Does a Networked Society Foster Participatory Democracy Or is Commitment to Place-based Community Still a Necessity for Civic Engagement?

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Will civic conversation accompany the virtual beers shared with digital netizens while bowling in a cyber bowling alley? Based on a look at events in this century, there is little evidence that administrative rationality functions properly or that society will benefit from a natural evolution of political forms. The vast majority of people are uninterested in civic affairs, and a growing number of people question the effectiveness of public institutions. Indicators suggest that engagement in politics and government has declined during the last generation (Putnam, 1995; Putnam, 2000). More disturbing is the claim that most adults in advanced industrial societies lack any desire for involvement in public life or any sense that this activity might have intrinsic rewards (Winner, 1992). Citizen participation has been a requisite of democracy – from its inception in the Greek polis, to all of the various forms currently proffered. For those of us who believe that democratic forms of government are the structures most capable of facilitating self-actualization and realization of human potential, the dearth of civic engagement is cancerous.

The growth of technical innovations that revolutionize the communication of information has been heralded as the means to rejuvenate and extend democracy (Tsagarousianou, Tambini, & Bryan, 1998; White, 1997). This claim, or hope, has been made for almost every previous form of technological innovation: writing, paper, printing press, radio, television, and even the airplane and automobile (Nye, 1994). These past innovations most definitely brought about changes to society, but the extent to which they furthered democratic ideals is limited. The rapid expansion of the information superhighway has fuelled the debate about whether this new technology can strengthen democracy (Bimber, 1996; Dutton, 1996a; Laird, 1993; Winner, 1992). Despite the lessons from the history of technology, claims that the new forms of telecommunications will foster more democratic social and political relationships – both to those who already enjoy the benefits of democracy, as well as to disenfranchised and oppressed people in the remainder of the world – have not subsided, and perhaps have grown stronger.

The data for this article is part of a larger research endeavour, supported by the Annenberg Center and the Annenberg School for Communication – University of Southern California, entitled "Metamorphosis: Transforming the Ties that Bind." This ongoing project focuses on contemporary social change, the issue of whether there can be "urban community," and how communication behaviours can help to create or destroy the "ties that bind" individuals into that ephemeral concept "community." The Metamorphosis project studies the problem of "belonging" in urban community to identify the communication processes that undermine or foster belonging. The intent of the project is to outline the communication resources that people can employ to foster "belonging communities"