DIGITAL MEDIA, POLITICAL CROWDS AND PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

MR. FREDERICK TUCKER[1]

ABSTRACT

Prior to the 21st century, representative democracy was the most democratic political procedure feasible on a national scale. Limitations to information and communication technologies rendered alternatives governing methods less democratic or unfeasible at the national and global scale. The recent burgeoning of digital information and communication technology has rendered representative democracy relatively undemocratic and labour-intensive. This paper will discuss the benefits and limitations of representative democracy and experimental democratic processes, along with democratic procedures that use sociological polling methods to maximise direct political participation while enhancing the representation of traditionally marginalised social groups that disproportionately lack the time, resources and digital communications networks necessary to meaningfully engage in representative democracy.
Key Words: digital media, participatory democracy, sociological methods

INTRODUCTION

For centuries, people across the globe have imagined, fought to establish, and struggled to maintain more democratic forms of government. Democratic procedures, however, correspond less with the ideals of their founders and more with geographic, demographic, and economic factors, as well as the information and communications technologies (ICT) utilised by these polities. Until the manipulation of radio waves, ICT was tethered to human transport, which along with economic and military considerations resulted in a certain level of geographical determinism in politics, typified by the dynamic between political cores and peripheries (Wallerstein, 1974, p. 401). Radio essentially negated space-time considerations for oral communication on Earth. Its one-to-many nature (Shirky, 2008, p. 86-87), however, made it unsuitable for facilitating global dialog and democracy. Rather, radio mostly intensified pre-existing political dynamics, suiting polities based on even fewer leaders dictating communiqués to millions of constituents.

Until recently, large-scale representative democracy and local, anarchic democracy have competed for hegemony, both equally flawed and irreconcilable. One entails a pyramid of gradually fewer, more distant and powerful individuals theoretically tasked with representing the interests of their constituents, who have no rights to vote on policy themselves, and limited resources to consider debate policy. The flipside of this centralist, representative democracy has typically been to restore power to the periphery, where local decisions can be discussed and voted on by residents or workers, despite the anarchy that arises from lax coordination of a dangerously technologically advanced, global society. Until the advent of digital media, all widespread democratic experiments, such as those described by Erik Olin Wright in *Envisioning Real Utopias* (2010), far from being utopian, were restricted to one of two paradigms: representative or anarchic.

Decades into the digital age, representative and anarchic democracies still prevail, and have begun experimenting with digital media to better facilitate their respective processes. The digital age has also witnessed democratic experiments that push beyond national borders, while

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[1] Mr. Frederick Tucker, Adjunct Lecturer, Borough of Manhattan Community College.

making government more direct and participatory. Europe's pirate parties (Almqvist, 2016, p. 104) and Argentina's Net Party (Mancini, 2015, p. 71) have developed direct, participatory democratic procedures based on digital social networks, around which they seek to build mass-based political parties in their respective nations. These parties are structured around websites that enable users to formulate, discuss, and vote on proposals (Almqvist, 2016, p. 104; Mancini, 2015, p. 71). The Net Party and pirate parties encourage others around the globe to utilise their open-source software to create similar polities (Almqvist, 2016, p. 103-105; Mancini, 2015, p. 71-72), and were recently taken up on this offer by Tunisian activists involved the creation of the nation's new constitution.

This paper will begin by examining the impact that digital media has had on both established and experimental democratic organisations and networks. Consideration will be given to socioeconomic and political factors that inhibit these democratic institutions from achieving their stated goals. Critique of these institutions will ultimately rest on whether digital media is being utilised to maximise direct participation in a manner that is replicable on a global scale, and whether these political procedures challenge or subvert the authority of traditionally empowered social groups. The author will conclude by suggesting how various components of these existing procedures can be reorganised and combined with sociological polling methods to develop a practical, digital, democratic polity that is global in scale, and which helps rectify ongoing social injustices.

THE BENEFITS OF REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY

The prevailing democratic paradigm is so skewed toward representative democracy that republics are regularly referred to simply as "democracies." This is not merely the result of propaganda. In fact, it's the other way around. For hundreds of years, republics were the most democratic form of national governance possible. The benefits of representative democracy are significant. Amartya Sen won the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences in 1998 for his conclusion that "no famine has ever taken place in the history of the world in a functioning democracy" (Sen, 1999, p. 16). India, the world's most populous republic, may rank lower than autocratic North Korea on the Global Hunger Index (Von Grebmer et al., 2015, p. 18 and 31), due to more than a third of Indian children under the age of five experiencing stunted growth due to malnutrition, and partially because 20–40% of its food is wasted (Artiuch and Kornstein, 2012, p. 2). It has nevertheless managed to avoid the 100,000 casualty benchmark for a famine since its independence from Britain. Representative democracy, while far from preventing war altogether, can make it harder for republics to conduct wars that span multiple election cycles. In the United States, former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates complained in his 2014 memoir (p. 325 and 553) of being unable to successfully conduct the Iraq War due to obstruction by Democratic Party politicians pandering to the anti-war sentiments of the American public. The ability of citizens of republics to temper the power of politicians and military figures might explain why China refuses to allow its citizens to vote for game-show contestants (Zhao, 2016, p. 401), lest it lead its citizens down a slippery slope toward demanding political representation.

Perhaps the greatest indicator of the success of representative democracy, however, is its resilience. Of the eighteen major social revolutions examined by Jeff Goodwin (2001, p. 4), as well as the three major social revolutions since the publishing of *No Other Way Out*, including the 2006 Nepali revolution and the 2010–11 Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, none has overthrown a republic.[2] The United States republic, for example, has endured over 200

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[2] This knowledge is based on the author's witnessing of live television broadcasts of the Egyptian Revolution, and conversations with participants in the Nepali Revolution. The author's claim about republics never having been overthrown in major social revolutions is based on his categorisation of the 2011 overthrow of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt as a major social revolution based primarily on a mass, urban insurrection, and the 2013 overthrow of

years despite at one point enslaving 13% of its population (New York Times, 1860), barring women from the vote for most of its existence, establishing the most thorough system of mass incarceration in the world (Hartney, 2006, p. 2), and committing nearly 1000 extra-judicial killings of its own citizens per year since journalists began keeping track in 2015 (Guardian, 2016; Fatal Encounters, 2016). Despite these human rights abuses, the US republic has not only been safe from a major social revolution, but is widely considered by its citizens to be the organisation best equipped to address its own abuses and deliver justice to its victims. Considering the political stability and perceived legitimacy that representative democracy brings to a nation's dominant political and economic organisations, it is no wonder that despots everywhere stage sham elections in which they inevitably receive an overwhelming majority of the vote (Keating, 2012).

The Limits to Representative Democracy
Systematic marginalisation of historically oppressed communities takes many forms. US voter records show that nearly every traditionally empowered group besides men – including white people, rich people, more educated people, and older people – votes disproportionately to its population (File, 2015, p. 4-7). Moneyed interests, however, do more than vote more. In the US, political parties may no longer be able to sway voters with cash and alcohol (Stokes et al., 2013, p. 200), but exert their influence via direct payments to electoral campaigns, which pay for rallies and political advertisements (Huber and Arceneaux, 2007; Spenkuch and Toniatti, 2016). Less well known is the more convincing, albeit more expensive tradition of door-to-door canvassing (Green, Gerber and Nickerson, 2003; Barton, Castillo and Petrie, 2014), which sways voter behaviour in similar ways as direct payments but without actually benefiting the voter's bank account.

The entire representative democracy paradigm, however, was questioned by Martin Gilens and Benjamin I. Page (2014) in what has become known colloquially as their "Princeton oligarchy study." Gilens and Page (2014, p. 568-570) conducted a multivariate regression analysis, with the independent variable being policies enacted by the US republic, and the dependent variables being policy positions taken by national interest groups – including corporations and labour unions – as well as policy positions held by "average citizens" and "economic elites," as determined by public opinion polls. The authors found that mass-based interest groups, such as labour unions and the American Association of Retired Persons, impact public policy significantly, but not nearly as much as business interest groups, which were outpaced by economic elites (Gilens and Page, 2014, p. 570-575). Political positions taken by average US citizens were found to have practically no independent correlation with public policy (Gilens and Page, 2014, p. 571-572).

Another widely accepted feature of representative democracy is the Balkanisation of humanity into various voting districts based primarily on national borders. Residents are further Balkanised into regional, metropolitan, and neighbourhood districts, and cannot vote outside their districts, despite neo-liberal globalisation allowing for the ever-freer flow of commodities. These administrative districts were mostly made when paper, horses, and trains were the dominant ICTs and transportation mechanisms, and votes had to be physical recorded, transported, and counted. In the digital age, however, a New Yorker can more easily complete an electronic absentee ballot from a computer in China than walk down the street to the nearest public school. Requiring people to vote at physical polling sites has gone from a logistical necessity to an impediment.

The interests of presently empowered corporate entities and political parties are clearly opposed to the institution of a digitally administered political system that would allow

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Muhammad Morsi a primarily a military coup. As has been the case in many revolutions, however, both incidents involved both mass urban insurrection and military coups, just in unequal parts.

individuals to vote directly on policy, obviating the need for representatives. This is not to say that powerful political parties are opposed to utilising digital media altogether, as anybody who has ever given their email address to a politician knows. Parties, however, are typically only interested in harnessing digital media to increase voter turnout for their party. Increasing total voter turnout isn't necessarily good or bad to a party, but rather fluctuates by case.

Still, the representative democratic paradigm pervades even the most liberal circles in the United States. Progressive US Americans who advocate for enfranchising undocumented immigrants are often fearful of the idea of including people living in the Middle East in their voting community, despite international polls suggesting that a global vote would not lead to Sharia law (Pew Research Center, 2013) but would have prevented the invasion of Iraq (Pew Research Center, 2012). Allowing New Yorkers to vote on local policies in Chengdu may sound ridiculous to some, but could be justified on the grounds that carbon emissions in Chengdu affect air and water quality worldwide. Global, democratic participation in local law might also help reduce the political power of Wall Street executives who take advantage of administrative Balkanisation to fund industrial projects wherever labour is cheapest (Rawthorn and Ramaswamy, 1997, p. 10), and might even help restore power to the Central American immigrants who currently spend their days serving these Wall Street executives after having lost their land in the aftermath of NAFTA (Greene, 2010). However a global vote on carbon emissions would turn out, the fact that it is feasible could not have been said 1000, 100, or even 20 years ago.

Participatory Democracy: Successes and Failures
Interest in direct, participatory democracy is on the rise throughout the world (Bowler, Donovan and Karp, 2007, p. 351). There are benefits to direct, participatory democracy beyond the main idea that it might lead to policy that actually reflects the interests of the average citizen. Theories, experiments, and polls all suggest that another expected benefit of direct citizen participation is increased acceptance of results that do not go one's way (Morrell, 1999, p. 295, 309-313). This may not seem important to the typical US citizen today, but is especially relevant to citizens of countries where various political parties have their own militia – often funded indirectly by US taxpayers – that threaten to pull out of the democratic process if their position is not voted for.

Mainstream experiments with direct, participatory democracy, however, have not been without controversy. California has long had a binding referendum process that is widely used by Americans (Muncie, 1998) as an example of how untrustworthy the populace is, or how participatory democracy cannot be scaled to the regional, national, and global levels. Some academics (Morrell, 1999, p. 294) claim that the blame lies not with Californians, but with the democratic process for being too infrequent, arguing that democratic cultures require frequent decisions on a variety of issues. Similar criticisms about the flawed nature of Election Day (Hessami, 2016, p. 263, 285) have been levied against Switzerland's referendum system, where evidence shows that increasing the number and complexity of measures being decided on in one session reduces their likelihood of being affirmed. All these studies suggest that democratic processes are hurt by the concept of an Election Day, and that a digitally administered system that allows people to vote – and change their vote – at any point, from the publication of a proposal until its agreed expiration date, would lead to more meaningful participation and less labour. Restricting democracy to participation on an annual Election Day, moreover, does not address the aforementioned deleterious effects of moneyed interests using advertisements and canvassers to get-out-the-vote (GOTV).

One of the most widespread contemporary forms of participatory democracy, practiced in thousands of cities, districts, and universities around the world, is the Participatory Budgeting (PB) process, in which residents attend local town-hall meetings to brainstorm ideas that are turned into budgetary items by volunteers working alongside local politicians, and

which are eventually are voted on by local residents on an Election Day (Baiocchi, 2005, p. 34-39). Such a process was well adapted to conditions in Porto Alegre, Brazil in 1989, but has seen little alteration during the digital age. Despite its widespread practice, PB is not practiced on a national, or even large municipal, scale. As a result, in New York City, PB voter participation is disproportionately high among white people, middle-aged people, more educated people, and economic elites, albeit not as disproportional as participation in local elections (Community Development Project, 2015, p. 7; Tucker, 2014, p. 37-39).[3]

The main logistical impediment to digitising the PB process in NYC, according to members of the PBNYC Steering Committee, is online verification of voters' residency. This is just one example of how conforming to republican administrative districts impedes democratic experimentation. Digital media has suddenly made it easier to allow anybody to vote on anything than it would be to Balkanise people into voting districts, just as centralised libraries were once the most feasible way to ensure widespread access to literature, whereas now more labour and money goes into keeping people out of online databases than would go into allowing open online access.

Having participated in PBNYC, volunteered as a budget delegate, attended Steering Committee meetings, and researched PB as an intern with the Community Development Project, it is the author's opinion that the real resistance to digitisation comes not from the PBNYC Steering Committee, but from the city councilmembers who fund PB and wish to see district residents attending meetings and Election Day festivities so they can conduct meet-and-greets and obtain residents' phone numbers or email addresses for their re-election campaigns. Unfortunately, this convoluted, labour-intensive process only provides critics of direct, participatory democracy with more arguments as to why direct, participatory democracy can never work beyond the local level.

Liquid Democracy: The Pirate and Net Parties

In 2006, digitally administered participatory democracy finally broke onto the national political scene. The pirate parties of Europe and Argentina's Net Party have all built online platforms that allow participants to initiate, discuss, edit, and vote on proposals (Mancini, 2015, p. 71-2; Miegel and Olsson, 2008, p. 212-215). The Net Party's founders, meanwhile, have recently released Democracy OS, an open-source version of their digital platform that allows users to create profiles, propose ideas, comment on each other's ideas, and register votes (Mancini, 2015, p. 71). This platform was used by Tunisian activists to debate and popularise ideas for their new constitution (Mancini, 2015, p. 71). If humanity can manage a digitally administered global banking system, there is no reason to believe that software such as Democracy OS could not be used to institute a direct, global, participatory democracy.

As political organisations, however, the Net Party and pirate parties conform almost completely to the representative democratic paradigm and its GOTV logic by contending popular elections in local, national and international parliaments. The pirate parties have won as much as 9% of the popular vote in Berlin (Almqvist, 2016, p. 102), and temporarily held a seat in the European Parliament via its Swedish chapter. Argentina's Net Party has thus far failed to win a single seat in the municipal government of Buenos Aires (Mancini, 2015, p. 71). The biggest difference between these parties and typical political parties is their promise to uphold the proposals that have been formulated and voted on by their constituents once they achieve power (Mancini, 2015, p. 71).

In a hypothetical global society of more than 7 billion people, where minutia around the globe is decided upon democratically, even the most active citizens would only be able to vote on a fraction of contested policies. One procedural innovation of the Pirate Party that seeks

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[3] The lowest income bracket, <$10,000/year, is also disproportionately represented in PBNYC, which may be due to the fact that many organisations who help administer PB are non-profits that serve low-income communities.

to address this, and which is championed by the Net Party's Pia Mancini (2014, p. 72), is that of Liquid Democracy (Almqvist, 2016, p. 108), whereby voters can delegate their votes on particular matters to other individuals or organisations. While advocates of Liquid Democracy rightly point out that individuals could alienate their votes based on trust (Mancini, 2014, p. 72), they neglect to mention the potential for Liquid Democracy to further amplify the voices and votes of disproportionately powerful individuals and organisations, a criticism that has already been levied at Pirate Party leaders by its own members (Almqvist, 2016, p. 107). As long as global, participatory democracy is conceived of within the capitalist paradigm, it is not hard to imagine the burgeoning of a new form of political party that uses patronage networks and zero-sum, two-party politics to entice allegiance of individuals in exchange for votes. Such behaviour may be impossible to outlaw in a digitally administered, direct democracy, and will likely exist as long as oppression itself. Liquid Democracy, however, institutionalises behaviour that is antithetical to the democratic ethos, as well as to intelligent, collective decision-making.

Power to the Polls: Towards a Theory of Sociologically Representative Democracy
There are, of course, methods of proportionally amplifying the voices of traditionally marginalised communities. Presently, sociologists use weighted adjustments and regression modelling (Gelman, 2007, p. 153) to ensure that survey samples accurately reflect the population. Political scientists, such as Gilens and Page (2014), then use these sociological surveys to judge the merits of our political system. Digital media finally enable us to remove the middlemen (politicians) and institute a political system based on sociological surveying methods.

Since 1994, social scientists in Britain and the US have been organising National Issues Conventions, where hundreds of randomly sampled individuals gather to deliberate political issues, consult and question experts, and read arguments from both sides (Fishkin and Luskin, 2009, p. 3). Surveying participants before and after deliberation, one such session found that participants became less likely to support certain armed conflicts, and were more likely to support democracy promotion and steps toward rectifying climate change (Tirtanadi, 2006, p. 43). Since the initiation of these forums, social scientists have been debating how to institutionalise them, whether it is Bruce Ackerman and James S. Fishkin's Deliberation Day (2004, p. 3), or Adrian Tirtanadi's Deliberative Policy Councils (2006, p. 43).

Meanwhile, for the first time in history, information and communications technologies are able to provide all of humanity with a common platform to deliberate, consult experts, read arguments from both sides, and vote, all without the logistical nightmare of organising common free time, transportation, catering, and ballot filling and counting. Where digital networks currently lack in quality of deliberation compared to National Issues Conventions, they more than make up for in quantity, as they have millions of active users all day, every day.

Insofar as power dynamics between races, classes, genders, nations, etc., continue to lead to underrepresentation of traditionally marginalised groups, statistical weighting methods can be utilised to amplify their votes. In the case of a community being so marginalised that it fails to register a statistically significant sample with which to weight it results, such as the millions of people living in the hills of Nepal who lack access to roads and electricity, GOTV tactics can be used to mobilise pollsters to canvass these communities for votes. A society seeking an educated, unbiased populace might consider allocating resources to send canvassers door-to-door to dispense knowledge, rather leaving it to partisans plugging for a particular proposal.

A digitally administered, statistically weighted democracy would not necessarily rid the world of oppression. As long as money exists, moneyed interests will disproportionately influence the terms of debate. As long as hierarchy exists, the oppressed will be coerced into voting in the interests of their oppressors. As long as anti-democratic institutions exist, they

will continue to lobby for decisions to be taken out of the public realm and rendered unto private hands. And as long as military forces still exist, they will occasionally forcibly dismantle democratic institutions altogether. An egalitarian society, however, is not even possible without direct, political participation in global democratic institutions, which was never feasible until the advent of digital media.

CONCLUSION: WHERE ARE WE NOW?

Nothing exemplifies the current state of direct, digital democracy better than the case of Boaty McBoatface. In 2016, Britain's Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) announced it would hold a non-binding online poll to determine the name of its new boat (Chappell, 2016). The British public, not allowed by its government to vote on life and death matters like war, pensions, and carbon emissions, flippantly voted for the name Boaty McBoatface (ibid). The UK Science Minister Jo Johnson reacted to this spectacle by deepening his paternalism, stressing that a £200 million boat needed a serious name (ibid). Katie Rogers (2016) of the *New York Times* wrote an article entitled "Boaty McBoatface: What you get when you let the Internet decide," which disparaged the British public as capricious, the Internet as untrustworthy, and the name Boaty McBoatface as undignified. As Roger's (2016) title suggests, the NERC eventually moved unilaterally to christen their new boat the RSS Sir David Attenborough.

Direct, global, participatory democracy may now be feasible, but is far from a reality. The world is largely run by an anarchic amalgamation of families, castes, tribes, corporations, labour unions, political parties, military republics, and dictatorships, each with competing claims on territories, commodities, and bodies. Every so often, ordinary people gather *en masse* to demonstrate their anger with the status quo and exert their influence on their governments. Very infrequently, but increasingly often (Goodwin, 2001, p. 4), unarmed, unorganised citizens have succeed in overthrowing their governments altogether, but until recently have had nothing more democratic to institute on a national scale than representative democracy.

The advent of digital media has transformed what is possible. Experiments in direct, participatory democracy are flourishing like never before, especially in neo-liberal countries where governments are eager to alienate core public functions, allowing corporate arbitration to usurp the judiciary (Stipanowich, 2010), ethnic and private militias to their fight wars (Scahill, 2007), think tanks to write legislation (Hertel-Fernandez, 2014), and democratic neighbourhood councils to allocate local budgets. These democratic experiments, however, are pigeonholed into the local level by anarchist activists and patronising politicians, both of whom wish to confine limit the power of neighbourhood groups, albeit for different reasons. Now even larger scale referenda and international political parties have begun utilising digital media, but are rendered politically useless, or even problematic, by their attempts to transform republics from within. National republics, meanwhile, continue to utilise representative democracy insofar as it enables them to survive, but have shown a willingness to shift back and forth between representative democracy and autocracy when threatened. Efforts toward democratisation must never underestimate the state's capacity for violence.

Democracy's proponents, moreover, cannot treat it as a panacea for all social ills. Democracy is merely the fairest way of resolving conflict, and requires people to accept collective decisions and submit to the will of the majority. If the same historical conflicts continue to arise despite democratically conceived solutions, people will resort to politics by other means, including organised violence. Other measures, such as the transformation of privately owned commodities into globally shared infrastructure, must be considered to avoid conflict in the first place. Finally, democracy advocates and activists must keep in mind that various democratic processes implicitly favour different interest groups. If representative democracy, with all its problems, can become nearly synonymous with "democracy"

throughout the globe, another problematic system calling itself "democracy" could easily take its place.

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