

2009

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Abrar Haider

School of Computer and Information Science, University of South Australia, abrarhaiders@gmail.com

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Recommended Citation

Haider, Abrar, "Continuance usage intention in microblogging services: The case of twitter" (2009). *ECIS 2009 Proceedings*. 28.
<http://aisel.aisnet.org/ecis2009/28>

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CONTRIBUTION OF INTERNET TO A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY

Abrar Haider, School of Computer and Information Science, University of South Australia,
Mawson Lakes Campus, SA 5095, Australia, abrar.haider@unisa.edu.au

Abstract

Equitable information access and freedom of expression are viewed as essential aspects of a truly democratic society, whereby all citizens are kept informed and enlightened. A natural extension of this ideal is the human need and desire to communicate and exchange information with others. With the advent of the internet, and extraordinary growth in information and communication technologies in recent years, more information than ever before is made freely available and easily shared. Information is now available in a plethora of digital formats and can be exchanged across time zones, countries and groups in seconds, and this makes communicating and connecting easier and more efficient. This paper discusses the role of free flow of information through internet in shaping democratic values. This paper discusses the role of internet as a democratic tool that allows significant benefits for society at large in a dynamic global environment. It concludes that internet's contribution to democracy has not fully matured and its potential to revitalize democracy and outweigh potential for oppression and control is a dynamic and multifaceted issue in the global environment. Internet, however, has a passive rather than active role in a democratic society. It, thus, influences only those who interact with it.

Keywords: Internet, democracy, information, democratic society.

1 INTRODUCTION

The contribution of the internet to a democratic society is a complex question, as the terms are quite subjective. The term 'democratic society' is difficult to define. The definition of democracy is not the purpose of this paper, however the concept needs to be explored to determine the level of influence that the internet has had. Additionally, in a world of increasing 'globalisation', the term 'democratic society' can mean a global society as well as being defined by geo-political borders. The internet has the potential to be a very powerful tool in the evolution of the democratic society, especially in regard to the accessibility of information; however it also has the potential to undermine the very fundamental concepts of what a democratic society is all about. This paper discusses the role of internet in a democracy, and highlights the power of internet as an information enabler. It starts with a discussion of democracy and the role of information in a democratic society. This is followed by a discussion on the influence of internet on democracy and vice versa. The paper concludes with drawing some conclusions from real world.

2 DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY

The term 'democracy' has its origins in Greece, meaning "people rule", but the concept of democracy and what constitutes a democratic society is a rather personal view. A purist would determine that true democracy would mean equality, that all people would have a voice and participate in the governing of a society. Held (2006, p1) describes democracy as "having some form of political equality". The author continues to argue that "most recent definitions refer to democracy in terms of a liberal democracy, where the term can only be applied to 'governmental affairs' as opposed to economic and social spheres, and that the concept of democracy belongs to the nation state" (Held 2006, p311). Tuzzi *et al.* (2007, p.31) view democracy as a political concept, concerning the collectively binding decisions about the rules and policies of a group, association or society. Such decision-making can be said to be democratic to the extent that it is subject to the controlling influence of all members of the collectivity (eg. Citizens) considered as equals. The starting point of democracy thus, is effectively 'popular control' and 'political equality.' Tuzzi *et al.* (2007, p. 36-37) take it further by suggesting several 'evaluation' aspects that define democracy,

- a. Rule of law, that the decisional output and implementation of the law are supreme, with independent judiciary and fair resolution of lawsuits required;
- b. Accountability, that the elected political leaders are obligated to answer for their political decisions when queried by citizens, opponents or constitutional bodies; this implies an informed public that actively participates in the political process;
- c. Respect for rights and achievement for freedoms, that implementation of social, political and economic equality is progressive; and
- d. Responsiveness:, that those that are governed are able to be satisfied that their demands are met through policies, services and distribution; also requires an informed and engaged public/society.

The concept of representative democracy, such as that in Australia, relies on the view that informed citizens make informed decisions to determine those people who are elected to make decisions on their behalf. The role of the internet in assisting with this concept is to provide access to information to inform citizens to make those informed decisions. With the advances in technology, where information can be transmitted quickly, the notion of global democracy has been envisioned. This is supported by eCommerce, where multinational corporations and mass media have helped to provide a

view of a global society. Klein (2001) suggests there are four preconditions of a democracy, whether the democratic society is a global one or determined by the nations. These preconditions are:

- a. Membership – who is allowed to vote?
- b. Communication capability - a common language, the ability to transmit and receive information
- c. A system of interest aggregation - such as political parties and lobby groups
- d. A democratic culture - where people have faith in the 'system', that although their view may not have won out, they accept the decision as part of the democratic process

Scholars argue about the role of these preconditions in a global democracy, and suggest that democracy can only remain in the nation state (Held, 2006). Klein (2001) argues that scholars may underestimate the impact of the internet. He implies that the internet reduces many barriers to global democracy. The internet can certainly increase the communication capability, can facilitate the voting of the Membership and possibly aid in promoting interest, but the internet is not able to change or impart a 'democratic culture'. This feature of Klein's (2001) democratic society is essential for a democracy, as people need to have faith that the 'system' works. If one loses faith in the system, and there is a collective loss of faith, it results in an instable government. This view is supported by Zinnbauer (2001) who suggests that whilst the "internet can act as an independent stimulant for political engagement" it is unlikely to "install a deliberative democratic culture amongst users". Samoriski (2002, pp.42-45) believes that the internet has several implications for the public, communities and government bodies. Firstly, because democracy can be harmed by the concentration of power toward economic interests, communications channels (such as the internet) can be tools through which citizens can discover shared interests and 'demand a more representative government'. Secondly, due to the information that is available on it and accessibility improvements, more citizens should be able to stay informed and thus make higher-quality decisions for democratic self-government (or when choosing representatives). Thirdly, anyone is allowed to have a voice and even antagonistic ideas can be disseminated; and fourthly, due to the internet's anonymity factor, people are more likely to speak their mind and protest about injustices without fear of retaliation or prejudice.

3 ACCESS TO INFORMATION – A FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLE

The fundamental principles of democracy are freedom and equality. For citizens to be active participants in a democracy, they need to be able to make informed decisions that impact on society. This requires people to have the freedom to access information and to have freedom of expression (Hamilton & Ole Pors, 2003). Habermas (1989, cited in Hamilton & Ole Pors, 2003 p 411) suggests that with greater access to information comes greater participation in democratic process. Therefore, the internet as a tool for the access and transfer of information, must certainly contribute to a democratic society, if the information itself is released on the internet.

In Australia we have the Freedom of Information (FOI) legislation, a legally enforceable right to access public information. Whilst it varies from state to state, and federally, in South Australia it aims to promote the transparency of the government. In Queensland there has recently been a review into the FOI legislation where recommendations have been for a more proactive approach to releasing of information, and to change the culture from one of secrecy, to one of openness (Field, 2008). The release of the Queensland review has obviously revealed that there are significant improvements that can be made to their FOI legislation, and the role of the internet in accessing that information will be taken into account.

The proliferation of the internet could be compared to the rise in publications in eighteenth century Europe. Travelling libraries originated in England around 1740 (Chambers *et. al.*, 1995), which opened up a range of reading material to the masses. Whilst these travelling libraries contributed to the spread of information and ideas, there were limitations. Many people in rural Europe were illiterate, which parallels the lack of eLiteracy in developing nations and even in Australia. However, where the revolutionaries and intellectuals in Europe used pictures and the spoken word to 'drum up support' and spread ideas, people still need a reasonable level of eLiteracy to access the pictures or the spoken word on the internet.

To overcome the levels of eLiteracy and other socio-economic reasons for lack of access to the internet, the Public Library has extended its historical role, to provide access to the information using the internet. As Byrne (2003) suggests "the aim of the Public Library was to offer information to all, no matter what your social or economic status, it is "an institution to educate for democratic living". Libraries are however public institutions and subject to public funding, which means there is the potential for information to be 'controlled' by governments by being tied to funding. In addition, Libraries are have the restrictions of budgets which in turn can restrict the amount of information a library can purchase. The internet is a relatively inexpensive 'virtual library', still with restrictions (that will be discussed later), but a wealth of information nonetheless. It is up to Librarians to help people to find the information they require – to turn information into knowledge. When it comes to accessing information, Libraries are paramount and as Byrne (2003) says, "a healthy library supports a healthy democracy, and a healthy democracy supports a healthy library".

4 BARRIERS TO INFORMATION

Byrne (2003) believes that the internet has "reinforced the democracy paradigm" as there is universal access to information. The statement should be changed to there is the potential for universal access to information. There are a number of barriers to information on the internet. Some of these barriers are being overcome by adding more information to the internet (such as scanning older documents); other barriers will not be so easy to overcome. In fact some barriers are being constructed.

As mentioned previously, two important facets of a democracy are freedom of expression and freedom of access to information however as Hamilton and Ole Pors (2003) discuss, these come with limitations, which vary from country to country, and these limitations have increased since September 11, 2001. Unfortunately, as in society, there are 'undesirable' groups in cyber space. Where the internet has the potential for rallying or uniting people with common interests, to participate in the democratic process, so too can the internet be used to unite people of questionable morals. The internet provides a perceived "safe space" for some people to gather together to perpetuate their warped viewpoints, such as Holocaust deniers, paedophiles and terrorists (Joint, 2005). The limitation to freedom of access to information is a contentious issue. Where does protection become censorship? Some scholars (Nijboer, 2004) argue that greater regulation of the internet is not necessary, this is despite the substantial increase in reports of internet violations (hackers, virus' etc) since 2000 (CERT, 2004 cited in Nijboer, 2004). Concepts such as anonymity on the internet, another core feature of freedom of expression, are no longer preserved in many countries. In Italy, journalists have to register to publish work on the internet, and the Patriot Act in the United States of America, allows for the monitoring of individuals' internet usage (Nijboer, 2004). These barriers are continuing to be built, obviously having an impact on democracy.

With the improvements in technology, there are also more sophisticated forms of crime and terrorism. With the culture of fear that seems apparent since September 11, does it create a more insular society? Eriksson (1999) outlines the “Network Revolution” and describes a shift in the method of warfare from Radio, mechanised forces and weapons of mass destruction to cyber weapons, precision munitions and high performance special operations. He goes on to write that infrastructure is no longer the vulnerable target, but knowledge and information assets are. As information is more of a commodity, therefore it is harder to acquire, which conflicts with the fundamentals of democracy. Therefore the internet, in this case, has become a barrier to a democratic society.

Censorship and monitoring of Information on the internet is not only conducted by the Government, many major websites are still controlled by rich multinationals or media moguls. In particular, the major ‘traditional’ media has a presence in cyber space, whether it is the electronic versions of a newspaper, a website of their television station or a presence that is not so obvious. In addition to these major websites there is the associated advertising of products or sites. With advertising, people are drawn to specific websites, and when people are drawn to specific websites, there is an element of control. McChesney (cited in Skinner *et al.* 2005) believes that the way the media is controlled, funded and structured should be part of democratic debate. He argues that the mass media undermines democracy. He also argues that the policies in the USA do not support democratic principles, but instead make it easier for mass media corporations to strike deals and alliances, thus controlling, to a certain extent, the information we, as consumers, receive. Major search engines also support this structure of corporate control where major companies can pay for priority retrieval, so their website is listed first (Novek, 2000). This view is contradicted by Castells (1998, cited in Kellerman, 2000) who suggests that whilst many cultural battles (the battle of the power to impose behaviour) are fought in the media, the media are not the power holders. He argues that the power lies in the networks of information exchange and the use of symbols to relate cultural movements through icons. This view seems to be a little old and does not take into account the level of sophistication of the mass popular media and their ability to combine radio, television and the internet to reinforce their views of the world.

Other barriers to the internet include the socio-economic inequities (Zinnbauer, 2001). Geldof (2005) discusses the difficulties of using ICT’s in developing countries, such as African nations. Politically, the nation needs to be stable, with a clear ICT policy, where the use of ICT’s is linked to the reduction in poverty. There are many politically unstable countries in Africa so if Geldof’s view is correct then many African nations will not have access to the internet for many years. Scholars (Eriksson, 1999) recognise that some Governments/Leaders identify the internet as a threat to their regime, and therefore resist the influence of the internet. Additionally, in many of these developing countries, there needs to be a focus on developing the infrastructure to utilise the internet and provide access for the people. Access is not enough, there needs to be education to develop the skills so people can use the internet. Things we in the West take for granted such as basic literacy. After all it is informed citizens, making informed decisions that are at the cornerstone of a democratic society.

5 OTHER USES OF THE INTERNET IN A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY

It can be argued that the internet’s biggest contribution to a democratic society is the acquisition of information. There are also other applications that the internet has been used for. Some countries have tried to adapt the internet to the political sphere. In Germany, the parliament has a website where different issues are discussed, facilitated by politicians and in Denmark there were online public

debates in 1999 (Ferdinand, 2000). The internet has made it quicker and easier to contact elected representatives. Once politicians were contactable by 'snail mail', now they have email, blogs and participate in online forums. Some politicians have their own website, and at the last Federal election in Australia, Kevin Rudd (current prime minister of Australia) had his own Facebook page. Hansard (traditional name for the printed transcripts of parliamentary debates in the Westminster system of government) is also available online and through 'youtube', you can watch policy speeches on demand. As a communication tool, rather than a research tool, the internet has the potential to revolutionise the way we communicate with politicians.

Another aspect of the internet's contribution to democratic society is the ease in which people can start their own businesses. As one of the features of a democracy is equality, the internet makes it more affordable to start a business. This 'economic democracy' has provided many people with the option of beginning their own business, without having to incur the costs associated with leasing a shopfront. Artists, in particular musicians, have found the internet to be a 'double edged sword'. Some musicians have used their democratic right to free speech and enjoyed the benefit of an economic democracy to launch their careers on the internet. The internet has made information easy to access, easy to download, copy and manipulate (Oddie, 1999). This concept is open to abuse, with many illegal downloading sites or file sharing sites (Napster used to be one, Lime wire is another). Like any right, there is a responsibility, and the responsibility in this case is to use the information we access from the internet in the correct way.

The biggest influence of the internet has been on economic freedoms rather than political; with marketing, procurement and recruiting completed over the internet. Internal efficiency and communications have been boosted since its advent. Although not a democratic ideal that we are looking at specifically, economic freedom to sell, buy and market to a worldwide audience (thus earn an income) has been quite revolutionary (globalisation etc). There has been some impact on politics and subsequent democratic improvement, according to Ferdinand (2000, pp.5-8):

- a. Some see the internet (communications and information available through it) as a way for increased transparency of government administration (to outside observers) and thus governments will be more 'amenable to democratic pressures';
- b. Professional (political) party organizers (particularly in the US) have quickly utilised the internet in campaigns. Not only is the internet less expensive to campaign on (versus large TV campaigns), but it can be used to reach particular demographics and even those that would usually be disenchanted with politics (thus increasing the number of citizens who are interested and participating in the democratic process of elections); and
- c. Many national parliaments are using internet to educate citizens about their activities and legislative procedures; who have at least broken down barriers between the political and public spheres.

Tuzzi *et al.* (2007, p.32) put forward their opinion that evolving information and communication technologies are becoming increasingly relevant in political systems. They also believe that there is a trend of public disengagement with traditional political life; with expressions of demand placed on direct civil engagement (from politicians) in such processes. Howard Dean (2007, p.94), chairman of the Democratic National Committee (ruling body of major US political party the *Democrats*), believes that the 'internet is the most significant tool for building democracy since the invention of the printing press. People are now easily able to create, discover and connect with networks [of people] within hours, anywhere around the globe.' He goes on to reflect over the resultant demands on leaders in terms of two-way communication and authenticity placed by diverse communities of university students, ethnic groups etc with shared interests. Dean (2007, pp.95-98) also believes that the internet:

- a. Allows online communities to question political candidates (that may one day represent them) and through sheer people power, change the course of campaign outcomes;
- b. Can be used by both party insiders and outsiders to distribute critical video or audio excerpts of slip-ups from opponents, thus gaining momentum;
- c. Allows campaign professionals to manage events and support, address concerns of the public and conduct fundraising from large numbers of people;
- d. Allows parties to develop social-networking software and tailor it to political activism, getting communities directly involved in campaigns and debate; and
- e. Provides pro-democracy citizens of authoritarian nations like Iran or China with the means of evading government interference in exchanging ideas.

6 DOES DEMOCRACY CONTRIBUTE TO INTERNET OR THE INTERNET CONTRIBUTES TO DEMOCRACY

Gutstein (cited In Hrynysyn, 2001) states that a “democratic society rests on a bedrock of freely exchanged public information”. The internet has the potential to contribute to this freely exchanged public information, by providing access to information. Whilst the internet contributes to democracy, it is our democratic society that provides the information in the first place. Zinnbauer (2001) takes the viewpoint that the internet can be a tool in the democratisation of a civil society, but it is up to governments to promote democracy through their own policies in relation to Freedom of Information, freedom of speech. In more controlled countries, such as China, there is still access to the internet; however the censorship is a lot greater. This censorship does not prevent the transmission of ideas or information, but it certainly makes it more difficult. So it is the lack of democracy that impacts on the contribution of the internet.

Internet access and its contribution to democratic society has the greatest potential in countries that have the policies to promote access to information. However democracy is facing a different challenge. Ferdinand (2000) discusses the increase in political apathy in the West. This is illustrated by the decrease in the membership of political parties, a decrease in voter turnout in countries that do not have compulsory voting and there is an increase in the public’s dissatisfaction in Parliament. The only exception to this seems to be single issue causes. Single issue causes seem to be enhanced by the internet through Social Networking sites.

The impact of social networking sites, such as Facebook, may open people’s eyes and minds to the political issues of a country at a particular time, and do it in a swift manner. One only has to look at the range of “groups” that occur on Facebook to see the power of conscious raising that can go on. Whether people act on their views though, is another matter. There are 209735 people that are members of the group “F\$@! Off Japan, leave the whales alone” (Facebook, 2008 Appendix 1), but what else are these people doing to show their objection, and their active participation? Are they boycotting Japanese goods? Are they writing letters to the newspaper? Are they donating to GreenPeace? Even without these actions, these group members are, engaging in debate, increasing their knowledge, and therefore becoming more informed citizens.

The internet seems to be facilitated by a democratic society, and a democratic society seems to facilitate the internet. When societies provide policies that promote democracy, individuals can freely use the internet for their own purposes, such as promoting their own cultures and views, where these

views can be explored in a safe, not threatening manner (Eriksson, 1999). In countries that do not promote democracy, then this feature of the internet can be perceived as a threat, which leads to censorship, where individuals cannot discuss differing viewpoints (that contradict the view of the government) and an underground culture can develop.

7 CONCLUSION

The improvements in technology have made it easier to access the internet, made the internet faster, and has allowed for more complex information to be placed on the internet. Once a research tool, the internet can now launch careers by providing an outlet to perform music, it can conduct business in virtual shops, it connects people through social networking sites amongst many other features. It facilitates the flow of information - but only to people that seek it. These factors illustrate the contribution of the internet to our (western) democratic society. In terms of how the internet has impacted on democracy, the internet is simply a technology, which is neither good nor bad, but it depends on how it is used (Joint, 2005). In countries that already are a democracy, the internet is another tool to seek information. In countries that have a more controlling form of government, the internet is also controlled, undermining the very principles of democracy. The key word should be potential – the internet has the potential to contribute very positively to the notion of a democratic society, but it is not yet used to its full potential.

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APPENDIX 1

The screenshot shows a Facebook group page with the following details:

- Group Name:** JAPAN... LEAVE THE WHALES ALONE!!!!
- Group Type:** Common Interest - Beliefs & Causes
- Description:** This group is aimed at the ICR & Japanese Government. It is a forum for people of our world to share their concerns about Japanese whaling. We hope it will help exert regional pressure on Japan to cease its illegal whaling activities in the Southern Ocean Whale Sanctuary. Please don't join to turn it into a racial battleground.
- Japan is singled out as it is the only country to have breached the:**
 - United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea,
 - United Nations Charter on Nature,
 - The Antarctic Treaty System,
 - The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) and
 - The International Convention on the Regulation of Whaling
- URL:** <http://www.ifaw.org/ifaw/general/default.aspx?oid=223096>
- Officers:**
 - Jos Fryer (New Zealand) - New Zealand Coordinator & Whale Guru
 - Tahimoana Kapa - New Zealand Whale Defender
 - Donovan Teal (Australia) - Aussie Whale Defender
 - Lori Blechynden (Australia) - Australian Whale Defender & Chief Cook
 - Anne Silver (Australia) - Australian Fleet Commander
 - Kerin Kujanpaa (Australia)

Source: Facebook (2008) <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=7251222651> [accessed online on 21 October 2008]