to less-developed democracies, help construct a shared vision of significant momentum of new media, and their intrinsic socio-political value.

3 Second theorem of electronic democracy: triangles

A second theorem is structural to the broader field of technology and society, but its validity can be extended to online politics as a societal phenomenon *sub specie politica*. By this interpretation, the introduction of a new ICT, its diffusion and adoption are shaped by three forces, corresponding to the main actors involved in the process: technology producers, consumers and the institutional framework of production / consumption (Hoff, 2000; see also van Bastelaer & Lobet-Maris, 1998: 13). As is documented in specific implementations of digital cities (van Bastelaer & Lobet-Maris, 1998), the discursive relations between these actors: political participation, policy regulation and market relations shape the overall discourse about the democratic potential of new media. The construction of electronic democracy is not limited to the 'linear' electoral circuit between leaders and the people but rather entails political institutions at large and the new media industry. Both new media businesses and institutional mediators, governments and oppositions alike, are interested third parties in the e-democracy discourse, truly an 'triangle' of rhetoric that requires citizens' uptake and use of new ICTs for political engagement (see Figure 1, above). Computer and telecommunication corporations, governmental and supra-national regulatory agencies such as ITU, the World Bank and the OECD (Cecchini & Shah, 2002) share in the construction of e-democracy and its discourse (see e.g. Couldry, 2004).

The role of governments is pivotal in channelling new media change. 'By either stalling, unleashing or leading technological innovation [the state] is a decisive factor in the overall process, as it expresses and organizes the social and cultural forces that dominate in a given space and time' (Castells, 2000: 13). However, not only the state drives change, sometimes governments are driven into change by the sheer force of the discourse. Tambini surveyed the interplay of strategies in different contexts that made the civic networking a key trend in the 1990s:

The expansionist plans of government information departments; pressure from new communitarian / civil society think tanks; lobbying by telecommunications providers;

EU initiatives; and the aims of accountability, transparency and efficiency associated with 'New Public Management' in local government (Tambini, 1999: 307).

Especially in the case of the UK, it was argued that the government may currently be hostage to a oligopolystic IT industry, as 'government-IT industry relations have become dangerously unbalanced' (Dunleavy, Margetts, Bastow, & Tinkler, 2004). In turn oligopoly hinders the capacity of the government to steer successful and effective IT operations – including e-government and e-democracy projects. As Goodwin and Spittle remarked, the widespread perception, amplified by media, industry and academic hype that we are entering an 'information revolution' makes it 'politically untenable for governments to be seen to be doing nothing' (Goodwin & Spittle, 2002: 226). Information age rhetoric, it was argued, surrounds this new industrial complex and being formed by it.

It is a powerful rhetoric, suffusing all sectors of society, economy and polity, as it promotes the uptake of technologies ... governments cannot be immune from these issues. Indeed, they increasingly perceive technological innovation to be central to their own 'reinvention'. (Bellamy & Taylor, 1998: 4)

Moreover, opposition parties, on the left as well as on the right, partake to the making of the discourse. I argued above that the e-democracy discourse in the UK and the US is underpinned by 'new left' and 'third way' political rhetoric – as it were a third way 'technological fix' (cf. Street, 1992). However, opposition parties actively partake in the construction of the discourse. On the one hand, bipartisan support descends from dynamics of political contention more than from a genuine evaluation of the democratic potential of new media. Discussing the potential of ICTs to enhance democracy, Arterton and colleagues argued that 'leaders and statesmen seek to reinforce their own power by stimulating citizen participation. In the main, broadened participation has been purportedly promoted in order to accomplish certain desired policies or to secure political power' (Arterton et al. 1984: 29). Technologies in general, in particular ICTs, occupy an increasingly central position of party manifestos in both pre-electoral and electoral times in Britain, the United States and other

OECD countries. Gary Chapman, an acute observer of the connection between technology and politics, quotes from an interview to Ralph Nader, the Green Party candidate for 2000 Presidential elections in the US, to expose this link.

“There are certain technologies that are very important to human beings and the planet that are subordinated in every way to the glamorous and lucrative technologies,” he said. He contrasted solar power with the mania over the Internet and telecommunications. “It would be far better for the world if solar technology were promoted more than telecommunications technology. Which is the most important technology? Solar tech doesn’t get any press, any public support, Clinton and Gore don’t fly to ‘Solar Valley,’ and so on,” he said. (Chapman, 2000)

Although the e-democracy discourse has evolved thematically over time, it has remained a constant feature in the media landscape, regardless of the governing party (Solomon, 2000). On the other hand, the policy window rests on dynamics of bipartisan support for new media as well as confrontation both in Britain (Bellamy & Taylor, 1998: 68-72) and in the U.S. (Smith & Kollock, 1998: 23-24). The reasons of bipartisan agreement on largely deregulated info-tech policy – and the ensuing freedom of action for big players – reduced above to ‘pure’ dynamics of political contention might have deeper roots. Political transformation qua new media, Triebwasser argued, ‘increases the possibilities of freedom in ways which both the left (who would emphasise human expression) and the right (who would focus on easy business entry and the operation of the free market) would appreciate’ (1998: 179). Beth Noveck noted that,

[F]oes of media regulation in the public interest have cropped up in the United States on the Left (in the name of freedom of speech) and on the Right (in the name of privatisation and efficiency), and in Europe, where traditional public broadcasting and its ornate regulatory system have come under increasingly vocal attack. On both Continents, proponents of privatisation argue [for] the end of spectrum scarcity. (Noveck, 1999: 4)

It was argued, very persuasively, that the ‘multimedia superhighway’ is legitimated to a great degree in the policy arena by the rhetoric of expanding democratic participation

(Calabrese & Borchert, 1996: 251). Goodwin and Spittle found that the rhetorical theme of citizen vs./as consumer features prominently in EU discourse on the information society, along with technological determinism, threat/opportunity of ICTs and market dominance (Goodwin & Spittle, 2002). Nonetheless, Robin Mansell's analysis, back in 1993, demonstrated how the rhetoric of expanded participation and universal access does not minimally meet with how public networks are designed, that is to the advantage of corporate actors and large user groups (Mansell, 1993). Ben Barber and colleagues argued that 'the Internet is following the paths of radio and television by moving quickly from rhetoric about democracy and the public good to a practice defined by merchandising and entertainment' (Barber, Mattson, & Peterson, 1997). Unsurprisingly, the more people use the Internet, the more hardware, software and connectivity applications can be marketed (e.g. Oracle, IBM), proprietary hardware and software standards enforced and / or reinforced (e.g. Microsoft), network position profits reaped (e.g. AOL), content sold (e.g. MSN). In fact, public interest, 'participation' rhetoric is fuelled by direct and mediated corporate speech. In the preface of a major survey research on e-democracy, the NTT Data Corporation affirms,

At NTT Data Corp. we believe that the next issues in electronic government are the broadening of channels between citizens and governments in both directions, and the improvement of facilities by which both sides can cross the bridge between them. These facilities will allow citizens to participate in the process of proposing and implementing policies. We believe that the next generation of electronic government will be the social infrastructure through which citizens can form consensus about the nature of the society that we should have, and to formulate plans through which it can be achieved. At NTT Data, we call this type of activity "e-Democracy". (NTT, 2002: 3)

These aims resemble the states aims of IBM's Institute for Electronic Government. The mission of the centre is to 'focus on issues including public policy as it relates to technology strategy and execution, economic development and education, online citizen and business services, and e-democracy'.⁵ Microsoft's Bill Gates wrote a best seller to make the case for the information revolution and its benign social consequences (Gates, Myhrvold, &

Rinearson, 1996). Later, Microsoft funded a 1.4 billion USD project aimed at improving learning opportunities, including the Gates Library Initiative to 'bring computers, Internet access and training to public libraries in low-income communities in the United States and Canada'.⁶ As it happened in the past for the construction of the communication infrastructure, private interests emphasise the social value of new media. Overall, therefore, the 'electronic democracy' agenda is set and pursued by governments, political oppositions and corporate interests, both function of and reflexively functional to the ICTs policy agendas of Western polities and supra-national entities. With governments, 'oppositions and lobbies [are] adopting both the rhetoric and the policy prescriptions which seem to them to be appropriate' (Bellamy & Taylor, 1998: 4).

4 Third theorem of electronic democracy: loops

The e-democracy discourse has been explained so far by reference to the linear rhetoric of opportunity windows and to the interaction of governments, new media players and citizen / consumers, which adds dimensionality and structure to the unfolding of the narrative. A 'loop' theorem, explored in this section, posits that academics may find it hard to escape from the rhetorical loop. On the one hand, the e-democracy discourse is more difficult to challenge than traditional media rhetoric, due to the persistent novelty of new media. As knowledge about new media developments rests with producers, critical counter-discourses are not as vigorous as they should be. 'A considerable difficulty with new media is precisely that they are not there. Researchers cannot research them, users cannot use them and policy makers cannot gauge their significance' (Livingstone, 1999: 61). This is not to claim that the e-democracy rhetoric goes unchallenged. Radical theorists, lawyers, hackers and practitioners of new media expose and challenge both the ideology and the praxis of structure, content and discourse of the Internet (Agre, 1998), the dynamics of proprietary code-production (e.g. the open source movement: GNU, FLOSS) and the uneven distribution of valuable content in cyberspace. These three grounds serve as platforms to assail the dual rhetoric of the Information society and its electronic democracy offspring. Ironically, the critical social

scientist (see Livingstone, 1999), the computer-expert-turned-intellectual (e.g. Schuler, 2001), and the intellectual computer-expert (Agre, 2003) are once again crucial to a proper understanding of new media. New media 'expand the field and capacities of the intellectual as well as the possibilities for public intervention' (Kellner, 1999: 110). In quite the same way, however, they also favour the formation of a new information elite, a class whose ideology and praxis are substantially different from the mainstream information-consumer class, and integral to the new technological system (Luke, 1991). Cyberspace is for the intellectual the equivalent of pre-modern Latin, within which walls they are insulated from the common folk. Integrated learned classes are extra-territorial, in that they inhabit a space that is beyond reach of ordinary people. The Internet brings 'the members of the knowledge classes close to each other' (Bauman, 1999: 124, 130). Finally, semantics makes electronic democracy popular and equally resilient to critical analysis. Electronic democracy is

the one most often used by those dealing with implications of computer technology for the political process ... To some extent, 'digital democracy' would be a more precise term. Other synonyms are also possible: 'Cyberdemocracy' ..., 'Virtual democracy', or 'Information Age democracy' ... However, it is now the term 'electronic' which has become to imply 'the application of interactive technology' itself. (Hagen, 1997)

The two forming words are in fact both intensely connotative and largely denotative terms. *Electronic* denotes every aspect of modern life, as defined in the Oxford English Dictionary⁷ as well as in the common acceptance of the term. Indeed, 'the key development of IT has been the ability to convert different forms of communication into a single medium – an electronic pulse' (Street, 1992: 161). Radio, Play Station and television are just some electronic devices, while digital devices are by definition electronic. Despite this ample denotation, electronic stands in this field as a proxy for a convergence and multiplicity of other concepts, such as multimedia, interactivity, connectivity and in some instances also, improperly, digitalisation. The encompassing 'information superhighway', Kubicek and Dutton argued, is a metaphor at the time simple and ambiguous (1997), as any mythical constructions need be (Mosco, 1998). The same is true for democracy.⁸ Central to

political theory, democracy embeds dense concepts such as institutions, political participation, deliberation, collective decision, popular will and community.⁹ Fulfilling Churchill's prediction, albeit unperfected democratic polities have scored much better than any other form of government, specifically in relation with having a clean sheet as regards famine, not waging war against each other and not perpetrating large scale abuse or violence upon their populations (Warren, 2002: 677). Moreover, from an epistemic perspective, government by the people is at least as good as any other decisional procedure to fulfil people's preferences. Where one assumes a large polity and that every individual is marginally more likely to understand public policy right rather than wrong, then different procedures of the rule by the people – elitist, pluralist and participatory – are equivalent in allocating societal values according to the preferences of the population (List & Goodin, 2001). The democratic *langue* reaches visibly beyond the limits of the *parole*, as authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, with the word, also claim legitimacy and recognition (Sartori, 1965). The resulting concept, electronic democracy, reflects an extremely complex set of issues. Ironically, adding 'electronic' to democracy expands rather than limit its semantic field: democracy is never diminished by electronic means; rather it is expanded, extended, improved. The concept of democracy seems to incur further 'conceptual stretching' by electronic means, yet not as classically predicted by Sartori, its '*denotation [being] extended by obfuscating the connotation*' (1970: 1041). Rather, democracy is stretched and expanded by further specification, its being or becoming electronic, rather than increased generalisation. The question is not easily asked: is the Internet *bad* for democracy? That is to say, the rhetoric of e-democracy also operates at the semantic level. Such a broad semantic extension has reached the status of a self-fulfilling prophecy, or worse of the untestable assumption of a unified, positive rhetorical discourse. Or a myth, according to Roland Barthes's classic definition (Barthes, 1972).

5 Conclusion

In this article, I critiqued the e-democracy discourse by reference to political, structural and semantic explainers. I argued that the study of online politics has identified as a change of perspective in democratic theory (e-democracy) rather than as a change in the practice of governance (the information polity). The e-democracy discourse encapsulates a vision of epochal revolution via new media and the prospect of imminent popular empowerment – local, national and global. The overall narrative is largely rhetorical, and builds on political, structural and epistemic discourses unfolding in the cultural domain. As such, the discourse is more the product of largely collusive dynamics between quasi-public and private interests in constructing the discourse (Howard, 2003) than of any instrumental alliances. The discourse is as old as the Internet, and originated in the United States. A window of opportunity opened, where politics in crisis met with the new media saviour on both sides of the Atlantic, a convergence between a paradigmatic shift in society due to the introduction of the new media and a urgent need for democratic restructuration (Hague & Loader, 1999). Today, the e-democracy discourse is promoted by national and international political entrepreneurs in strange alliance with the ‘dark’ forces of high-tech capitalism, mainly amongst academic quiescence. Nonetheless, the discourse does not hinder the transformative potential of the new technology for politics. Quite the contrary: it transfigures the political, contentious potential of the Internet into a democratic potential tout court. Therefore, the discourse is an impediment to the realisation of the alleged democratic benefits of the Information Revolution, in as much as democracy is best served by increased political equality than by general popular empowerment. What if, as is the case, Internet access and political uses are socially stratified (Gibson, Lusoli, & Ward, 2005)? What if the information polity is colonised by traditional purveyors of political information (Ward et al., 2003)? What if, as it happens, the online sphere is the loudspeaker of a small minority of hyper-activists (Lusoli & Ward, 2005)? What if, in other words, power resides in the Net? Two decades ago, Christopher Arterton and colleagues warned against the strong temptation to ‘phrase the quest

for expanded political participation in broad terms of political crisis in the legitimacy of the American political system ... a more responsible and empirically valid rationale should be staked upon the age-old pursuit of political equality' (Arterton, Lazarus, Griffen, & Andres, 1984: 28; see also Blumler & Coleman, 2001). A decade later, Robin Mansell demonstrated that the rhetoric of expanded participation and universal access did not minimally meet with how public networks were designed, in fact to the advantage of corporate actors and large user groups (Mansell, 1993). Today, it is equally urgent to critique the transformative potential of the Internet and to ask questions directly about the Internet's consequences for citizen participation and political equality. Starting, perhaps, from the uneasy but legitimate question: is the internet *bad* for democracy?

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Endnotes

¹ *Theorem* Sub 1. “A universal or general proposition or statement, not self-evident (thus distinguished from an AXIOM), but demonstrable by argument (in the strict sense, by necessary reasoning); ‘a demonstrable theoretical judgement’ (Abp. Thomson).” OED, second edition, 1989.

² Carlo De Benedetti, Olivetti CEO, lecture given at The London School of Economics on 15 February 2000.

³ Also see the more lengthy remarks of Dick Morris, Clinton's communication adviser, on the democratic power of ICTs (Morris, 2001).

⁴ Also see Loader & Keeble (2003) and Bakardjieva & Feenberg (2002).

⁵ From <http://www.ieg.ibm.com>.

⁶ Bill Gates's biography is found at <http://www.microsoft.com/billgates/default.asp>. To be fair, Bill and Melissa Gates are involved in a range of charitable activities, mostly addressing primary needs in less-developed countries. This, however, does not subtract from the argument proposed above.

⁷ *Electronic* Sub 2. “Of or pertaining to electronics; esp. of something operated by the methods, principles, etc., of electronics.” OED, second edition, 1989.

⁸ This does not want be a comprehensive discussion of democracy, it serves only to illustrate the extension and intension of the concept.

⁹ ‘Democracy’, in Dictionary of the Social Sciences. Craig Calhoun, ed. Oxford University Press 2002.

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