

Democracy in the Age of Information:

A Reconception of the Public Sphere

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With the proliferation of electronic technologies in the latter part of the twentieth century, many aspects of cultural practice have been redefined in ways which information in a matter of seconds.

This eradication of physical boundaries which limit discourse and information access, can have profound effects upon the manner in which we conduct democracy. Yet opinions strongly differ over whether or not the growth of electronic networks will result in expanded democracy. On one side of the debate are anti-utopians who fear that with the intrusion of the Internet into many facets of life, personal freedom will be impeded and the existing rift between the "haves" and "have-nots" in society will grow.

On the other side, many 'cyberutopians' believe that new technologies can eliminate the institutional form of democracy with which so people are dissatisfied. The Internet, they say, will allow for a true "participatory democracy" in which citizens can govern themselves without the interference of bureaucrats and legislators.

Neither of these theories by themselves, I contend, can fully address the role of democracy in the age of information. As debates about censorship and encryption have shown, government regulation of the Internet can result in violations of the basic rights of speech set forth in the Constitution. Yet groups which preach 'Big Brother' theories of paranoia tend to neglect the fact that new technologies can serve as tools for usurping the traditional power found in central government. At the same time, however, the likelihood of doing away with this institution in favor of complete and pure self-governance seems impossible, if not wholly undesirable.

Yet both of these arguments about the future of the way in which discourse will occur highlight the inherent relationship between communication and democracy. Perhaps a more useful model for the study of this dynamic can be found in the model of the "[public sphere](#)" proposed by Jurgen Habermas. In this realm, free and diverse equals come together to deliberate and discuss pertinent issues without the impediment of external coercion. The ensuing dialogue transpires in a profoundly democratic forum.

The dispensal of traditional hierarchies which occurs on the Internet appears to make possible the type of categories necessary for Habermas' '[ideal speech situation](#)' to occur.

But postmodern critics indicate that the autonomous individual which Habermas presupposes no longer exists in a world where our identities are constructed as much for us as by us. And indeed, much of the postmodern notion of self seems to fit closely with reconfigurations of the subject brought on by electronic technologies.

The questions then arise: what type of democracy can come out of the Internet? Does the notion of the public sphere have any relevance to our current communicative and political situation? And finally, how might the reconfiguration of communication enabled by the Internet work to create a new form of 'cyberdemocracy' which better represents citizens' interests?

Note: Because this essay is written in hypertext, there is no proper way to read it. However, I have divided the essay into roughly three sections:

- 1) [Habermas' public sphere](#)
- 2) [the democratizing capabilities of electronic networks](#)
- 3) [the limitations of electronic networks](#)

For a fairly traditional, linear reading experience, you may wish to go to the beginning of the sections and follow the arrows at the bottom of the pages. But links between sections and to outside sites provide an alternative (and I would suggest, more fulfilling) method for exploring the text.

During the process of composing this homepage, I realized that the relationship between democracy and technology is still in its infant stages.

Most arguments which posit future conditions and dynamics lead to more questions than answers. Do not be discouraged then if you leave this essay without having drawn one unifying set of conclusions.

I have, however, included an analysis of the World Wide Web site, [President '96](#), a political simulation which raises a variety of issues addressed in other parts of this essay, in the hopes of providing a concrete model for some of the concepts which I broach.

Finally, a friend once told me that a good homepage never allows the reader to come to a halt. I have therefore included a listing of [additional places](#) on the Internet that address the democratizing potential of the Internet.

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This page was made for Randy Bass' graduate seminar:
[The Electronic Kool-Aid Acid Text, or, Text, Knowledge, and Pedagogy in the Electronic Age,](#)
Spring 1996.