The Internet and the Democratic Imagination: Deweyan Communication in the 21st Century

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There is a broad consensus in liberal democracies that deliberation and political communication are vital to ensuring healthy democracies. The Internet has become increasingly become a commonplace feature of everyday and democratic life, in particular in shaping political deliberation and rhetoric. Its impact on political life has been hotly debated, with some theorists viewing the Internet as replacing and damaging traditional means of communication, and others viewing the Internet as a perfect medium of expressing alternatives modes of discourse and identity. I argue that these conceptions of the Internet fail to understand the Internet as a communicative medium and have an overly deterministic view of technology. Against these views I argue that we need to understand communicative tools such as the Internet as a ‘problematic situation’, where Dewey’s insights on communication, technology, and education converge to help us better understand how the Internet can be utilized as a tool for political deliberation and communication.

“A culture which permits science to destroy traditional values but which distrusts its power to create new ones is a culture which is destroying itself.”

Since its emergence as a serious subset of political theory in the 1980s, criticisms of deliberative democracy have generated an entire field of literature on their own. I argue that while deliberative theorists have anticipated and argued adequately against most agonistic and liberal critiques of deliberative democracy, they have failed to give a thorough account of an essential component of their theories: communication.

While Dewey is not typically classified as a deliberative theorist, I argue that a more robust account of communication can be found in his work, which places aesthetic experience at the heart of communication, and which replaces consensus with confluence as the goal of communication/deliberation. Dewey’s account of communication thus allows for a legitimate space for emotions in the deliberative process, which is crucial to unlocking previously excluded and marginalized claims. However, it would seem that Dewey’s
conception of communication is not only overly demanding, but archaic in the face of ‘new’ communicative technologies. I will argue that we need to understand communicative tools such as the Internet as a ‘problematic situation’, where Dewey’s insights on communication, technology, and education converge to help us better understand how the Internet can be utilized as a tool for political deliberation and communication.

Deliberative theorists diverge on how to achieve consensus, but they still see it as a key component of deliberation, and thus place great emphasis on how citizens can come to agreements through communication despite ethical and socio-economic differences. All deliberative theorists however, recognize that consensus is unrealistic in many political situations, and thus many like Cohen, suggest voting as a means of decision-making if consensus is unachievable. However, deliberative theorists argue that voting after deliberation ensures the vote is a result of reflective processes rather than arbitrary coincidence. Underpinning the ideal of consensus for all deliberative theorists are liberal values of equality, respect for plurality and the claim that authority should be legitimated through agreement rather than coercion. Deliberative theorists accept broadly liberal norms and ideals, but a large part of the dispute between deliberative theorists and other liberals lies in the question of legitimacy as framed theoretically by deliberative theorists.

Criticisms of deliberative democracy can be categorized into three main groups: 1) theoretical weaknesses, 2) faulty epistemic assumptions and 3) practical impossibilities. The second and third groups have been dealt with substantively in the work of deliberative theorists such as John Dryzek, James Bohman, and Amy Gutmann. I will focus on the theoretical criticisms of deliberative theory. The main theoretical criticism of deliberative democracy is that it assumes an overly rationalist conception of the subject. Critics argue that the ideal of rational consensus is impossible to achieve, as individuals’ moral and ethical identities are part and parcel of their selves, and to ask them to translate their moral and ethical beliefs into universal reasons acceptable to all individuals is to deny individual differences. Agonistic theorists like Chantal Mouffe argue that deliberative democracy negates difference by presenting consensus as a regulative ideal. For Mouffe, deliberative democracy is politics without the political, which she defines as the “dimension of antagonism that is inherent in all human society” (2005, 745). Deliberative democracy, by positing that legitimacy rests on rationally motivated consensus, denies the possibility of acknowledging this antagonism that is inherent to any political situation or system. While Mouffe’s insistence upon a metaphysical view of politics can be vague, a similar criticism can be seen in Beck’s work. Beck makes a distinction between “rule-directed” and “rule-altering” politics (133). While the former operates within the constraints and logic of a prevailing formal system, the latter attempts to break down rules, seeing them as part of a dominant hierarchy that marginalizes and excludes alternative discourse. Thus agonistic theorists claim that deliberative democracy impedes political reform by positing a rigidified set