Digital Democracy: Panacea or Problem?

Charles Pattie

(Charles Pattie is Professor of Geography at the University of Sheffield. His research specialism is in elections, political campaigning and public participation in politics, on which he has written extensively.)

Like many other polities, Britain faces a real problem of public engagement with politics. Take just a few indicators. Turnout in elections has generally been substantially below post-war averages for much of the last 15 years. Trust in elected politicians is low. And support for (and membership of) the mainstream political parties which dominated the Twentieth Century and the early years of the millennium is in serious decline.

But this does not mean people are politically apathetic. They continue to care deeply about the direction in which society is heading. This was dramatically expressed very recently in the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum, which saw a post-war record turnout of 85% on an unusually complete electoral register. Not only was turnout at the actual referendum high, but public engagement in the debate was extraordinary. (An anecdote: I was in Edinburgh on the last weekend of the campaign, and everywhere I went in the city, people were talking about the referendum, even in causally overheard conversations in the street. In 30 years of studying UK elections, I have never before encountered anything remotely like this ubiquity or intensity of public political debate, and I am sure I am not alone in that.)

Clearly, the Scottish vote was in many respects *sui generis*, not least as it involved a much more fundamental – and potentially irreversible – decision than almost any other British vote of modern times (it doesn't get much more existential than the future of the entire state). It would be wrong to expect similarly high levels of engagement on more normal forms of political event. Even so, the experience of the referendum does highlight the dislocation at the heart of UK – and other states' – democracy: high levels of public concern coupled with a strong sense that current arrangements do not work and (critically) do not represent public interests or views and a widespread disengagement from 'politics as usual'.

Digital technologies (the web, new social media etc. etc.) do offer a number of potential means of addressing that dislocation. They have the potential to further democratise and widen the dissemination of information, to provide new and more flexible platforms for people to campaign, to organise, to lobby, and to provide fora within which more deliberative and open forms of decision-making can happen. The possibilities are substantial. However, there is also a serious risk of over-playing the hype. To listen to some advocates, one might think that digital democracy offers the answer to all our political ills, re-inventing a modern version of the ancient Athenian agora in which all citizens could be fully and actively engaged in the political lie of their community, but in the context of a modern mass democracy. It is important, therefore, that we be realistic about our expectations. No technology in human history has ever proved to be a universal good: all have had their pros and their cons. There is no reason to think the digital turn will be any different. Panaceas do not exist in the real world: it is not the technology we adopt that matters: it is what we do with it. We need to be clear-sighted about the possible down- as well as the up-side of digital democracy. In the following, therefore, I focus on several potential pitfalls.

A good starting point is to articulate a vision of the sort of democracy we might ideally want. Given the massive volume of debate on the nature of democracy, there are many different models available. However, a strong contender can be found in the work of Robert Dahl, probably the leading political thinker on democracy in the last 50 years (e.g. Dahl, 1998). For him, the core requirements for a healthy democracy are:

1. Effective participation;
2. Equality in voting;
3. Gaining enlightened understanding;
4. Exercising control over the agenda; and
5. Inclusion of all adults.

Points 2 and 5 are largely concerned with the nature of the franchise. At present in the UK, both are broadly achieved, at least in principle (there are important questions around the extent to which some groups are under-registered and around who does and who does not take up the opportunity to vote, but for the sake of argument, I put them to one side here). The remaining three desiderata are the foci of the thoughts below. How might digital democracy affect them? Will it make it more or less likely that those who have a view will be able to express that view (effective participation)? Will it make it easier or harder for people to deliberate together, to understand each other's viewpoints, and to persuade each other (gaining enlightened understanding)? And will it enable people to shape the course of political debate (exercising control over the agenda)?

1. Effective participation: getting people to join in.

Step one in tackling the democratic dislocation identified above is to try and improve participation in politics. We know a great deal about who does and who does not take part in democratic politics, broadly conceived. Much of this reflects various well-known biases of age, education, socio-economic position and so on. Many of these biases are structural and societal, and are very hard to shift. And as a result, they are unlikely to be solved – though they may be ameliorated – by digital means alone.

But an important element of the story of who participates and why concerns something which it is in the power of those who are already politically engaged to do something about. A very substantial body of research points to the importance of active mobilisation as a means of encouraging people to be politically active. Other things being equal, people who are personally invited by others to participate in politics are noticeably more likely to do so than those who are not invited (Verba *et al.*, 1995; Pattie *et al.*, 2004). This extends through election canvassing to invitations (from friends, neighbours, and even relative – though trusted – strangers) to get involved in community groups, parties, political campaigns and so on. When people are personally asked to get involved, they are more likely to do so.

The digital world has considerable potential as a medium through which to contact people and invite their participation. One often-cited example is Barack Obama's 2008 campaign for the Democrat nomination and then for the US Presidency. The accepted wisdom of that contest is that one of Obama's key weapons was his campaign's innovative and very active use of new social media to spread the message, recruiting new activists virally and so building a rich resource base both of small-scale donors (who made up in sheer number for their individually small donations to the campaign) and of local activists to pound the streets

in key states. The Obama campaign is generally argued to have spotted the potential of new social media earlier and, more important still, been able to exploit it more effectively than other, more traditional campaigns.

So is this a harbinger of things to come? Perhaps. But there are grounds for healthy scepticism. Yes, the Obama campaign did use NSM very effectively. But it is much less clear whether this really did engage people new to politics in large numbers. Obama was a remarkably adept and attractive candidate in 2008, and gained substantial (old) media interest right from the start, giving him a flying start over most of his Democrat rivals. Had his campaign not already had this momentum, it is unlikely that the NSM strategy would ever have taken off. There is a strong case for saying that the successful NSM strategy was the result, not the cause, of Obama's successful insurgency. What is more, very many of those contacted via NSM were already politically engaged and would almost certainly have joined the Obama campaign come what may.

Nor is this just a feature of the 2008 Obama campaign. It is an example of a wider phenomenon. Recent work on the effects of the internet on political participation suggests that it does little or nothing in practice to compensate for already-existing biases in involvement (e.g. Schlozman *et al*., 2012, esp. chapter 16). Those already politically engaged are quick to adopt web technologies as yet further ways of engaging. By and large, those who are politically marginalised just do not. Far from being a potential 'weapon of the weak' or even just a leveller of the participatory playing field, it seems, web technologies in practice are far more likely to entrench existing inequalities in political access.

One other aspect of NSM use by the 2008 Obama campaign is also instructive. The main advantages for the campaign were less to do with recruiting new activists (most would have been activists anyway) and much more to do with allowing quick and efficient communication. And it allowed the campaign to collect information on its activists, which in its turn became useful for targeting messages, for directing fund-raising drives and so on (to the extent that the campaign exploited the data generated through NSM about its activists, it was behaving similarly to companies like Facebook).

Probably the most famous story about modern US Presidential campaigns concerns the Kennedy-Nixon debate in 1960. Most political anoraks will know that perceptions of who won the debate depended strongly on the medium through which voters experienced it, radio listeners scoring the debate for Nixon while TV viewers (swayed by Kennedy's suave, handsome charm against Nixon's sweaty, unshaved demeanour) gave the honours to Kennedy. A famous story. But it turns out to be an urban myth. Repeated attempts to track down the source of the story have failed. There is no concrete evidence for it. It may well be the case that the story of the critical importance of NSM to Obama's 2008 victory could be a similar urban myth.

What is more, while the evidence is that while personal invitations do mobilise people to take part in various forms of political action, not all forms of contact are equally effective. Some of the best evidence for those comes from a now very substantial body of experimental research (the pioneer work in this rapidly-expanding field is by Gerber and Green, 2004). Overwhelmingly, these experiments confirm that personal really does mean personal. Face to face contact with a real, physically present individual is, other things being equal, just about the most persuasive and mobilising form of contact. Other forms of contact (telephone calls, letters, e-mails, twitter feeds etc. etc.) pale in comparison. More impersonal forms of contact

are poor substitutes for meeting someone in the flesh if one wants to encourage people to participate. Quality counts: digital means of contacting and mobilising are not as effective.

2. Enlightened understanding: improving the quality of debate?

What of digital democracy's scope for enhancing public debate? There is clearly considerable potential here. The Web resources place huge amounts of information at almost anyone's finger tips. The scope for finding and disseminating relevant arguments, data and evidence is huge. A web-enabled citizen body has the potential to be a well-informed citizen body. And various NSM platforms provide fora in which groups and individuals can meet virtually, exchange views, deliberate and potentially reach consensus. One of the major barriers to large scale citizen involvement in modern representative democracies has been the sheer impossibility of getting large groups of people together physically in any form which might allow serious debate: Ancient Athenian citizens just about could all meet in the same place at the same time and have some meaningful form of exchange. But in modern democracies with millions of citizens, the physical co-presence of large numbers of citizens is impossible to organise. But it could just conceivably be done digitally. The virtual world releases us from the constraint of physical space. And it opens up the potential for arguments and claims to be compared, tested and evaluated. What could be more democratic than the widespread, free exchange of views?

But once again, there are very serious grounds for a strong dose of scepticism. What at first might appear a boon could in fact become a snare.

Scotland's recent independence referendum highlights one potential issue: we cannot assume that the volume of web opinion really is a reflection of wider public opinion. As noted above, the referendum debate was remarkable. It slipped the bounds of the major parties and the media, and even of the official Yes and No campaigns and became, vibrantly, public property in a way few if any other political debates have in modern Britain. People wrestled with the issues at work, at home, in their leisure time, with their families, their friends, their colleagues, and with strangers. And to a remarkable extent the debate went on (and still goes on) via digital technologies – Facebook groups, Twitter feeds, discussion forums, etc. etc. etc.. This efflorescence of public debate is surely guaranteed to delight believers in the democratic process, whatever their views on the actual issue of Scottish independence.

That said, the debate was not entirely even. It was notable that the Yes campaign seemed far more visible and voluble in the digital world than was the No campaign (as, indeed, it was generally the most visible and voluble in the non-digital campaign). A follower of the digital debate might therefore have been forgiven for thinking that a Yes vote was all but certain. As we now know, however, that is not what actually happened. A clear majority of Scots voted against independence. For all its noise, vibrancy and imagination, the Yes campaign was defeated. In retrospect, it seems all but certain that a classic 'spiral of silence' effect (Noelle-Neumann, 1974) was operating throughout the campaign, and especially in the final weeks: faced with a confident and upbeat Yes campaign, many No supporters kept their views to themselves.

The lesson this offers is a variant of the well-rehearsed arguments about the digital divide between those with and those without access to digital technology and media. As with other means of engaging in political activity, care needs to be taken not to confuse visibility with

support. Just because one side of a debate dominates the digital argument does not mean that it must also win the real argument.

But there is a deeper problem too. While the potential exists to use digital media to find out about, and engage with, views different from one's own, this is not necessarily what really happens. The new media are narrowcasting media. Faced with a huge plethora of rival voices, most of us make shortcuts to reduce the volume of information we might otherwise be bombarded with. And one of the easiest – and most widely used – shortcuts is to seek out those voices which comport with our own views and to ignore or dismiss those which challenge us.

The danger is clear. If we only seek out those views which agree with our own, we enter an echo-chamber into which nothing new ever enters. And that is hardly conducive to Dahl's 'enlightened understanding'. The risks are two-fold.

First, hearing only opinions we already agree with can lead to declining trust. The political scientist Robert Putnam (1993, 2000) has written extensively of the importance of what he terms social capital. By rubbing along together in society, we develop bonds with others. But Putnam points to two different sorts of social capital, one good, one bad. 'Good' social capital (Putnam calls it bridging social capital) comes from engaging with a wide variety of different people from a wide variety of backgrounds and with a wide range of different outlooks on the world. For Putnam, this develops a sense of generalised trust, such that even when we disagree with an individual, we still tend to think that person is reasonable and decent. The dark side' of social capital, however, is what Putnam terms 'bonding social capital', which develops when people interact almost entirely with others just like themselves. This builds very strong bonds within the group, but tends to increase feelings of isolation from, and distrust of, others outside the group.

Current trends in the USA reveal why this can be a serious problem. The US media market is increasingly fractured, with more and more emphasis on narrowcasting technologies: highly partisan (and often highly inaccurate) web infotainment channels, talk radio stations, and so on. As a result, many Americans now live deep within their own echo chambers, only hearing the views of others who think like they do. Everything they hear tells them they are right and those who disagree with them are not only wrong but, at the extreme, downright dangerous. Hence growing concerns in the States over political polarisation and the increasingly shrill nature of public debate there. Digital technologies have played an important part in generating that narrowcast, echo-chamber world.

Second, and worse still, there is evidence that living in an echo-chamber actually makes people hold more extreme views than they otherwise would. The legal scholar Cass Sunstein (2008) has carried out much empirical and experimental work on this, and the results seem unequivocal. When surrounded by others who hold the same view as we do, the tendency is for everyone in the group to move further away from the centre ground. Not only do ideological echo-chambers harden our views, but they also push us further apart. One need look no further than some of the pro-independence web forums which sprung up during and after the Scottish referendum. It doesn't take long to find – repeated – narratives of betrayal, treachery and treason being aimed at the No camp. Nor does it take long to realise that many of those engaged in these fora get most of their information from these and similarly oriented sources. Hardly surprising, then, that a betrayal myth builds up.

The digital world might yet live up to its initial promise of a vibrant forum for debate. But we should be sceptical: the evidence so far points in quite the opposite direction. And as Putnam and Sunstein both show, the consequences of building ever stronger echo chambers are potentially dire, undermining the very trust and civility on which democracy depends.

3. Controlling the agenda: what do people really want from politics?

Among those whose daily lives revolve around the political world, there is often an assumption that the rest of society shares their close interest. From this position, it seems self-evident that everyone wants to be involved in politics, wants to be heard, wants to help shape decisions, and so on. All that is missing, goes the argument, is the appropriate opportunity structure: what holds people back is a lack of readily accessible means of getting involved.

But here's the truth: many of us don't have a burning but unfulfilled desire to be politically active. And quite reasonably so: people have busy lives and enough on their plates with jobs, families, and so on. Quite the opposite, in fact. Some fascinating, though in some respects unsettling work by the American political scientists John Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse (2002) suggests that many people are what they term 'stealth democrats'. These individuals generally support the idea of democracy, but really do not want to become directly involved themselves, do not want to be burdened with policy debates and details on most issues, and so on. That, say the stealth democrats, is surely what we pay our politicians to do: just as one should not trust a plumber who asks you how best to fix your leaking pipe, should you trust a politician who asks you how best to deal with a complex policy decision? So long as those elected politicians get on with their job of governing and do so with at least moderate competence, stealth democrats, it seems, are content to let them do so.

The affinities with Joseph Schumpeter's famous analysis of modern democracy as a process by which citizens periodically choose between governing elites at elections but then let those elites rule between elections, is clear. The difference is Hibbing and Thiess-Morse are not content with a theoretical exposition but show how many citizens actually hold such a view. Around 70% of US citizens share two or more characteristics of being stealth democrats, by their estimate. A more recent of UK citizens by Paul Webb (2013) suggests that around 39% of UK citizens are stealth democrats.

What is more, Webb shows that stealth democrats are not a random cross-section of society. On the whole, they tend to be more authoritarian in their views, less interested in politics (unsurprisingly), less convinced they can make a political difference (also unsurprising), are more likely to be women, more likely to come from lower socio-economic groups, and less likely to be highly educated. Not surprisingly, stealth democrats are over-represented among those groups who are least likely to turn out in elections, least likely to join political organisations, least likely to participate in campaigns, and so on.

This points to two obvious, but still important, conclusions. First, it would be a serious mistake to think that digital democracy initiatives will make active citizens of us all, or even of most of us. Many – especially the stealth democrats – will be impervious to the appeal. But, second, given the stealth democrats' social profiles, there is a real – in truth a very high – risk that digital democracy initiatives might just re-inscribe already-existing biases in whose voice is heard and whose is not.

Nor should we be too surprised by this. Virtually all previous attempts to provide new means of being politically involved have tended to be enthusiastically embraced by the already politically active, and extensively ignored by those who are not active. It would be remarkable indeed if digital democracy approaches bucked this pattern. The chances are not high.

Final thoughts

I have been deliberately provocative in my comments above. I am not by any means an out and out sceptic regarding digital democracy. Its potential is clear. But so are its potential pitfalls. It is important, it seems to me, that we go into this with our eyes open and that we do not fall for the hype – for hype it is – of digital enthusiasts. So I have tried to point out to some of the larger pitfalls along the way. None are unavoidable. But all are based on solid social science evidence. These are not scare stories: they do happen.

In 1900, many intelligent people in Europe and North America looked forward to the new century with some excitement. Science was improving living standards rapidly, societies were at peace, democracy was being extended. Surely, they argued, the twentieth century would be a new Golden Age in which new technologies would make life better and better. With hindsight, we know that expectation was naïve in the extreme. New technologies did do much to improve lives. But they also wreaked destruction on hitherto unimaginable scales through two World Wars and other misfortunes. Technology was not, and is never, a panacea. The digital world is no different.

Ultimately, there is no simple technological 'fix' for our broken politics. Technology might help or might make things worse, depending on how we use it. The solutions – inevitably partial and with their own problems – have to be primarily social and political. To return to my initial example, the reason the Scottish Independence vote generated such an extraordinary level of engagement was not because the debate was carried on via digital as well as traditional platforms. It was because the debate really mattered. If we want to fix civic life in Britain, therefore, make it matter. Make the content and outcome of political debate consequential. If politics matters again, people will get involved. If it doesn't, they won't, no matter how many shiny new digital platforms we put in place to encourage them to do so. It isn't the technology that creates the effect: it is what we do with it.

References

Dahl, R. 1998. *On Democracy*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Gerber, D.P and Green, A.S. 2004. *Get Out The Vote! How to Increase Voter Turnout*. Washington D.C.: Brookings Institute.

Hibbing, J.R. and Theiss-Morse, E. 2002. *Stealth Democracy: Americans' Beliefs About How Government Should Work.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Noelle-Neumann, E. 1974. The spiral of silence: a theory of public opinion. *Journal of Communication*. 24: 43-51.

Pattie, C.J., Seyd, P. and Whiteley, P. 2004. *Citizenship in Britain: Values, Participation and Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Putnam, R. 1993. *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.

Putnam, R. 2000. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Schlozman, K.L., Verba, S. and Brady, H.E. 2012. *The Unheavenly Chorus: Unequal Political Voice and the Broken Promise of American Democracy*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.

Sunstein, C. 2009. *Going to Extremes: How Like Minds Unite and* Divide. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Verba, S., Schlozman, K.L. and Brady, H.E. 1995. *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Webb, P. 2013. Who is willing to participate? Dissatisfied democrats, stealth democrats and populists in the United Kingdom. *European Journal of Political Research.* 52: 747-772.