Not by technology alone: The "analog" aspects of online public engagement in policymaking

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ABSTRACT

Between Twitter revolutions and Facebook elections, there is a growing belief that information and communication technologies are changing the way democracy is practiced. The discourse around e-government and online deliberation is frequently focused on technical solutions and based in the belief that if you build it correctly they will come. This paper departs from the literature on digital divide to examine barriers to online civic participation in policy deliberation. While most scholarship focuses on identifying and describing those barriers, this study offers an in-depth analysis of what it takes to address them using a particular case study. Based in the tradition of action research, this paper focuses on analysis of practices that evolved in Regulation Room—a research project of CeRI (Cornell eRulemaking Initiative) that works with federal government agencies in helping them engage public in complex policymaking processes. It draws a multidimensional picture of motivation, skill, and general political participation divides; or the "analog" aspects of the digital divide in online civic participation and policy deliberation.

1. Introduction

Between Twitter revolutions and Facebook elections, there is a growing belief that information and communication technologies are changing the way democracy is practiced. Some view the Internet as shifting the principles of political organization by making collective action cheaper and more easily available (Bimber, Stohl, & Flanagin, 2009; Shirky, 2008). Others allude to the "sunlight effect" of Internet technologies that can make political institutions and politicians more accountable to the public as their actions become more visible and information used for their decision-making is more easily accessible (Coleman, 2009; Schacter, 2009). Some note that adoption of information technologies by government institutions changes their character and their organizational arrangements (Fountain, 2009; Margetts, 2009). Yet others view the Internet as altering the polity itself by shifting power from the center of the communication network to its edges (Mueller, 2010) and by enabling a better informed (Hardy, Hall Jamieson, & Winneg, 2009; Reedy & Wells, 2009) and a more engaged public (Brundidge & Rice, 2009).

Among researchers of deliberative democracy, some suggest that the Internet allows for scaling of deliberative processes beyond small group face-to-face discussion to broad public participation (Gil de Zúñiga, Veenstra, Vraga, & Shah, 2010; Gimmler, 2001; Witschge, 2004). Others observe disparities in how different socioeconomic groups utilize the Internet for political purposes and suggest that the more powerful social strata are overall better positioned to engage (Min, 2010; Norris, 2001; Papacharissi, 2002). Along similarly critical lines, another view highlights the polarizing effect of online anonymous discussions (Witschge, 2004), while others, supported by the popular discourse about Web 2.0, suggest that when designed correctly, technical solutions can leverage the affordances of the Internet to enable large scale public deliberation (Wright & Street, 2007).

Using the lens of scholarship about the digital divide, this paper explains how various aspects of online civic deliberation are addressed through design decisions with deliberate care and focused attention on the needs of users who are unfamiliar with the complex process in which they are operating, unsure of every step they are taking, and often skeptical that the value of their participation is worth the effort they put into it. This analysis offers insights into comprehensive thinking about online deliberation and raises important questions to consider in future efforts in e-government. We will delve into what it actually takes to turn Internet technology into a meaningful deliberative tool in the context of civic engagement in policymaking, analyzing Regulation Room, an interdisciplinary research project of CeRI (the Cornell University eRulemaking Initiative) that offers an online public participation platform for interested individuals to learn about and provide input on complex government policy discussions. Over the last four years, it has featured five proposed federal agency rulemakings and two pre-rulemaking discussions. Regulation Room's target audience has been those whose voices are traditionally missing in the rulemaking process.

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2. Civic participation and the digital divide

Disparities in access and ability to use the Internet are typically referred to as the "digital divide." Originally rooted in a dichotomous notion of information "haves" vs. "have-nots," the concept of the digital divide has been used to analyze information technology-related inequalities within and between countries and regions (Epstein, 2011). When translated into policy, this dichotomous thinking often takes the form of fundamental technocratic optimism with an action focus on physical access to technology. Thus, early policy responses to the digital divide were focused on providing computers and Internet connection to the have-nots, with the implied notion that once available, the technology would be put to positive and productive uses spurring political, economic, and social progress (Epstein, Nisbet, & Gillespie, 2011). More recently, emphasis has shifted to the quality of the connection, as the policy focus has become expanding broadband access (Kruger & Gilroy, 2012).

Over the years, the discourse about the digital divide has expanded beyond "first-level" divide issues, which focused on access to technology and the associated socio-demographic causes, to include factors such as motivation and Internet skills (Min, 2010). This focus on the "second-level" divide brought the technocratic view of information technology and the causal relationship between adoption of technology and social outcomes under increasing scrutiny. Some scholars have suggested that the digital divide should be understood as a series of divides (Barzilai-Nahon, 2006; Meredyth & Thomas, 2002) or inequalities (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Celeste, & Shafer, 2004), while others prefer viewing it as a continuum (Warschauer, 2002, 2003) or spectrum (Lenhart & Horrigan, 2003). Some also challenged the attention to access as determinist, utopian, and naïve, warning that the evident demographic disparities have to do with more than just the presence or absence of the technology, and do not simply disappear as information and communication technologies (ICTs) become more ubiquitous (Gunkel, 2003; van Dijk, 2006). Others have attempted to link the digital divide to the larger forces that perpetuate resource disparities: some see the digital divide as an element of political and economic development (Norris, 2001; Pohjola, 2001; Warschauer, 2003), while others see it as a product of cultural imperialism (Chomsky, 2004), Westernization (Schiller, 1992), or an emerging power block within the information industry (Chomsky, 2004; Schiller, 1992).

Specifically in the area of civic engagement in political processes and e-government, dichotomous digital divide thinking of information "haves" vs. "have-nots" lent itself to the "if you build it, they will come" mindset primarily among policymakers (e.g. Chen & Dimitrova, 2006). In other words, given the right technological tools, members of the public will engage in political processes, and they will do so in a meaningful way (Macintosh, 2004; Reddick, 2005). A recent report by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, for example, suggests that 73% of adult Internet users in the US (representing 53% of all US adults) could be described as "online political users in 2010." Yet most of the "political" use of the Internet described in the report is consuming political news, whether from online outlets, campaign websites, or online social interactions (Smith, 2011).

While an informed public is an important component in a democratic society, consuming information does not necessarily translate to people effectively engaging or interacting with the government online. An earlier Pew report (see Smith, 2010) suggested that accessing government information is the most common "interaction" of US citizens with their government online, followed by consuming government services (such as renewing a driver's license or auto registration). The report found that only 23% of Internet users "participate in the online debate around government policies or issues, with much of this discussion occurring outside of official government channels" (p. 2–3). Although this proportion is not negligible, the report suggests that there is still a divide to bridge in terms of civic online engagement, a divide that also mirrors the socioeconomic disparities. For example, the PEW report states that "participators tend to be somewhat more educated and affluent than the online population as a whole" (p.32); moreover, the group of citizens engaged online "is more heavily composed of whites" compared to other racial groups (p.33). In other words, the digital divide can be viewed as amplifying the dynamics where the powerful are becoming more powerful and the politically weak are becoming weaker.

Providing online tools that enable meaningful and productive engagement of the public in policymaking processes is not a trivial undertaking. Simply giving people interactive technology, even when they know how to operate it, does not necessarily result in effective engagement. For example, soon after the election of Barak Obama, whose campaign was praised for its use of information technology, his transition team launched a series of initiatives aimed to engage the public in policy processes using the Internet (White, 2008). The results of these initiatives were mixed. For example, in the *Citizen's Briefing Book*, legalization of marijuana was voted as the top topic to be included in the new administration's agenda (Johnson, 2009), but this stand was not taken seriously by the powers that be. The transition team did not achieve the kind of participation they hoped for about issues the incoming Administration perceived as important—such as healthcare and unemployment—while members of the public who did participate felt their voices have not been heard.

Similar disappointments occurred in other online experiments of the transition team and later the Administration, as well as in other contexts and countries (e.g. Chen & Dimitrova, 2006; Tomkova, 2009). These discrepancies between the democratic promise of the Internet and the mixed results on the ground suggest that a more nuanced story about the digital divide and online civic engagement needs to be constructed. van Dijk (2005), for example, speaks about the digital divide as an assembly of different kinds of accesses, each shaping and at the same time being shaped by the other. Specifically, he identifies motivational access, material access, skills access, and usage access—all positioned within social, political and economic context, and continuously interacting with the characteristics of technology.

Traditionally, the digital divide has been addressed in terms of material access; this is the perception behind the "build it and they will come" approach to online civic engagement. Yet, other kinds of accesses play out in important and unique ways when considered in the context of citizens' engagement with the government. For example, van Dijk explains *motivational access* as a function of the psychological processes or social context that supports adoption of new technology. He emphasizes the centrality of a consciously recognized need for the technology, as well as a potential conflict between the moral and the cultural values of the users and perceived dangers of the new medium. In the specific context of civic engagement, motivational access requires the motivation not only to use technology but also to use technology to engage in meaningful political discourse online; each one of these motivations can enhance or limit the other.

DiMaggio et al. (2004) emphasize the centrality of *skills* in adoption of new technology (see also Hargittai, 2002). Their research allows us to picture adoption of socio-technical practices as sort of a Maslow's pyramid at the bottom of which is physical access to technology, further up is the basic ability to use the technology primarily for recreational purposes, and at the top is the advanced ability to use the technology for capital enhancing activities. DiMaggio et al. allude to the reflection of social disparities in the digital divide when viewed through the lens of skills. Thus, they demonstrate that those belonging to higher socio-economic strata are more likely to engage in capital enhancing activities, compared to those belonging to the lower socio-economic strata. The Pew report mentioned above (see Smith, 2011) suggests that similar tendencies can be observed in online civic