

Prospects for electronic democracy in the United States: rethinking communication and social policy

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Introduction

The subject of democratic communities in cyberspace, and the possible role of government in supporting them, has been of great interest to a growing number of scholars (Barber, 1984; Arterton, 1987; Becker and Scarce, 1987; Abramson et al., 1988; Rheingold, 1993). In this article, we present a case for treating communication policy as social policy in efforts to realize ideals of 'electronic democracy'. Consistent with the relationship between citizenship and 'social rights' articulated by T.H. Marshall (1950), we argue below from the position that communication policy must be central to any meaningful deliberations about the future of the modern democratic welfare state.

We maintain below not only that an assault on the welfare state is an assault on universal citizenship, but also that communication policy-as-social policy must be central to the revitalization of the welfare state's mandate to secure the rights of citizenship in modern capitalist democracies. Focusing particularly on the context of the United States, we advocate a new New Deal in which it is understood that the relationship between citizenship and communication are central to a democratic society and that, contrary to prevailing belief, a worthy recognition of the limits of state power does not in itself provide a rationale for a disappearance of state involvement from the public realm of communication.¹

There have always been vigorously opposing views on what institutions and practices can be labeled truly democratic.² Our narrower aim in this article is to describe and critically examine a broad set of trends well underway in the US which, when taken as a whole, constitute the state-of-

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the-art for what sometimes is referred to as 'electronic democracy'. In order to do so, we wish to acknowledge some of the ambiguities to be found in the current use of this compound term. Some enthusiasts of cyberspace isolate the recent and rapid diffusion of the Internet as the defining feature in the emergence of electronic democracy, but we must also note a parallel euphoric discourse about a 'convergent' multimedia environment which combines radio and television call-in talk shows, the Internet, interactive cable television, 'wireless cable', computer polling, satellites and other developments in infrastructure and services. For many, the idea of electronic democracy is represented by the sum of all of the many technological and institutional possibilities now before us.

Moving from the point of acknowledging euphoric discourse about the prospects for democracy posed by technological development in the means of communication in modern society, to asking what are the minimal requirements for grounding such optimism, we conclude that there must be a revisable consensus about the responsibilities, possibilities and limitations of government. Furthermore, we conclude that such a consensus should be grounded in the revitalization, rather than the abandonment, of the idea of a democratic welfare state. In using the term 'welfare state', we find useful a definition provided by Asa Briggs:

A 'welfare state' is a state in which organized power is deliberately used (through politics and administration) in an effort to modify the play of market forces in at least three directions — first, by guaranteeing individuals and families a minimum income irrespective of the market value of their work or their property; second, by narrowing the extent of insecurity by enabling individuals and families to meet certain 'social contingencies (for example, sickness, old age and unemployment) which lead otherwise to individual and family crises; and third, by ensuring that all citizens without distinction of status or class are offered the best standards available in relation to a certain agreed range of social services. (Briggs, 1961: 228)

In the United States, well before the current 'Republican revolution', attacks on the welfare state have sought to hold individuals and communities more responsible for their economic well being, and this despite the fact that the problems they face in terms of de-skilling, union-busting, under-employment, capital flight and de-industrialization mostly are beyond individual and local control. Under these conditions, currently prevailing assumptions that conditions of robust competition can be established and maintained adequately in order to meet consumer needs, and that to the extent that market failure occurs it can be resolved by voluntarism and philanthropy, make it deeply challenging to develop an argument for extending the ideals of the welfare state in new directions. Nevertheless, rather than accept weak premises for the elimination of the democratic welfare state, we argue for the latter's reinvigoration through communication policy.

For the sake of argument: class division on the information superhighway

Ideas about electronic democracy generally presuppose the existence and/or the possibility of citizens giving life to their views through exchanges in new forms of public space. Whether these new spaces are meeting the ideals of cyber-democrats is an open question, as is the question of what are the defining boundaries of these new spaces. Hannah Arendt (1958) argues that two fundamental characteristics of public space, and therefore of politics, are their boundlessness and their unpredictability. If we accept this perspective, then we also accept that we can no more hope to settle the boundaries of what is legitimately 'political' any more than we can (or should) hope to end politics. Consistent with Arendt on this point, Alberto Melucci raises the question of which institutions legitimately represent the public interest and he argues that the 'enlargement of the public space' is 'the task for a real "postindustrial" democracy' (1985: 815–16).³

The information superhighway, also known in the US as the 'national information infrastructure', is a loosely defined vision of how innovation in telecommunications has begun and likely will continue to expand the flow of commerce, politics and popular culture both nationally and globally. The idea of a multimedia superhighway is legitimated to a great degree in the policy arena by the rhetoric of expanding democratic participation. While we do not deny the appeal of this rhetoric, or that it has some basis in the everyday life experiences of a small portion of the US population, we cautiously offer the following scenario as a counterpoint.

Two contradictory but ultimately compatible models of network activity will continue to emerge on the superhighway. One can be called the 'consumer' model, and the other the 'civic' model. The two models have distinct characteristics, but they will be increasingly interdependent, particularly in the face of a declining ethos in the US towards 'public service' media and 'public interest' policy-making, and due to the more general ideological backlash against 'welfare' economics which, as at least a few have argued, has been particularly misplaced with respect to telecommunications (Horwitz, 1989; Stone, 1991).

While we are likely to see some uses of the superhighway become increasingly stratified along class lines, there will be some uses in common across social strata. Based on patterns of the consumption of goods, services and political ideas and representatives, all strata will be segmented, targeted and mass-democratized in a further stage in the realization of Max Weber's (1946) gloomy characterization of modern democracy not as a general uplifting of the civic virtue of the public, but as 'the levelling of the governed'. New forms of entertainment and shopping will constitute the bulk of innovative new services available to consumers. While ostensibly 'interactive' ('Press now to purchase; to select a story ending; to register

your opinion; to vote.’), most patterns of mediated communication will be characterized by their high degree of institutional and hierarchical control, and by their high-bandwidth downstream flows and low-bandwidth upstream flows.

The volume and nature of network interactivity will vary significantly on the basis of socio-economic status. The information superhighway offers the prospect of broadband convergence and interactivity in such a way as to overlay social stratification upon market segmentation. The civic model will primarily occupy a stratum constituted by significant portions of the new class of technical and professional intelligentsia. While the spending power of the new class as a whole makes its members prime targets within the consumer model, a portion of the new class — the portion which constitutes much of the ‘attentive public’, that is, the audience for, and sometimes members of, policy elites — will engage proportionately more frequently in political deliberations than will members of lower strata. Notwithstanding postmodern assumptions about the bankruptcy of such a concept as ‘authenticity’, the ‘culture of critical discourse’ described by Alvin Gouldner (1979) in his account of the rise of the new class will indeed be internally egalitarian and communitarian, and externally effective in exercising political and economic power (see also Bruce-Briggs, 1979). For the new class, electronic democracy will facilitate and confirm its members’ political franchise and their authentic access to the closest contemporary approximation of the early bourgeois public sphere described by Habermas (1989) and others. Finally, the cosmopolitanism of the new class will be enhanced by its activity on the superhighway. The high spatial mobility of its members will be mirrored by their high network mobility and activity in the formation and maintenance of political alliances and economic relations on a highly privatized, translocal and increasingly transnational basis. The activities of the new class on the superhighway will be exclusionary, both by default and by design. As Christopher Lasch (1994: 47) observes:

To an alarming extent, the privileged classes — by an expansive definition, the top 20 percent — have made themselves independent not only of crumbling industrial cities but of public services in general. They send their children to private schools, insure themselves against medical emergencies by enrolling in company-supported plans, and hire private security guards to protect themselves against mounting violence. It is not just that they see no point in paying for public services they can no longer use; many of them have ceased to think of themselves as Americans in any important sense, implicated in America’s destiny for better or worse. Their ties to an international culture of work and leisure — of business, entertainment, information, and ‘information retrieval’ — make many members of the elite deeply indifferent to the prospect of national decline.

By contrast with patterns in the civic model, the information superhigh-

way will be based almost exclusively on a consumer model for lower strata. Wage earners, the precariously employed and the unemployed will interact infrequently on a horizontal dimension, except primarily in commercial modes which are institutionally and hierarchically structured and controlled for commercial purposes such as games and shopping, and also to do more routine forms of telework. The low spatial mobility of lower strata will be mirrored by low network mobility and limited perceived prospects for using available network resources for creative expression or upward mobility, and by limited felt need for horizontal or upstream communication flows beyond those which are structured for commercial purposes or for the accessing of social services where they are available.

The sense in which the consumer and civic models are interdependent is that the economic viability of the civic model will depend on revenue generated from the consumer model. Highly interactive and non-commercial horizontal communication activity, which will be engaged in primarily by members of the new class when they function not as consumers but as political actors, will be subsidized by revenue from high-bandwidth downstream flows, which will be consumed by all social strata.

We do not believe that this is all that is in store on the information superhighway, but we believe it is aptly descriptive of the challenge facing any politically progressive vision of the emancipatory potential of these new forces of production.

Case study: talk media and electronic populism

While discussions of the shape of the interactive future remain speculative, there are other aspects of electronic democracy in its broader sense which are already well developed, and about which definite conclusions may be drawn. The press and political commentators increasingly have discussed the significance of the expansion of the talk format during the 1980s and 1990s. In the past decade, the number of all-talk or talk-news radio stations has quadrupled, making 'talk' the second most listened to radio format in the US (Jost, 1994). At the same time, the cable television industry has increasingly turned to talk shows in efforts to generate programming for targeted audiences. The most popular of the political radio call-in programs, *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, continues to attract listeners and boasts that it is heard daily on more than 660 American stations.

Talk shows frequently do audience polling and subsequently report results back on-air, a practice which has come to be identified as part of the repertoire of electronic democracy. The practice of polling either by telephone or by computer is, of course, problematic, due to the potential for producing and disseminating misleading results. Becker and Scarce (1987) distinguish between two general concepts of electronic democracy,

namely, one which stresses the possibilities for expanding access to political deliberation, and one which stresses the use of innovations for polling and voting. Like other thoughtful comparisons on this point, the authors place greater store in the emancipatory possibilities for deliberation and consensus building in relatively unstructured fora. In contrast, views on electronic voting and polling tend to reflect apprehension about the validity of data obtained through voluntary call-ins or through the registration of votes on computer-recorded polls. Among the concerns of those who question the wisdom of on-line polling and telephone call-ins is that such activities may short-circuit the more sober deliberations of representative democracy. By enabling consumers to impulsively register pseudo-opinions on matters about which they had little or no knowledge prior to being whipped into a frenzy by the missionary zeal of a highly partisan host such as Rush Limbaugh, talk show polling may be a misuse of political power (Alter, 1995).

It does not take much sophistication in the knowledge of survey research methods to realize that those who choose to place a telephone call in response to a question posed by a television talk show host, let alone those who happen to be watching the show at all, are unlikely to be representative of any population other than of viewers of that show who would choose to call in. To then generalize beyond that group is not only bad method, it also is unethical, since talk show hosts would know that they are misleading their viewers. Despite disclaimers offered by hosts that on-line or call-in samples are not representative, they regularly report back to their viewers and listeners the percentage of callers who hold position *x* or *y* on a particular issue. Unfortunately, we cannot assume that audience members will pay heed to such disclaimers, which of course serves the interest of the talk show host who wishes to gain authority by seeming to be scientific in having found confirmation of his or her claims. This problem comes with the territory of 'talk show democracy', such as it is, and it even has a pejorative label in the trade: 'SLOPS' or 'self-selected, listener-oriented public surveys' (Moore, 1994).

Unfortunately, we cannot hope that talk show hosts who trade in such currency will dedicate much effort to educate their audiences. Despite general awareness of this problem among social scientists and policy makers, now would hardly be a politically receptive time to urge for regulations requiring radio and television networks to carry programming to educate audiences on the potential for public deception through the use of pseudo-scientific data.

The irreverent and humorous style of some radio talk hosts has led political analysts to focus on the entertainment value rather than political impact of the talk phenomenon, and indeed to suggest that such discourse has little bearing on the real business of politics. This view certainly offers a convenient escape hatch for any talk show host who wishes not to be held

accountable for the political views expressed entertainingly on his or her show. Simply because a host such as Rush Limbaugh considers himself to be an entertainer rather than a journalist does not mean that his ideas are taken so lightly by the audience. Audience members may smile and laugh when they listen to Limbaugh discuss 'wacko' environmentalists and 'feminazis', but that doesn't mean that they reject his characterizations. Ironically, there is a growing consensus that 'news' and 'entertainment' should not be held as antithetical, and perhaps more people would be interested in the news if it were more engrossing, more entertaining. If that is the case, then it becomes difficult to justify protecting talk show hosts from accountability on the basis of their being called 'entertainers'.

Enabling citizens to rationally familiarize themselves with the political agendas of talk shows, and equipping them with sufficient understanding about sound and unsound social science research (with respect to polling), are two very important steps which can be taken towards disarming hate and deception from the talk media phenomenon. However, such an effort would be premised on the assumption that there are affirmative steps which can and should be taken to cultivate competent citizenship. Of course, we live in an era of US history in which the political tide has for many years — many years before the 'Republican revolution' and the rise of Newt Gingrich — been aimed against having government play an affirmative role in promoting civic competence. The assault on social policies through which governments in the past assumed responsibility for easing the suffering caused by market failures is only heating up. The new means of communication can be every bit as useful, if not more so, for generating social bile and stimulating agendas of hatred by one group against another, as for binding a society according to the touted communitarian ideals underlying the discourse on electronic democracy. In the remainder of this article, we argue that a democratic and responsible government can make great strides as a guarantor of a democratic civil society by meeting a minimal set of demands for a social policy of communication.

The unsettling of communication: US media policies in transition

One of the key factors determining the nature of any future electronic democracy is the way in which its elements are regulated. We are at a historic moment in media policy making in the US due to the confluence of technological and industrial convergence, coupled with the political endorsement of a Republican Congress. Not since the passage of the Communications Act of 1934 has such comprehensive telecommunications reform reached so close to becoming law. As of the writing of this article, both

houses of Congress have been moving towards a consensus on sweeping reforms in telecommunications policy which will eliminate existing media cross-ownership policies with the aim of opening up the number of competitors in previously restricted markets. Even if legislation is not passed in the current Congressional session, it seems likely that we will see a similar law passed within the very near future. Given that likelihood, it would be useful to understand the general foundations of current US media policy. Different regimes have arisen for different media, and they display different potentials for democracy.

The least regulated form of mediated communication in the US is paper-based publishing. As the quintessential form of publishing, newspapers are privately owned and controlled enterprises which enjoy the fullest protection among the media industries from government intervention under the First Amendment to the US Constitution. Newspapers may publish what they choose, within the constraints of laws governing libel and obscenity. While a newspaper is vulnerable to lawsuits for libelous statements, US law does not insure that individuals or groups have access to the pages of a newspaper in order to respond to personal attacks or to positions with which they disagree. Arguments to extend access to newspapers have not succeeded.

Any discussion about how 'the public interest' is defined with respect to US broadcasting must focus on the commercial system. To the extent that Congress has allowed public service broadcasting to exist in the US, it is a very poor cousin in comparison with systems in other liberal democracies. While subject to defamation and obscenity laws, commercial television and radio station owners are restricted in some ways by having to fulfil public service requirements such as producing local news and public affairs programs. Prior to 1987, broadcasters were obligated under the Federal Communication Commission's 'Fairness Doctrine' to air opposing views on controversial issues of public importance. The elimination of the Fairness Doctrine is seen by some observers as having paved the way for stations to carry highly partisan political talk shows without having to worry about whether they are fairly representing opposing views either within the show or on the station at all. It appears that the Republican Party has gained a great deal from this development, as it is estimated that 70 per cent of talk shows are politically conservative in their orientation (Kurtz, 24 October 1994).

Under US telecommunications law, a 'common carrier' is distinguished from a broadcaster by virtue of the latter holding no obligations to provide direct access to groups wishing to purchase transmission time. This was the case even prior to the FCC's elimination of the Fairness Doctrine, and the position was affirmed by the US Supreme Court in the case of the *Columbia Broadcasting System v. Democratic National Committee*, 412 US 94 (1973). What is unique about a common carrier is that it is, in essence,

for hire by anyone with the ability to pay the going rate. The rates charged by local telephone common carriers are governed by public utility commissions in each of the 50 states. In the absence of real competition for the delivery of basic local telephone monopoly service, a regulatory authority exists in order to protect consumers in terms of price and quality of service. Due to technological changes, new potential competitors and an anti-regulatory political climate, it is likely that in the near future Congress will enact laws promoting local and long distance competition in transmission services, thereby justifying the diminution of the authority of public utility commissions.

Since the breakup of AT&T in the early 1980s, common carriers have moved progressively into electronic publishing. Under the authority of the US District Court judge, Harold Greene, who presided over the break-up, restrictions prohibiting electronic publishing by regional Bell Operating Companies (RBOCs) were lifted in 1991. However, the RBOCs are prohibited by Congressional statute from being video publishers within the geographic areas where they own and operate local telephone monopolies. This restriction is expected to be lifted soon, in accordance with the efforts by telephone common carriers to develop new switched broadband networks and to become vertically integrated video publishers and distributors, and not simply distributors of video signals originated by other parties.

The availability of universal telephone service in the US and its historical relationship to the issue of poverty is a complicated one (see for example Calabrese, 1992; Mueller, 1993). Recently, the ascendant conventional policy wisdom about universality at the dawn of technological and industrial convergence has shifted the focus from 'service' to 'access', as Browning (1994: A14) describes:

Universal service is a 1930s solution to a 1990s problem. It is time to bury it — slowly and with great care to preserve both its spirit and its many achievements, but bury it nonetheless. Instead, regulators must create a new regulatory regime that gives people the power to create whatever telecom services they can imagine, instead of merely the right to demand the same services as their neighbors. Instead of universal service from the telecom network, this requires universal access to the network.

A principal underlying assumption of this vision is that there will in the future be robust competition, which will obviate the need for extensive regulatory mechanisms as currently exist to safeguard against the monopoly power of the old regime. Under this assumption, it is argued that it would be unreasonable to hold private competitors individually responsible for ensuring universality of access on the basis of need, but rather if the state chooses to develop a need-based social policy to promote network access it should do so independently of the infrastructure market, just as it does

in welfare policies for food, housing and health care. Ironically, this envisioned 'spinning off' of a social policy obligation from protected monopolies to government bureaucracies, based as it is on the dubious assumption that a perfect market of robust infrastructure competition is on the near horizon, has been generated at a time when the assault on the welfare state has heated up considerably in the US. It remains to be seen whether and how universal access to new means of communication will receive serious and sustained political commitment.

Cable television companies are unique in that they are monopolies which are subject to minimal regulations. Under federal law, municipalities may demand that the cable firm provide public, educational and government access channels, to be used by local citizens according to their needs and interests. Also, within certain guidelines, local broadcast stations are able to have their signals carried by the local cable system. However, the choice of commercial channels provided by the cable company is not subject to interference by the franchising authority. Most of the population served by cable television service in the US are customers of multiple system operators (MSOs), some of which are vertically integrated owners or part-owners of cable channels carried on their systems. Based on the 1992 Cable Act, vertically integrated MSOs cannot refuse to license channels they own to competing delivery systems by dealing only exclusively with the delivery system they own. This notable step enables other delivery systems to compete more viably in the same localities. In the future, these companies may be able to program the same or similar services in competition with cable MSOs. Of course, depending on future legislation, telephone companies may be permitted to acquire significant financial interests in or total ownership of MSOs operating in their service areas, thus removing their principal competitors. At present, however, in the absence of any real competition, the cable MSOs enjoy the First Amendment freedoms of a broadcaster and the absence of competition of a telephone common carrier. It has been the best of all possible worlds, but it may soon end. Cable MSOs are mostly heavily indebted, and they will inevitably rely on infusions of capital from telephone companies and other new potential entrants in the wake of further deregulation.

This brief review of the different traditions of regulation of the US media industries indicates that, far from there being one consistent line of policy, there are a wide range of attempted answers to basic democratic questions about freedom of expression, universality and openness of access, public service and plurality of viewpoints. There is no single way of regulating the media which policy makers in the US must choose as though it is the only one consistent with the Constitution or the basic habits of American life. Rather, there is room for a vigorous debate over which elements of these different regulatory traditions would best ensure the evolution of electronic democracy.

The Internet: ownership and access

Although the structure of ownership and control of the Internet is not a 'model' of media policy per se, its unique features warrant attention. The demand for political information on the Internet tends to be high, and efforts to satisfy it come from municipal, state and federal governments, as well as from commercial sources. Predictably, studies show that political activism among cyberspace users is higher than in the general population, with users being more interested in voting in elections, in participating in 'electronic town hall' meetings, in accessing the voting records of elected officials, and in sending e-mail to officials (Wu, 1995: 22–3).⁴

While the Internet began as a federally funded means of communication for scientists, its expanded use by a much broader range of academics and non-academics, and the development of new, easier to use storage and retrieval capabilities, has changed its character and increased the commercial viability of many of its aspects. Increasingly, the infrastructure on which communication via the Internet relies is operated by commercial vendors (Kahin, 1990). Government agencies, research institutes and universities (many of which rely on government funds) pay for access to the privately operated telecommunications infrastructure which serves the Internet. Simultaneously, there is growth in the availability of commercial access to the Internet by corporations, individuals and groups not affiliated with government agencies, research institutes and universities. In the future, services provided on the Internet increasingly will be commercial.

A frequently asked question about the highly decentralized infrastructure called the Internet is what is at stake for democracy in the ownership of its component parts? Is there something intrinsically 'public' or 'non-public' about communication by virtue of who owns the space where it occurs? The issue of ownership is sometimes considered by contemporary progressives to be the primary, if not the sole, criterion for judging the publicness of a communications infrastructure. As a past ideal, the measure of the authenticity of publicity in the era of the early bourgeois public sphere in Europe was the degree to which ideas could be subject to egalitarian debate among political equals. In retrospect, the spaces in which such discourse took place are seen as 'public' by virtue of the activities involved in subjecting ideas to publicity. The proliferation of publications and salons on the eve of the French Revolution, and of *samizdat* and underground theatre on the eve of the velvet revolutions in Central Europe, were made possible not by state-secured subsidies but by individual and group mobilization efforts. In both 1789 and in 1989, civil society rather than the state provided the economic foundations for what generally have been assessed as authentic public spaces. Clearly, there is a risk of suffering from illusions about the absence of state power where such power simply is concealed effectively, but the question remains whether

commercialization of an infrastructure is tantamount to it becoming undemocratic. Progressive sentiments notwithstanding, any ethical or legal challenge to continued commercialization of the Internet faces the very difficult burden of explaining under what circumstances commercial ownership would contradict the possibility of undistorted public communication.

As a 'model' of policy making, the Internet is notable for the near absence of content controls at present. As the popular press coverage of the Internet demonstrates on a daily basis, the enthusiasm for electronic democracy is generally coupled with the optimism that the Internet will remain an uncontrollable medium where anarchy reigns. This 'openness', and the ability it affords individuals and groups to roam, express and associate freely, is what much of the democratic optimism is about. Among those addressing issues regarding the future directions of media policy developments in an era of rapid convergence are the members of an idealistic and active 'community network movement' that adheres predominantly to the idea that the best model for a future public telecommunications infrastructure will be one that holds dear to non-commercial values, such as those that have prevailed until recently on the Internet. It will be interesting to see if this movement's efforts are more lasting and fruitful than those of the US media access movement of the 1970s. However, what cannot be disputed is that lasting decisions about telecommunications and the public interest soon will be codified into public policy. The perspective of public interest advocates for electronic democracy and its relationship to such developments can be summarized as follows.

The next few years will be an opportunity for public-interest groups to discover whether there really is a grassroots constituency

who want power to become senders of information and not just receivers, who will insist on using the information superhighway to participate in debates and influence government, and therefore will refuse to be forced by the new technology into the role of passive information consumers. (James Love, Taxpayer Assets Project, quoted in *Telecommunications Public Interest Newsletter*, 1994)

Towards a newer deal: communication and citizenship in an age of cyberspace

It would be foolish to deny that the national and global information infrastructures which today are presented as being full of empowering democratic potential are heavily constrained and shaped by market imperatives. The dominant role of communications media in the US and throughout the world has been shaped far more by the dual imperatives of capital accumulation and instrumental rationality than by any particular aspirations for 'democracy'. We believe that, to the extent that particular

variants of democratic changes and democratic structures can be shown in practice to be useful in the realization of those imperatives, such changes and structures will be tolerated. Otherwise, they face a constant struggle against marginalization. We believe that the revitalization of the welfare state, including a fuller consideration given to communication policy as social policy, is essential to even minimally challenge and mitigate against the excesses of those imperatives.

For many decades, defenses of the welfare state have attempted to define the minimal needs of citizens in a democratic society and to prescribe the role of good government in facilitating the fulfilment of such needs (Marshall, 1950; Duncan, 1989; Goodin, 1988; Gutmann, 1988a). Few would claim that there are no genuine needs which must be met in order for individuals to be able to live in dignity as responsible citizens. However, some liberal theorists have claimed that an argument in favor of government taking responsibility for meeting such needs is an argument against liberty. In his famous essay on two concepts of liberty, negative and positive, Isaiah Berlin (1969) gives preference to the former. Negative liberty is based on removing obstacles which may impede the pursuit of individual interests, particularly where government is involved, whereas positive liberty is based on actively promoting the pursuit of collectively defined interests through government mechanisms. In the former (negative liberty), individuals are left to define and satisfy their own needs as they choose, while in the latter (positive liberty), individuals are assumed to share basic needs in common and those who are unable to meet such needs themselves are assisted in doing so by state intervention. In the US, and increasingly throughout the world, the idea of freedom of expression is conceived in practice primarily as a negative right.

Proponents of the welfare state argue that in order to be truly free to participate as a citizen one must have certain common needs met. As one theorist argues:

The significance of poverty, then, is not just the suffering it involves, though that is obviously important, but the fact that it represents an undeserved exile from society. It is the failure of libertarian arguments to recognize and come to terms with this fact that ultimately destroys their moral viability. There is something deeply and undeniably unjust about a social order that necessarily frustrates fulfilment of the promises it makes. (Moon, 1988: 29)

Furthermore, in order to ensure the broadest range of political participation and representation, it is the responsibility of the state to see that such a threshold of needs is reached. Only from that starting point can a citizen be free to exercise his or her autonomous judgment. Where there are impediments beyond individuals' control prohibiting them from satisfying such needs, the intervention of the welfare state is justified. Otherwise, such individuals lack the means to function as enlightened citizens. Indeed,

this line of thinking has been a major justification for publicly funded education (Gutmann, 1988b).

The modern democratic welfare state in the USA generally is acknowledged to have its origins in the New Deal of the 1930s. This was not initiated as a foundation for socialism but as a means of delivering capitalism from violent opposition at a time of widespread dispossession (Ehrenreich, 1985: 78–138). More generally, as Claus Offe (1984: 154) has noted, the welfare state ‘is a device to stabilize, rather than a step in the transformation of, capitalist society’.

The collection of policies and programs which were instituted under the administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt in the years following the stock market crash of 1929 and the onset of the Great Depression had, as their initial aims, relief and recovery, and later reform of the economic system. While the Roosevelt administration acted with minimal contact with British economist John Keynes, they held two basic principles in common: namely, a disbelief in the market’s self-correcting potential and a belief that government spending is necessary to stimulate the process of capital accumulation (Zinn, 1966a: 403–4; Barber, 1967: 227–58; Heilbroner, 1972). This meant not only bail-outs of capitalist enterprises, but also ‘priming the pump’ by subsidizing consumption.

When he first became president in 1933, Roosevelt bailed out corporations and the banking system, and he developed programs to employ young people in public works projects and to subsidize state relief systems. According to Ehrenreich, this ‘first New Deal’ represented ‘a fundamentally conservative social policy’, and it was later, in 1935, that Roosevelt began to respond to massive unrest among the unemployed and the radicalizing labour movement by ‘moving sharply to the left’ in the ‘second New Deal’, the latter of which more accurately can be called the basis of the US welfare state (1985: 89–95).

The principal change in the second New Deal was the increased recognition paid to stabilizing the labor force of the capitalist economy. Particularly noteworthy among second New Deal legislation was the passage in 1935 of the National Labor Relations Act, also known as the ‘Wagner Act’ after Senator Robert F. Wagner of New York. The Wagner Act guaranteed the right of labor to organize, to bargain collectively and to strike (Zinn, 1966b: 195–200). To a great degree, the Wagner Act extended rights of free association and free expression into the workplace. The historical significance of this event is great since, in combination with other legislation regulating wages and hours, eliminating sweatshops, prohibiting child labor and guaranteeing minimal safety standards, it provided the foundation for modern ‘industrial democracy’ in the US. It is exemplary of the broader 20th-century movement towards defining the role of the state as guarantor of ‘social rights’, the means needed to secure access to the prevailing standard of living and thus the full benefits of citizenship

(Marshall, 1950).⁵ In other terms, the 'positive' concept of liberty, as defined by Isaiah Berlin (1969), might be said to have gained in relative importance against 'negative' liberty.

One line of argument which must be confronted in relating communication policy and the welfare state has to do with the very assumption that 'needs' of any sort ought to be the primary concern in a discussion about democracy and citizenship. Taken for granted as such a position is by progressives, there is something fundamental about this assumption which must be defended in light of a critique such as Hannah Arendt's (1958) towards the progressive instrumentalization of an ostensibly 'public' realm. For Arendt, whose work provides a particularly important departure point for any study of citizenship, contemporary publicity amounts to simply the airing of positions and concerns over economic questions of interest either to capitalists or to those who suffer economically under capitalism. Arendt finds this purpose of publicity to amount to a reduction of public life to a preoccupation with 'the social' at the expense of 'the political', the former being geared towards administrative (instrumental) concerns with articulating and satisfying needs, and the latter being geared toward the agonistic expression of virtue. Arendt notes that the distinctive trait of the ancient Athenian *oikos* (household) was that people lived together to fulfil their needs, that is, to sustain their lives. In contrast, the *polis* was the realm of freedom, 'and if there was a relationship between these two spheres, it was a matter of course that the mastering of the necessities of life in the household was the condition for freedom of the polis' (1958: 30–1). Arendt argues that by failing to keep the *oikos* (the realm of necessity) and *polis* (the realm of freedom) separate, public virtue is displaced by a 'passion of compassion' that is linked to biological necessity and, potentially, to violence as a way to end suffering (1963: 108–10). Arendt also is critical of the modern concept of economic 'equality' (contra political equality), which in her view is based on conformism, whereas in antiquity 'the polis, was permeated by a fiercely agonal spirit, where everybody had constantly to distinguish himself from all others, to show through unique deeds or achievements that he was the best of all' (1958: 41). Arendt feels that a preoccupation with needs (the realm of 'the social') has brought on the demise of the public realm, and that needs should be satisfied in such a manner so as to not make our concept of 'the political' one in which administration, rather than virtue, is of central importance. Presumably, according to Arendt's perspective, administration can be handled apolitically by neutral experts and technocrats, a deeply problematic position which begs the question of what distinguishes 'the social' and 'the political' (Bernstein, 1983: 207–23).

The position that the state has a responsibility for securing certain 'social' or 'positive' rights of citizenship is, of course, under serious attack today, and while even in the case of the USA we are not likely to see a

complete rollback of the welfare state, there is no consensus as to what the minimum requirements are to guarantee one's status as a citizen. Furthermore, current debates over the threshold of needs beneath which a democratic welfare state should not fall are not just about the quantity of human needs, but their quality as well, for example, in deciding whether to legitimate or delegitimate a particular claim by defining it as 'public' or 'private' (Fraser, 1989a, 1989b). One famous attempt to define qualitative differences among needs by outlining a 'hierarchy' beginning with physiological needs, and moving 'upward' through safety, love or affection, esteem by self and others, and self-actualization, still holds a great deal of sway (Maslow, 1943). As Fitzgerald (1977) argues, while there may be little evidence to validate such a system, 'there is no evidence that suggests the superiority of an alternate theory of human needs', and furthermore, he argues, empirical progress may not be possible within the framework of 'need theory' generally (1977: 51). From this perspective, to argue that one or another type of communication activity is necessary to secure competent citizenship, one would have to appeal to other elements of reason than scientific ones.

While communication needs and associated rights are essential considerations for promoting civic competence and human dignity, we are not prepared with a simplified list of must-haves for the complete cybercitizen in an electronic democracy. In general terms, a central place must exist in interdisciplinary research and pedagogy, and in political practice in general, for promoting critical thinking consumers and producers of public discourse, and more serious attention must be paid to the costs, benefits and meaning of the idea of 'access' to the public realm.

Conclusion

The technological and industrial convergence now taking place signals neither a fundamental upheaval in the social order nor a totally administered and lockstep stage in contemporary capitalism. Rather, the new structural transformation taking place is a matter of society's political and intellectual elite striving to secure its own means of democratic communication. Perhaps in the process, new opportunities for more widely expanding the democratic franchise will arise. Furthermore, there have been and will continue to be exhilarating moments when the collective and individual uses of the new means of communication can be held up as examples of the realization of electronic democracy's emancipatory potential. Whether they are commonplace or institutionalized practices is another matter, but perhaps that is not what is most important about democracy.

The discourse on electronic democracy is aesthetically pleasing, but visions of empowerment are illusory or manipulative if they do not rest on

the foundation of a clearly articulated vision of government. Unless fundamental questions of public policy are central to this discourse, euphoria arising from a well-intentioned, politically progressive but socio-economically homogeneous handful of enthusiasts for the participatory potential of new communication systems is much too self-indulgent. Breathtaking innovations in the means of communication do not create a more deliberative, egalitarian and democratic society. A societal commitment to shaping communication policy in the service of goals for social justice might hold promise in this regard. Despite its contradictions, a democratic welfare state may be the only means we have for ensuring human dignity under global capitalism. The global neoliberal tendency to conceive of communicative rights as negative rights is powerful, but we conclude that any meaningful affirmation of democratic principles demands a state committed to a revisable consensus on how to promote civic competence in a world of rapid technological change in the means of communication.

Notes

1. Keane (1988) provides a useful review of the theoretical and practical explanations for such limits in the face of waning support for the social democratic welfare states of Western Europe. Keane (1991) later vigorously states his case against state regulation of the activities of civil society, specifically with reference to communications media. In the latter work, he rightly scrutinizes the paternalism of state-sponsored public service media and the many vulgar aims of commercial media systems. His ideal of a third possibility of 'non-state, non-market' media rests on a critique of the excesses of these alternatives and on his hope for what appears to be a voluntaristic economic foundation for a vaguely articulated alternative. With good reason, Keane's third way has been criticized for its lack of feasibility (Scannell, 1992). A useful lesson of what can happen when well-intentioned but politically naïve attempts are made to keep the state completely out of the way both as a regulator and as a guarantor of stable financial means can be found in the history of Italian television broadcasting over the past 20 years. In 1974, in response to a leftist grassroots movement calling for *libertà d'antenna* (practical translation: independence from RAI, the Italian public broadcasting authority), the Italian government made many new broadcast frequencies available for the establishment of 'independent' stations in order to serve more localized and diverse community needs and interests. Lacking sufficient managerial competence and secure financial support, the stations eventually became vulnerable to takeover by commercial interests and later were consolidated into Silvio Berlusconi's Fininvest empire. While there certainly is a range of opinion in Italy regarding the degree to which the public interest is served by Berlusconi's media property, the label 'non-state, non-market' media would never apply (Padovani and Calabrese, 1995).

2. While the scope of this article does not permit us to engage with all of the competing arguments about what can or does constitute democratic political

practice in the modern world, we refer readers to two useful accounts which serve as valuable introductions to much of the vast body of literature on the subject (Finley, 1985; Held, 1987).

3. Henri Lefebvre (1991: 416) makes a convincing case that there is a positive correlation between the institutionalization of political life and the degree of decay in authentic politics: 'Once it reaches a certain level of intensity, politicization self-destructs: constant political activity eventually enters into contradiction with its own foundations. . . . What, then, of the political status of space? No sooner has space assumed a political character than its depoliticization appears on the agenda'.

4. These findings seem to be further supported by a recent study conducted by Yankelovich Partners, Inc. (1995), although the study results have only been made available in brief summary form. The study, labelled 'Cybercitizen', was designed 'specifically for businesses exploring online opportunities' and access to the full results requires payment of US \$5000 per subscriber. The study's target market and the price tag provide a sad commentary on the meaning of citizenship in cyberspace.

5. In contrast with this view, Duncan (1989) notes that the welfare state has been seen by others as a palliative against the threat of an unravelling capitalist social order. At the time of the New Deal, such a response was not unfamiliar in the USA (Thomas, 1966).

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