

## Disruption and Empowerment

*Embedding citizens at the Heart of Democracy*

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**Abstract:** *This paper describes a changing landscape of society and politics. Firstly it briefly situates current practices and methods of democratic engagement and representation within a recent historical framework. It then describes mediating factors relating to democracy, the media and civil society and contextualises these within the broader neoliberal shift from citizen to consumer. The paper then identifies some key transformational agendas in the modus operandi of citizen to government exchange that hint at a return to more civic-focused responsibility, the emergence of issues-based politics and discusses the transformative role that digital media can play in this. All of this pre-supposes that citizens have both the ability and opportunity to engage in democratic practices so, finally, the paper describes a transformative model for citizen-driven, issues-based democracy that might connect with the systems of power in a more effective and democratic way by harnessing digital media and by building on local skills, knowledge, ideas and partnerships.*

**Keywords:** community engagement, digital deficit, political trust, model for engagement.

From the 1980s onwards the UK and other societies have shifted radically away from a culture of community towards a culture of individualism. We are no longer just citizens but also consumers. The rationalisation of public services into efficient “business units” has paralleled a rise in the role of a technocratic elite. Although genuine examples exist of good attempts to engage the public, governments can at times appear arrogant (Galbraith, 1992, p. 67) and to distrust the public, privileging the expertise of select groups of (often ex-government) consultants and experts (Mälkiä, Anttiroiko, & Savolainen, 2004). Even where the public are consulted, the primacy of expert opinion can appear to de-value citizens’ views, leading to feelings of dislocation and a concomitant fall in civic responsibility (Mälkiä et al., 2004; Williamson, 2007). Hansard Society research shows that a minority of citizens now want to be involved in decision making; 43% nationally and 48% locally (Hansard Society, 2009). Reflecting this, political campaigning has been transformed into brand management and marketing, again positioning the voter as a consumer. Political communication throughout the electoral cycle has a focus on re-election (Gaber, 2007). Add to this heady mix our acceleration into a digital age, bringing with it 24-hour news cycles, rapidly emerging viral networks and the potential for citizen-led initiatives that can quickly influence political decision making.

Democratic disaffection is not “a story of the decline of civic virtue, nor is it a story of political apathy — it is one of disenchantment, even hatred, of politics and politicians” (Hay, 2008, p. 1). In the UK, 57% of citizens do not wish to become involved in national decision making, 40% suggest this is because of a lack of time (Hansard Society, 2009). I would argue that time is not the real issue but rather it is one of motivation and, whilst the internet does not of itself change an individual’s motivation to become engaged, it can reduce barriers to engagement, lowering the motivational threshold at which citizens choose to engage (Williamson, 2007). Lending weight to the relevance of a motivational dimension, 85% of UK citizens report that they feel that they exert little or no influence over national-level decision-making (Hansard Society, 2009).

This paper will contextualise the changing democratic landscape and discuss the role that active citizens and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) play in mediating the discourses between government and wider civil society. It provides a temporal model for engagement and argues how

emergent digital media can disintermediate democratic spaces allowing them to become more direct and discursive, thereby supporting the emergence of citizen-led groups.

## 1. Civil society and civic disconnection

The transformation in the roles of government, media and citizens has created a void in modern society (Power Inquiry, 2006). Increasing decentralisation of decision-making is mirrored by declining democratic participation (Norris, 2001; Wright, 2006) and a public perception that governments are “mentally moribund, seriously incompetent and, on frequent occasion, offensively arrogant” (Galbraith, 1992, p. 67). A technocratic shift has resulted in decision-making moving away from elected representatives towards experts, with decisions based on science and professional knowledge, rather than public opinion (Mälkiä et al., 2004).

Two challenges have arisen as a result of the foregoing, the first being the privileging of the individual over the collective, thereby reducing opportunities for citizens to be engaged, debate and modify their beliefs (Richardson, 2004). The second revolves around the difficulties involved in reasserting an independent public sphere when it remains colonised by powerful corporate interests, media outlets and technocratic agencies (Wilhelm, 2000).

Many regard a strong civil society as a sign of a healthy democracy and in some ways able to mitigate the negative impact of the foregoing. Indeed, governments often assume that an active civil society and participation in it should be encouraged because it:

1. leads to better and more responsive services;
2. tackles people's disengagement from politics and the democratic process; and
3. builds social capital (Skidmore, Bound, & Lownsborough, 2006, p. 6).

Yet it is also the case in modern Britain that civil society organisations have to some extent bought into the technocratic arguments of government, positioning themselves as the experts of choice when it comes to representing the views of a wider public, regardless of the extent to which that public has actually been consulted or agreed to being represented. This is not necessarily a criticism of NGOs as they are largely stepping into a democratic void created by a failing public sphere but it does present a risk for a strong democracy. An ideal civil society, therefore, reflects an inter-connection of individuals and groups beyond economic and state systems, with varying degrees of formality and structure. Whilst there is room in this model for the established NGOs there is also an inherent shift away from monolithic structures such that social movements come and go, emerging to challenge hegemonic values, existing social orientations and “the modality of the social use of resources and cultural models” (Touraine, 2000).

## 2. Professionalising the public sphere

The shift towards the professionalization of civil society was a direct response to neoliberalism (Bondi & Laurie, 2005) and its resultant “socio-spatial polarisation” (Larner & Craig, 2005, p. 404) and is seen by some as a “double-edged sword” (Katz, 2005, p. 629). In addition to the rise of activist-organisations, neoliberalism has led to a significant increase in neo-communitarian service-based NGOs, focusing on social cohesion and framed within a civil society context that, whilst strengthened, is reliant on strategic compacts (neo-Faustian contracts, perhaps?) with local and national government (Fyfe, 2005). More recently, the increased use of digital media also positions third-sector organisations more strongly as democratic actors and ‘information intermediaries’ (Burt & Taylor, 2004). The large NGOs are corporatised, run by professional managers and able to orchestrate significant campaigns to effect influence and affect government policy in their areas of interest (Fyfe, 2005). Membership of campaign organisations serves two purposes; first, it suggests

a level of support and, therefore, importance and power and, second, it brings in revenue to allow campaigns to be funded.

Despite their role as democratic actors there is no inherent pre-requisite for NGOs to act democratically themselves; most supporters give money but take no active role or oversight in the organisation. Whilst participatory frameworks are intended to support the building of social capital and actively engage people in democratic processes, such social capital appears “valuable to some people at some times and places, and not at all valuable in others” (Skidmore et al., 2006, p. 11) and is not evenly distributed. Social capital is often embodied in the key relationships that exist between individuals or organisations across civil society, access to it is, therefore, negotiated via a range of background factors that include socio-economic status, geographical circumstances, ethnicity, religion, age, gender and sexual orientation (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000).

The foregoing does not suggest that NGOs are not a vital component of the democratic landscape but that caution is needed when such organisations claim to “represent” citizens. It highlights too that there has been a steady polarisation between “grassroots” civil society and corporatized NGOs (Fyfe, 2005; Knight, 1993). The ability to participate effectively is not neutral and is intensified or mitigated by the factors discussed above, because those participating in decision-making are often a small inside elite and because the systems of democratic engagement are themselves a barrier to participation for some (Bowler, Donovan, & Karp, 2002).

There exists a gap within our framework of civil society where digital media can be used to support informal, emergent issues-based citizen-led groups, reclaiming “spaces of ‘reality’ or ‘resistance’” (Fyfe, 2005, p. 553).

### 3. Policy Context

As we have seen, the current context is one of a widely estranged public and a government that relies more on science and experts than citizens to make decisions (Mälkiä et al., 2004; Norris, 2002). Citizens often perceive themselves to be excluded because they are outside the circle of trusted advisors (Power Inquiry, 2006). When governments do attempt to engage directly with citizens, the process can often be mediated and dominated by NGOs, creating a risk that other equally valid perspectives are missed.

Overcoming civic disengagement and reinvigorating democracy has been the subject of a number of recent policies in the UK. One solution to a lack of democratic efficacy has been framed in terms of political literacy. The government’s ‘together we can’ initiative (launched in 2005) was used to coordinate public engagement initiatives and heralds a move to deepen its focus on citizen engagement and representative democracy through projects such as the Power of Information Review (Mayo & Steinberg, 2007), a subsequent task force and a number of other new (or pending) initiatives that include policies on civic regeneration and participatory budgeting and legislation to increase levels of local engagement and participation.

The foregoing highlights government’s focus on reformulating the relationship between the individual, community and state so that it becomes less centralised with more decisions being made by those directly affected by them. For this to work, there is an inherent requirement on the part of the citizen to engage actively and effectively in the policy process — to, in effect, become the architects of their own democratic engagement strategy. However, as noted earlier, this presents a major challenge since less than half of all citizens wish to take part in democracy and only slightly more (53%) intend to vote, despite 83% seeing the voting act as being at least “fairly important” (Hansard Society, 2008).

### 4. Framing the Digital Deficit

There is a thread throughout current policy that strongly promotes the use of digital media as an important tool in citizen engagement. Indeed, digital media is a timely and pertinent tool that can clearly be (and is being) harnessed by democratic actors for democratic engagement (Miller, 2008).

In reality, attempts to radically re-engage are unlikely to happen without the internet playing at least some role. Government is therefore right to explore how the interactive aspects of digital media can be used to enable this to happen, enhancing other face-to-face forms of deliberation and engagement.

Before examining contexts for online engagement and deliberation it is important to establish the context in which it exists and to identify barriers to access and adoption. It is vital to directly address a very large digital elephant standing in the room, namely the issue of the digital deficit: you cannot promote digital engagement as an effective democratic tool if you do not overcome digital inequality.

Although internet use is increasing, a sizeable proportion of the British population is yet to go online. According to Ofcom (2008), 57% of UK homes have broadband internet access, however, the typical internet user is above-average income and education, in the 25-45 age cohort, male and educated (Oll, 2007). The reality of this is that national rates of adoption are reversed in inner cities, such as Liverpool and Glasgow, where an estimated 60% of residents lack internet access at home. Further compounding the problem is that late adopters do not see sufficient value in being online; the internet is expensive, intrusive or it requires them to develop skills that they do not have and do not necessarily know how to acquire or feel motivated to acquire.

This leaves a significant digital deficit that is most likely to exclude those who are already marginalised. Citizens with no internet access become further discriminated against, increasingly excluded from social, cultural and economic activities. This fact is starting to be recognised by governments and is the subject of emergent and embryonic policy relating to digital ubiquity in the UK (BERR & DCMS, 2008).

Significant barriers to ICT adoption remain. The term often used in this context is "digital divide", however, this is somewhat simplistic since the root causes vary but are broadly the result of socio-economic or educational disparity and disadvantage. Nine clearly identifiable components of a digital deficit can be seen (Chen, 2007):

- Bandwidth (slow access)
- Digital (lack of access)
- Educational (lack of skills)
- Linguistic
- Mobility (cannot reach or afford ICT)
- Motivation
- Time poor
- Disability
- Application

These in turn lead to four primary barriers to the effective personal adoption and use of ICT, namely (Hacker & van Dijk, 2000):

- Mental access – A lack of interest, motivation or anxiety.
- Material access – The inability to obtain access to technology.
- Skills access – Lack of 'digital' skills.
- Usage access – Lack of significant usage opportunities.

A fifth dimension acts as a barrier at the community level:

- Civil access – Lack of understanding of how ICT can be synthesised into community development activities

Extending this to a democratic context, it can be seen that a failure to alleviate a digital deficit will increase rather than diminish the democratic deficit and so a sixth barrier becomes pertinent for both individuals and communities:

- Democratic access – Unable to harness ICT for political participation or to influence (Norris, 2001).

Some argue that the 'digital divide' is short term and largely irrelevant; that it will be resolved over time by market forces. Most commentators disagree arguing that the societal transformation brought about by access to information (and the related disadvantage of not having access) is too significant to leave to chance. Information and communication enables individuals and communities to shape their identities, develop a shared sense of community and to gain insight into other, different communities as well as more easily take part in democracy (Keeble & Loader, 2001; Williamson, 2005).

## 5. Online Engagement

The internet does not of itself change an individual's motivation to become engaged, what it does do is reduce the barriers to engagement and hence lowers the motivational threshold at which citizens choose to engage (Williamson, 2007).

The findings of the Hansard Society's Digital Dialogues project — a three-year study of online government engagement (Miller, 2008) — highlight the benefits of what happens when citizens and government *do* talk online and why there is a need for a more sustained public deliberation with government. Standing in the way of this 'effective engagement' are barriers on both sides. On the government side, these include lack of "buy in" to principles of true engagement and a culture that is inherently averse to risk (and which perceives engaging with non-experts as risky).

The internet facilitates the kinds of single-issue politics that are becoming increasingly popular offline but these do not necessarily link back to traditional democratic processes or institutions. Instead, citizen-led online activism tends to be viral and anarchic, leading to a distributed model of political individualism. Nor do new technologies necessarily lead to an increase in the numbers of people participating. Whilst they provide access to a wider range of sources of information the overload arising from them may account for a reduction in participation (Bimber, 1998). Information is often conflicting yet consider that it appears to be online human-nature to congregate around like-minds, rather than to actively seek out difference (Witschge, 2002).

While some fear that these trends could lead to a fragmentation of the public sphere (Galston, 2003) others argue that the internet enables a more organic form of political engagement that fosters engagement by local communities (Alexander, 1999). Rather than assume that diverse groups and opinions require shepherding into a unitary public sphere, advocates of internet-enabled governance suggest that areas of civic interest congregate online and networks emerge that lead to new forms of engagement. Such re-invigoration of civil society can itself be a catalyst for democratic renewal and, as Sunstein (2001) argues, the internet in this regard is at least not bad for democracy although the tendency for activists to coalesce around their own interest groups remains as strong online as it does offline.

Civil society has always seen like-minded individuals and groups operate beyond economic and state systems, with varying degrees of formality and structure. Social movements, both online and off, come and go — emerging to challenge hegemonic values, existing social orientations and "the

modality of the social use of resources and cultural models” (Touraine, 2000). Rather than signalling a breakdown in democratic engagement, they require the government to respond in new ways.

## 6. Establishing New Models for Engagement

Recognising the primary importance of situating eDemocracy initiatives within their broader social setting with the intent of ensuring that they are open, accessible and transparent suggests that a strategy is needed to describe the processes by which a grounded leadership can draw in partners from civil society and government to facilitate and promote the transformative potential of digital media, privileging the necessary advocacy, awareness-building and disruptive practices that are required to initiate and sustain transformation. For this purpose the leadership role of grounded advocates (Williamson, 2007) is of critical importance since such actors facilitate and empower the creation of disruptive spaces where alternative discourses can arise. These spaces can be both physical and virtual and include underground publishing, social software or community meetings but can also lead to more institutionalised methods of engagement over time.

This section explores a model of engagement that recognises individual motivations for engagement as well as the changing roles that key actors perform in order to situate a number of key processes within a democratic framework whilst privileging the social sphere and transformative praxis. Two existing theoretical models are fused in a framework for engagement that is technologically agnostic and communally orientated. These are the Transtheoretical Model of Change (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1984; Prochaska & Velicer, 1997) and the Lifecycle for Social Movements (Moyer, 2001). Combining these models provides a framework in which to locate the key social and community attributes of emergent eDemocracy and this results in a process-oriented way of understanding how digital media is adopted within a democratic context.

The Transtheoretical Model of Change is often implemented as “Motivational Interviewing” and emerged from decision-making theory and motivational psychology. This incorporates a transtheoretical model of the stages of change, which act as a central construct around which individuals can modify behaviour (Velicer, Prochaska, Fava, Norman, & Redding, 1988). Originally this model was focussed on overcoming addictive behaviours. The model includes a series of independent variables which refer to both the process of change which must occur as well as a series of related outcome measures. These stages of change will be used here to define the key stages of awareness and process maturity applied to an emergent eDemocracy project and the associated pre-requisite engagement of individuals. This can be expressed as five levels of awareness and action (or readiness), which are both linear and temporal:

TABLE 1: STAGES OF CHANGE

Pre-contemplation	The person is not aware or not yet ready to consider that change is needed.
Contemplation	There is some awareness of the necessity (or desire) to change but resistance and ambivalence remains.
Preparation	At this stage people have become receptive to change and are actively considering how to make the changes needed.
Action	Actors are now engaged with making changes and adopting new ways of being or doing.
Maintenance	The changes are complete and new ways are now maintained.

Whereas traditional change models focus on influencing social norms, the Transtheoretical Model is based on individual motivation and intent. This is appropriate to grass-roots democratic engagement because such a model is able to allow for a resistance to systemic pressures to change, relying instead on individual motivation and valuing of the process or desired outcome

(Wilhelm, 2000). A key precept of motivational interviewing is that the focus is on individual engagement when the individual is ready, rather than on the system forcing change.

Motivation and awareness extends to the general population, encompassing government actors, civil society and activists. It is this latter group that provides "grounded leadership" as existing structures are challenged and new processes emerge: The catalyst for emergent eDemocracy comes from them. Such activities mirror the traditional life-cycle of social movements and Moyer (Moyer, 2001, pp., p.46) suggests that actors within such movements have four primary roles:

- Reformer
- Rebel
- Citizen
- Change-agent

Moyer suggests that each of these roles is needed to create and sustain social movements which work effectively. He suggests that social movements must be seen as responsible *citizens* by the wider public. At the same time, *rebels* must be willing to protest against established policies and social conditions and to speak out against issues that challenge hegemonic assumptions. To be effective, *change-agents* are needed who can educate and organise the public to become aware of such issues and then advocate for change. Finally, systems need *reformers* working with them. It is the *reformers* role to integrate new ideas into the mainstream.

Thus the actions of the activists influence and affect the stages of change for the wider population, leading through a range of socially-constructed roles and process that describe an emergent eDemocracy lifecycle, shown in *Figure 1*.

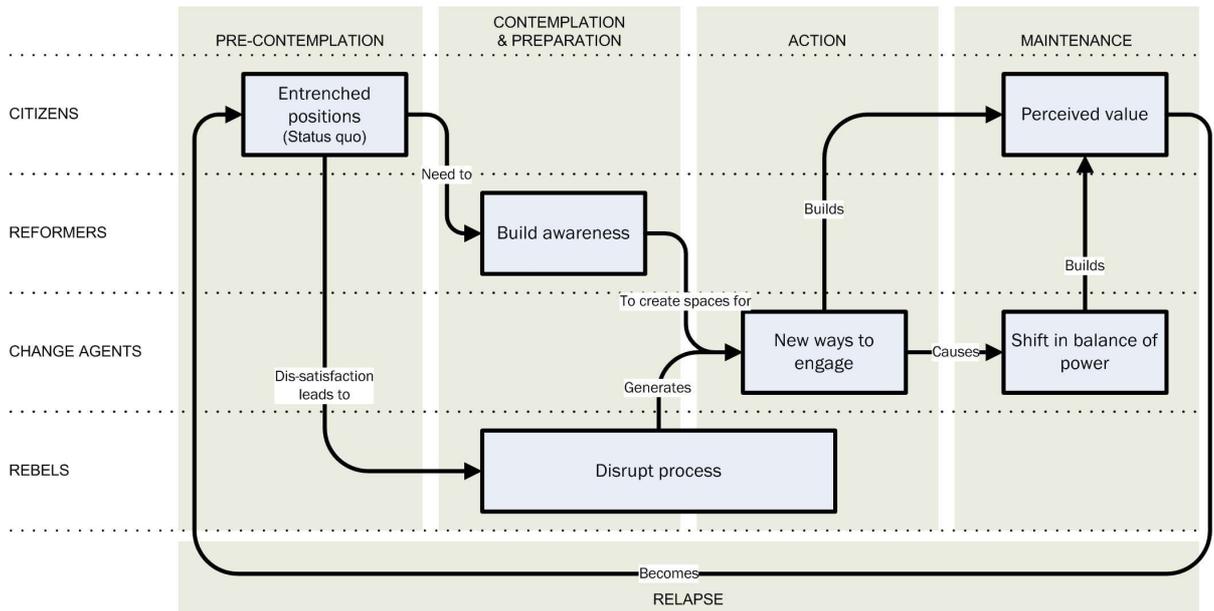


FIGURE 1: EMERGENT EDEMOCRACY LIFECYCLE.

The categories shown in *Figure 1* can be explored with regard to their implications and interactions as well as the different roles required by them, as *Table 2* shows.

TABLE 2: KEY STAGES

Entrenched positions	At the start of the process the <i>status quo</i> creates a sufficient level of disaffection that early-adopters of eDemocracy become active in attempting to force debate and promote alternatives.
Building awareness	This early activity creates limited but growing awareness and activism continues. However, this group is now joined by those who see opportunities for reforming the processes.
Disruption to existing processes	Identification of an opportunity has occurred and awareness-building will eventually lead to the emergence of new models of engagement. Some of these occur through the reformation of existing processes and others emerge from a transformative model that subverts existing practices. At this stage, success is dependent on key actors adopting and promoting new ways of engaging such that they can be translated into language understood by ordinary citizens.
New ways to engage	If the change-agents have been successful, the ideas that have been promoted now start to be adopted by the mainstream and become normative practice.
Shift in balance of power	If process has been sufficiently transformative then shifts in the balance of power should occur. Citizens have become more empowered and are more able to influence democratic process.
Perceived value	Models have been developed and processes refined and communicated such that citizens now see value in working this way and generally accept eDemocracy. At this point, eDemocracy becomes the status quo way of functioning.

Having reached the point where there is a general uptake of eDemocracy amongst citizens, new power-blocks and alliances can once again start to exert influence and the novelty of the new wears off. Relapse is now a potential problem, where the new systems become entrenched and fail to respond to individual needs. At this point there is a risk that a new power-elite, or bourgeois public sphere, will emerge to replace the previous one.

## 7. Conclusion

Digital media removes the barriers of space and time, allowing individuals to create effective issues-based campaigns that can quickly and spontaneously spread through viral networks. The largest of these can reach a tipping point where government policy is impacted, influenced and even changed. The key attributes of such campaigns are that they are driven independently, largely unplanned and take on a momentum of their own. The internet creates opportunities for civil society to form, disperse and re-form quickly on an issue-by-issue basis. Traditional civil society organisations certainly have a role to play in this but in the digital age they are more likely to be supporters and followers, rather than the innovators (Shirky, 2008). Indeed, when large NGOs attempt to use such new media models they can appear cumbersome and slightly forced (A Williamson, 2009).

The same is true for any government wanting to address the democratic deficit. The internet allows them to bypass the traditional limitations of consultation and engage with a wider public, thereby overcoming a constant criticism of attempts to engage (Williamson, 2007). For the truly connected government, talking to a wider audience is no longer just a top-down process but must include effective engagement with bottom-up campaigns too. If this situation is to become a reality, governments need to view digital media as supplementing and supporting wider forms of engagement, not replacing them. They must address digital inequalities and transform their

thinking and their focus from a top-down model of engagement based on risk aversion and a culture of technocracy to embrace a culture of rapidly shifting grass-roots-led viral emergence.

The effective use of digital media enhances citizens' ability to influence and affect policy outcomes not simply because they are enabling and transformative technologies but because of the social transformation that accompanies this and the potential for long-term adoption that results. This paper describes a temporal life-cycle for effective eDemocracy where access foreshadows literacy and content acts as a motivator for continued adoption. As the model matures, communities become creators of new online content and, ultimately, localised neutral channels for dissemination emerge. Clearly articulated leadership roles emerge, positioned within an overarching social model of transformation. These roles change as the process matures and adoption processes also change, highlighting not only the key stages for the emergence of eDemocracy but also the inherent risk that such process themselves become a tool of a new power elite.

Partnerships are fundamental to the effectiveness of eDemocracy. Yet they also show that many challenges exist to establishing effective community-government models for effective engagement. Not least of which are the entrenched views of "government as expert" and an approach of "benevolent bullying"; where those who hold the power support change only so far as it complies with their agenda and their control is not challenged. These risks can only be overcome by increased civic awareness and an attitudinal change towards digital media that positions it as not simply "just useful" but as an integral part of democratic process itself; where citizens see their role to not simply to call for change but to lead it. In accepting this, it becomes necessary for government to value a diversity of opinions and knowledge, giving equal recognition to the folksonomies of civil society as is currently given to the formal taxonomies of experts.

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