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Stephen Coleman and Jay G. Blumler, The Internet and Democratic Citizenship. Theory, Practice and Policy. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009, 220 pp.

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Book reviews

Stephen Coleman and Jay G. Blumler, *The Internet and Democratic Citizenship. Theory, Practice and Policy*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009, 220 pp.

In this volume, Stephen Coleman and Jay Blumler update and develop the proposal they advanced for the first time in *Realising Democracy Online: A Civic Commons in Cyberspace*, originally published in 2001 by the centre-left think tank IPPS (Institute for Public Policies Research) and by the non-profit association Citizens Online which works towards bridging the digital divide. According to the authors, the Internet and new digital technologies can help to revitalise contemporary democracies by making up for their growing deficits. These deficits, analysed in the first three chapters of the book, are the lack of deliberation, the crisis of public communication and the failure of "indirect" representation mechanisms. The following two chapters provide an analysis of the forms of "e-democracy from above" and "e-democracy from below," respectively promoted by political and institutional players and by non-institutional players. The book then goes on to examine the rhetoric that has accompanied public policies in support of e-democracy, providing an overall evaluation of their results. The final chapter argues for the institution of an electronic "civic commons," as an institutional innovation designed to maximise the benefits of e-democracy, while reducing its limitations and risks.

The authors are clear about their views on the Internet and democracy from the outset of the work: by making it easier to channel the growing and diverse demands of citizens, the Internet has the potential to improve relations between the governed and the governing, between the represented and their representatives. In fact, the authors maintain that the impoverishment of political communication cannot be countered from within by mass media systems and structures. An "electronic civic commons" which acts as a new independent mediator between citizens and decision-making processes could, on the other hand, provide an adequate tool. The key to reading the crisis of democracies adopted by the authors is clearly focused on the communication sphere.

Chapter one provides a schematic presentation of the theoretical arguments for and against deliberative democracy in comparison to aggregative democracy. The authors indicate "more deliberative" democracy as the objective to be pursued in order to more realistically approach the regulative ideals of deliberation [p. 26]. The contribution made by the Internet in this sense should be decisive due to a number of opportunities offered by the web: overcoming barriers of time and space, allowing the circulation of a greater volume and variety of information, boosting the inclusion of citizens and co-operation. A "more deliberative" democracy ought to provide wider access to "balanced information," a truly open agenda, sufficient time for consultations, transparent rules of participation, the involvement of citizens representative of the population "affected by or concerned about the issue being considered," free flows of information between citizens and the government or between citizens and other citizens, full acknowledgment of the differences between citizens without discrimination and, a particularly critical requirement, protection against forms of manipulation and coercion [p. 40]. Upon closer

analysis, the requirements of this "more deliberative democracy" do not seem so distant, less ambitious or more approachable than those of the full deliberative democracy model. On the other hand, the authors use an argument that is seemingly intended to rescale the ambitions of the deliberative project in view of its frequent empirical failings.

Chapter two is dedicated to the debate on the crisis of public communication in contemporary democracies, with particular reference to the US and UK contexts. It is well-known that not only are the media increasingly becoming the protagonists of politics, but that alongside this the growing communications supply places politics in competition with other more attractive media "products." Having studied the causes of the crisis of public communication identified in the literature, the authors make reference to some broad-ranging sociocultural and political processes (individualisation, modernisation and secularisation, transformations in relations between parties and electorate). However, no reference is made to the profound economic and productive changes in contemporary society, such as the transformation of work and its political and social effects. In this vast domain of social changes the attention seems limited to the high level of professionalisation of the political functions associated with the growing relevance of communication flows. With regard to the media, the authors review some key aspects of the debate on the subject: the growing "interpretative" side of journalism and the tendency to aggravate the negative aspects of political life. This latter trend leads to a sort of climate of perennial conflict between journalists and politicians. In short, the authors seem to overlook the possibility of the political subjection or complicity of the media and journalists, despite the fact that this possibility actually dominates certain democratic contexts (in the case of Italy, for example). The spread of infotainment and its impact on the formats of political communication, with the tendency to reduce the length of communicative exchanges and the establishment of a "game frame," pushes towards extreme simplification of the content and turns citizens into passive spectators. It is well known that the overall effects of this are the depoliticisation of public discourse, widespread cynicism regarding communications, and therefore the impossibility to fuel deliberative exchanges. In short, the authors take the position according to which media systems and structures fuel the distrust of citizens in institutional politics. This unfavourable scenario for a "more deliberative democracy" is, however, modified by the spread of new electronic media: in fact, we are witnessing a markedly generational migration of citizens's interest from old sources of information to new. The latter are also qualitatively diverse, in that they are characterised by "open" and participatory news production models.

A significant deficit of contemporary democracy, on which the Internet and the new media could intervene effectively, concerns the pervasive sense of "disconnection" between representatives and represented [p. 68]. The authors discuss the problem on the basis of a number of surveys carried out in the UK and USA in the early 2000s, which revealed that the citizens who make most contact with their elected representatives are also those who feel most connected with their representatives [p. 73]. However, this "correlation" identified by the authors risks being a circular relationship and therefore doing little to explain the problem of relations between citizens and politicians. Further investigation using qualitative research techniques would reveal that citizens are more dissatisfied with their relationship with politicians than with their decisions [pp. 77-78]. However, the doubt remains that the way in which this study and the survey were struc-

tured was at least in part conditioned by the problematic focus of the research (the feeling of connection with representatives). In effect, the proposed analysis tends to reduce the complex problem of representation in contemporary democracies to the problem of direct "connection" between citizens and their elected representatives, partly reflecting an aspect of the Anglo-Saxon political culture and partly overshadowing the more conflictual side of political relations.

The authors therefore put forward the idea of a "third way" to representation, midway between representative liberal democracy and direct democracy, which could be realised by combining indirect representation with a form of direct representation. This last form of representation would be made possible by the new context created by electronic communications, particularly the development of the blogosphere, thanks to the increased opportunity for co-presence, network co-operation and equal dialogue. The authors focus particularly on the importance of "self-disclosure" opportunities for individuals, that is to say the possibility of having access to a more genuine space for communication.

The following chapter features two short case studies of "e-democracy from above" from the late 1990s to the early 2000s: the online consultations of the UK Parliament on two very different issues (violence against women and the draft Communications Bill) and Bristol Council's Community Campaign Creator. The authors highlight the strong points and limitations of these experiences and conclude by making reference to more extensive literature which points out the ambiguities of this type of initiative "from above" as a form of domestication of citizen participation, therefore encouraging the spread of anti-political sentiment rather than combatting it. As regards "e-democracy from below," the case studies presented concern experiences from the early 2000s: the BBC's iCan experiment, which went on to become the BBC Action Network, Netmums and the Stop The War Coalition. As regards this aspect, the main limits identified are the "disconnection" from institutional politics; the extemporary and elitist character; the "destructive and nihilistic" tendency which manifests itself in certain forms of culture jamming and hacktivism [p. 137]. Overall, this empirical section of the volume does not seem particularly innovative, perhaps in part because of the selected case studies.

The focus then turns to the rhetoric that accompanies public policies for e-democracy, with particular reference to the UK. Here, the authors touch on an important and noteworthy aspect of the entire question discussed in the book. Institutional rhetoric appears to focus on a limited and technocratic vision of the relationship between technology and participation. Instead of intervening in the deep-rooted social causes of declining citizen participation in institutional life, the institutional discourse sees technology as the solution, particularly new electronic media. During an initial phase in particular, there does not seem to be any room for concern about the decline in other forms of participation, "in trade unions, protest groups or street demonstrations," nor are growing social inequality or the characteristics of the political offer mentioned as problematic elements for democratic citizenship. "It is as if political disengagement is an inexplicable malaise, a natural illness calling for remedial technologies of treatment" [p. 145]. Another important theme of government rhetoric is listening to citizens, predominantly as an opportunity for activating new information flows rather than an opportunity for dialogue and discussion. A third recurring topic is the importance of civic participation on a local

level, often linked to the reorganisation of public services and welfare. As a whole, the authors believe the results of these public policies to be modest, in keeping with critical literature, which has grown over recent years. Although the empirical elements offered by the book in support of this negative evaluation appear to be rather unsystematic, it is difficult to doubt Coleman's thorough knowledge of the sector, as he is one of the main e-democracy experts and consultants on an international level. The greatest risk posed by institutional initiatives is indicated to be their strong power to set agendas, which also conditions the creation of a public of participants of reference. The authors also stress the need for a more accurate assessment method and mark out its main characteristics very schematically, given that the debate and research regarding the critical evaluation of institutional experiences is, at the end of the 2000s, far more developed than it appears in this book. In agreement with other earlier studies, the authors conclude that, in terms of contribution towards revitalising democracy, the experiences produced in the UK by non-institutional actors have proved to be more convincing.. Amongst these last experiences, mention is made of those carried out by innovative enterprises in the Internet sector, as in the case of Mysociety or TheyWorkForYou, rather than of those emerging from the oppositional public sphere.

Coleman and Blumler therefore come to the renewal of their original proposal of 2001 for the creation of a "civic commons" understood as "common ground," which is accessible and reliable on the one hand, and an intermediate space on the other, a "space between" state and market "neither incorporated within existing constellations of power nor detached from them" [p. 164]. The authors entrust the creation of this opportunity to the decisive role of political and institutional actors. In practical terms it would involve the promotion of an agency funded by public resources, but independent from the government. This agency would ensure connection between citizens and institutional political processes. Its main tasks would be to provide a "balanced" information base, to promote discussion amongst citizens both during the preparatory phase and the implementation and evaluation phase of the legislative provisions, and to offer a common ground for the countless institutional and citizens' initiatives. The agency would also have to provide training, discussion moderation and assessment services, and to promote initiatives in order to ensure the greatest possible involvement of citizens, whether they be experts, people directly affected by the matters in question or citizens with no authority who are therefore frequently left out. Lastly, a crucial accompanying measure is the constitution of an accountable body, which answers to the public. According to the authors, these functions could be performed by a branch of the BBC or the CPB in the US.

In the Web 2.0 era the original proposal for a civic commons set out thus has been updated in favour of a more distributed model, both within the government structure (co-governance) and within the content production dynamic (co-production). The objective is no longer to unify the public sphere online, but rather to interconnect the multiple communication spheres on the web: "The role of the civic commons would be to connect diverse social networks" [p. 179], even on a transnational basis. The expansion of the commons would increase the importance of linguistic and visualisation technologies for displaying data and analysing conversations (semantic web), and skill in moderating discussions. In reality, elements of the technocratic and deterministic structure criticised by the authors seem to re-emerge in the description of the proposal. One

example is the emphasis on the "inescapable logic of networked organisation" [p. 179], which seems to lead to an underestimation of the stratification and power dynamics that consolidate within network structures over time. Lastly, Coleman and Blumler discuss the conditions underlying the realisation of the civic commons: the desire of citizens to participate in the new arenas, the desire of governments to learn from public deliberation, the sustainability of the new infrastructure over time. The second condition is indicated as a prerequisite of the first: in fact, the authors maintain that the participation of citizens is almost never a problem of technological platforms, but instead depends on how citizens perceive the government's intention and capacity to "learn" from the consultation and therefore to modify its decisions. It is certainly easy to agree with this point, but the authors do not tackle the question of how this vicious circle can be broken. The possibility of a productive conflictual debate between citizens, such as those involved in protest movements for example, and institutional actors seems to have been left out. Instead, the authors conclude that "some government actors will do their best to ignore, work around or manipulate the civic commons so that they retain control on policy agenda; and some citizens groups will prefer to protest and demonstrate without feeling compromised by any associations with government. The civic commons will not replace politics as usual, but augment and integrate its democratic elements" [p. 195]. In short, the concept of politics appears to be firmly anchored to the institutional sphere, even in the Web 2.0 era.

As a whole, the volume offers a range of empirical materials on the one hand, many of which are already known to the public but not featured as part of a broader picture, while on the other it seeks to update the proposal put forward almost a decade earlier, without being fully convincing. Furthermore, the statement about the need to rescale the deterministic role of technology in favour of revitalising democracy is certainly easy to agree with, albeit not new. However, we would expect a development as a result of this declaration, such as greater attention being paid to the problem of social policies in the information society, to the digital divide, to the regulation of rights and freedoms online (Internet Bill of Rights), and to the profound cultural transformation and the very forms of politics that online communication seems to have brought to collective action. Nevertheless, this ambitious volume leaves these issues undervalued, as if the neoliberal transformation, whose social consequences moreover are seen as indisputable facts, had nothing to do with the deficits in contemporary democracy, the new forms of social movements and the very vulnerability of Internet politics from a democratic point of view. To conclude, the political and social dimension of the transformation under analysis seems to have been forced right down to the level of political and institutional communication and/or learning, on a symbolic and cognitive level, while the conflictual nature of democratic politics is completely marginal. In this sense, the book exemplifies a very widespread view on the political impact of the Internet and public deliberation in the 2000s, with which, however, there is a growing degree of dissatisfaction.

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