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How Much Deliberative Democracy Is There In “Internet Politics”

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A Book Review

How Much Deliberative Democracy Is There In “Internet Politics?”

Andrew Chadwick, *Internet Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 384 pages, 2006.

This is quite a book. No, actually it is a treatise on its subject. Although nearly exhaustive of its subject matter up to the time it was proofread for the final time, it is, like its subject matter, already well beyond the confines of its contents and into further reaches of The Great Unknown. .

So what did I think after reading this book? . Who, these days, is going to sit down and read a lengthy treatise on a subject that has already metastasized well beyond its confines ? Trying to pin down “Internet Politics” would be like, to use John F. Kennedy’s phrase, “nailing Jell-o to the wall.” However, in leafing through the Table of Contents and the index, it occurred to me that this would be a very good book to review concerning how an erudite scholar of “internet politics” saw “deliberative democracy” within his universe. How does he define and evaluate us? Are we even on the radar screen? What can we learn from this to help us on our way?

So, first: how **does** he define “deliberative democracy” or “public deliberation” and its place in “Internet Politics.” Answer: Very superficially. For example, his only relevant index entry is: “Democracy: deliberative models of, 25, 100-102.” OK, not much, but at least it’s mentioned.

Page 25 describes the usual suspects and arguments about the weakness of modern representative democracy and the ancient perils of direct democracy. People like

Barber, Habermas, Sunstein, Fishkin and Dahl are trotted out and disposed of quickly. Will the internet and its unlimited capacity for talk and information strengthen or weaken representative democracy? Chadwick ends on a slight uptick by making some vaguely positive remarks about the use of the internet in Howard Dean's U.S. presidential primary of 2003-04 to generate more citizen participation in choosing candidates and letting us know that he'll soon discuss "the most successful online deliberative forum, Minnesota E-democracy." (p. 25) If he was right about these being two of the best examples of the interface between the deliberative democracy movement and internet politics, we'd hardly be a blip. But perhaps we fare better on pp. 100-02.

Chapter 5 of the book is titled "Community, Deliberation and Participation" and has a subtitle: "E-democracy." Well, if the deliberative democracy movement is to be found alive and well anywhere in this book, surely it is here. Let's see.

The chapter starts with two quotes. The first is from Ben Barber: "There can be no strong democratic legitimacy without ongoing talk." The second is from Cass Sunstein: "Unplanned, unanticipated encounters are central to democracy itself." It would seem, then, that what the author is suggesting is that deliberative democracy within internet politics is "ongoing talk" plus "unplanned, unanticipated encounters." I don't think that anyone who is truly associated with the work of the deliberative democracy movement would pick those qualities or elements as being anywhere near the essence of our vision and practice that comprises our large and growing body of work. But perhaps the text of the section on "deliberative models" will be more relevant and friendly to the idea and ideals of more effective public deliberation via the use of the

internet?

In this short take, Professor Chadwick sees public deliberation via the web almost exclusively in terms of the British political and academic establishment's love affair with electronic "consultations" between citizens and officialdom. These "forums" are replete with webcasts, data bases, chat rooms, bulletin boards, streaming video....and are all the better for the "non-binding" suggestions and opinions of suitably informed and fully deliberated citizens upon Parliament and various and sundry governmental agencies who may sponsor or be engaged in the exercises.

Chadwick admits that whereas authentic E-democracy experiments emphasize "complex horizontal and multi-directional interactions," the "consultative E-democracy" versions involve more of a "vertical flow of government-citizen communication." (p. 100) The former, he observes correctly, are "thinner on the ground." Well, of course they are. The latter are generously funded by the UK government. Thus, the genuine forms are "weak" and he congratulates the latter as evidence that E-democracy now has defused "the criticism that executive managed consultations marginalize elected representatives." (p. 102). Edmund Burke can rest easy. In modern Britain, despite the Internet, the citizens are still marginalized in governance, just like all gratuitous consultants ("If we really wanted your opinions, we'd pay you a lot of money and you'd tell us what we want to hear.")

Chadwick's bias is clear. He notes that "...the road to E-democracy is littered with the burnt-out hulks of failed projects." (p. 102). To him, the deliberative democracy movement on the Internet is almost invisible and its parent, the participatory democracy

movement, is like the highway from Baghdad to its airport during the American occupation. All are already confined to the "dustbin of history."

He continues brandishing his prejudice in the section on "E-democracy," where the participatory democracy movement has tried to develop a wide variety of Habermas-like "public spheres," "virtual communities" and "political deliberation" processes to influence haughty elites. At best, they may actually have an effect at the "margins" in "mature democracies."

To Chadwick's credit, he does mention the influence of "town hall forms of online deliberation" in the development of global social movements and he mentions a number of them and how they worked. On the other hand, he says that "the effect of the protests and campaigns was also dependent upon the creation of basic information networks and the sense of collective enterprise brought about by simply hyperlinking rather than grand and detailed debates about substantive issues" (p. 135). Well, a global deliberative democracy network needs to have such independent "information networks" in place first, and needs to have a "sense of collective enterprise" as building blocks. The new system is starting to take shape.

Chadwick misses this entirely. He fails to see how "the deliberative democracy movement," as a socio-political energy, is utilizing the Internet to develop for years now. All kinds of conferences, projects, experiments are announced and described on the web and covered in websites, newsletters, and journals like *JPD*, which is an open access web publication supported by a consortium of researchers and practitioners. Isn't this part of "internet politics?" We exist because we are preparing for an inevitable paradigm shift,

the transformation of representative democracy into a more democratic form of politics and governance...

There are many other projects that have used or use a mix of web and face to face forums that are not mentioned at all in this book. None of them were failures. They are all experiments from which much is learned and passed on and become part of the growth process. They are an important part of “Internet Politics” now and will be even more important in the future.

What Chadwick and his fellow travelers fail to see is that their beloved representative democracy, with its clever ploys at “deliberative consultations” with citizens via the web, or their attempts at greater efficiency via e-government, continue to make vital decisions that are at odds with the general public will, public interest, global peace and stability, and ecological sense. It is this that spurs the deliberative democracy on despite being trivialized and marginalized as it is in this book. This is not Chadwick’s fault. After all, this is a book about *Internet Politics*, and the deliberative democracy movement per se is not presently a major part of the formal politics that exists upon the Internet at the present time, or in the real world of government—which is just about all Chadwick can see on his screen.

This book, then, helps us calibrate the present position of public deliberation, deliberative democracy, and participatory democracy a decade after the Internet became such an important part of the global electronic communications system. We are still a small and relatively inconsequential part of the mix. Indeed, web-based public deliberation per se is probably a small part of the present state of the entire deliberative

democracy movement and has had less political impact than some of the face-to-face experiments and projects. So, to Chadwick, the deliberative democracy movement is much less visible than it is in the broader world of politics.

A score of years from now, in 2026, Chadwick’s definition of “*Internet Politics*” will be totally outmoded and there can be no doubt that the use of the Internet in a much larger and effective “deliberative democracy movement” will be a reality. His book is about what was and is. Our movement—comprised of theorists, experimenters, practitioners, and involving the public in enlightened, transformational self-governance—is about what will be. Our experimentation is not the dustbin of history. It is the crucible. But it is good to be beneath the radar presently.

That’s the good news.