



Extended Abstract

Revisiting E-topia – A Social Movements Contribution to the Debate on Democratic Innovation

Hans Asenbaum

University of Vienna, Department of Political Science

E-Mails: hans.asenbaum@univie.ac.at

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Introduction

In academia and in civil society as a whole, there are two debates containing at least some emancipatory potential for democratic transformations. One is the somewhat elitist or technocratic debate on e-democracy and democratic innovations online. This debate concentrates on democratic reform, trying to counter the lacking participation but ultimately geared to stabilise the current capitalist system (Grunwald et al. 2006: 62 ff). The other debate is mostly led by civil rights activists and journalists concerned with freedom on the Internet. They counter the claim for real name policies online and defend online anonymity as democratic right to free participation (Ruesch/Märker 2012: 111f). This debate contains clear emancipatory potential, but remains defensive and is lacking a vision of democratic change. The arguments and ideas of both debates can be tracked back to the discussion on cyberdemocracy of the 1990s. In the context of the spread of internet access in Western societies ideas of new democratic utopias arose imagining cyberspace as a place free of domination (Poster 1995; Poster 1997; Rheingold 1993; Landow 1992; Holmes 1997; Tsagarousianou et al. 1998; Fang 1995). However, the Internet proved to be governed by private commercialisation, state censorship and the reproduction of social hierarchies of the “offline world”. In retrospect, the ideas of the democratic e-topias were soon perceived as naïve. The justified concerns and the criticism of hierarchy online incorporated the cyberdemocratic ideas as a moment of disciplination: E-topia could never be realised. This position, however, confines debates to defensive or conservative argumentation. Thus this research project picks up on the cyberdemocratic discourse and tries to renew these ideas from the perspective of current democratic movements online. First the discourse on cyberdemocracy will be revisited, then a social movements elaboration and renewal of these ideas will be developed by online document analysis and interviews with key activists. The goal is to make a theoretical contribution to the somewhat conservative debate on e-democracy and to further its emancipatory potential. A the

same time I wish to contribute to clarifying the ideas of social movements concerned with freedom on the Internet and support them in boldly promoting ideas for democratic online participation.

Methods

First the debate on cyberdemocracy is revisited. Literature containing the term “cyberdemocracy” is considered. In this first step the main arguments of the debate are identified. Then the argument that’s of most importance to this research project, the idea of flexible identity construction and anonymity online, is tracked further in the contemporary debates. After this, ideas of social movements for freedom on the Internet are examined. For this purpose two movements are selected, that are specifically concerned with online-identity/anonymity: Anonymous and Cyberfeminism. First the ideas of these movements concerning identity/anonymity are gathered by online document analysis. Second qualitative interviews with key activists in these movements are conducted. The analysis of the data is not aimed at identifying a political agenda representative for the respective movements, but at generating ideas concerning identity/anonymity online for democratic transformation.

Results and Discussion

The results of the study show a vibrant discussion of some ideas already debated under the term cyberdemocracy some twenty years ago. This is not to say, however, that these ideas haven’t changed and adapted. Anonymity is valued by some and seen as an essential part of democracy and democratic transformation. Anonymous activists criticise the production of fixed social identities as capitalist mode of hierarchisation and commodification. Thus the possibility of dissolving or hiding identity online means liberation, which is also an essential part of a democratic alternatives for the future. Some cyberfeminists agree and advocate concepts of disembodiment as means of leaving patriarchic and heteronormativ identities behind and engaging in free communication. As cyberfeminism is a heterogeneous movement representing all diversity of feminist discussions, many activists are sceptical of anonymity and stress the value of diversity. Nevertheless they advocate concepts of identity tourism for temporarily changing identity and creative processes of construction of the digital self. Activists of Anonymous and Cyberfeminism see great potential in flexible identity creation and/or anonymity online for democratic change. However, they are also sceptical of the possibilities of realising these potentials in the light of current commercialisation and surveillance on the Internet.

Conclusions

While current academic discussions on e-democracy declare democratic transformation by the means of ICTs as failed and work on reformist ideas, the renewal of cyberdemocratic thought by social movements reveals clear alternatives. Reforms that increase participation are steps in the right direction, but they should be perceived as part of a process of democratic transformation that implies systemic change. Hierarchies tied to social identity cannot be done away with by simply hiding them or making them flexible online. This can, however, temporarily counter social inequalities and demonstrate potentials for future alternatives.

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