

The creation of an Internet public sphere by South Africa's Independent Electoral Commission and Elections Canada

ABSTRACT

A prerequisite for a healthy, sustainable democracy is an informed citizenry that participates in the democratic process (see Habermas, 1989:49). In recent years much discourse on the media and democracy correlation has focused on the potential role of the Internet in facilitating political communication by establishing a virtual public sphere.

This article investigates the extent to which the South African (IEC) and Canadian electoral commissions' websites have succeeded in establishing a virtual public sphere. The Elections Canada web site (representing an established democracy) has succeeded better at resembling some of the normative principles of the public sphere theory than has the IEC.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, much reflection and interest have revolved around the appeal of the Internet as a fresh alternative to the “passé” public sphere ideal of public debate between “ordinary” citizens and official decision makers. Accordingly, a large faction of scholars, practitioners, non-profit organisations, and civil society organisations maintain that as public will formation stands at the centre of any legitimate democracy, new spaces of political engagement must be identified and appropriated. This kind of speculation has launched the expectation that new channels of electronic communication may perhaps far better enhance and ultimately define citizen engagement in democratic practices than do the more “traditional” modes of public and political communication, which allegedly allow inadequate degrees of political participation, and restricted discussion between society and representative structures.

This argument is especially true for the South African circumstance of a young, developing democracy. Even though regular elections are an important component of a democracy, the argument holds that such “public opinion surveys” have to coincide with the fostering of a democratic political culture so as to ensure the sustainability of the democracy. History has repeatedly shown that in many cases democratic transitions in Africa did not lead to sustainable democracy, as formal structures and constitutions are no guarantee for democratic practices (Lodge, 1999:1-17; Mattes, Keulder, & Chikwanha, 2002:4). Since South Africa is in its twelfth year of democracy, after hosting its first fully democratic elections in April 1994, pressure is continuously exerted on the government of the day to continue combating poverty, lack of human rights, widespread corruption, and non-democratic policies in an attempt to substantiate and consolidate the much-celebrated democratic tradition (Seale, 2002).

It is widely accepted that a condition for any authentic, participative democracy is an informed citizenry (Blumler & Gurevitch, 2000:159; De Beer, 1998:19; Louw, 1993:244). The correlation between the informational role of the media and a democratic system, therefore, frequently figures at the centre of effecting ways by means of which to consolidate a potentially politically responsible public able to interact with politically representative structures.

According to the Habermasian concept of a public sphere, and the interrelated communicative action theories, private individuals must continuously reflect critically on themselves and the state, contained by a public environment, with the purpose of developing public opinion through rational debate (see Habermas, 1989; Habermas, 1984). Through such critical reflection or “discursive participation”, citizens could ultimately guide democratic decision-making processes that affect the public good (see Delli Carpini, Cook & Jacobs, 2004:315-316; Habermas, 1989; Webster, 2002:163).

Especially in the context of the purported information age, many theorists have extolled innovative networks, such as the Internet as the new public space or “electronic agora” of public engagement (see Tambini, 1999:307). In contrast to the standard, linear model of political communication,

adherents agree that the inherent dialogical nature of the Internet allows for a deliberation between political actors that is more meaningful and participatory (see Berners-Lee, 1999:169; Dahlberg, 2002; Ferdinand, 2000:6; Rola, 2000; Thorton, 2002:12). The assumption is that virtual forums, chat rooms, and information-rich web pages could fashion online communication spaces in which participants could obtain political information, exchange political opinion, and argue political topics. Such "ideal speech situations" (ISS) support rational, critical discussion that is vital to the continuation of a democracy, including South Africa's (see Habermas, 1987; Habermas, 1984).

This is supported by constitutional obligations placed on certain South African institutions to serve the public's "right-to-know" as well as the "right-to-be-heard" by creating such "ideal speech situations" or public platforms. One such institution is the Independent Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC). As one of six constitutionally appointed guardians of the South African democracy, the IEC should be considered as one of the institutional mainstays of sustainable, local democracy. Against this background, the IEC states in its vision and mission avowal that it intends to strengthen the South African democratic culture by securing the right of every eligible South African voter to put down on paper his or her informed political choice by means of a just and free electoral system (Independent Electoral Commission [IEC], 2002). The establishment of the electoral commission of Canada, Elections Canada, likewise echoes these objectives.

This article therefore asks how political representative structures could improve levels of political participation via "new media" public spheres such as organisational web sites on the World Wide Web (WWW) (Sundar, Kalyanaraman & Brown, 2003:33-34). More specifically, the research question addressed here is: To what extent could political institutions, such as electoral management bodies, establish alternative political platforms to supplement "traditional" forms of political participation.

In order to answer this, we chose to analyse comparatively the web sites of the South African IEC and Elections Canada for functional levels of web site communication interactivity. Canada was chosen as an example of a mature, developed democracy. Theoretically-enthused criteria were devised for the empirical exercise of this study. These criteria will now be introduced before comparative assessments of the results are given.

1. HABERMAS AND THE CYBERSPACE PUBLIC SPHERE

In the optimistic sense, many advocates of the Internet Public-Sphere model (PSM) agree that instead of standing in line on elections days, citizens should continually be able to intermingle online with their political representatives during the periods in which major electoral events are lacking. Proponents of such a vision insist that the unique interactive characteristics of the Internet, and its related applications, could effectively rejuvenate the deficient deliberative process needed to legitimate the democratic process (see Blumler & Gurevitch, 2000; Dahlberg, 2001:85).

Derived from the normative Habermasian public-sphere theory, these optimistic accounts of democratic theory suggest that the Internet might appropriate the alternative space essential for

participatory democracy. The innate interactive nature of the Internet allegedly supports one of the most rudimentary goals of human development; that is, in order to attain the “good life”, individuals must be able to participate freely in the rule of law and the “social life” of their community that ultimately determine their destiny (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2002:13). This is true in that interactivity apparently allows for a dialogical, reciprocal variety of communication, which creates feedback loops between senders and receivers (Newhagen & Rafaeli, 1996:6). Ideally, communicators could then critically examine each other’s opinions and arguments after which they reciprocate alternative arguments in the hope of finding a “solution” to a suspected problem. Simply put, communicators could converse with one another in cyberspace on an equal footing, since interactivity allows inclusive, two-way communication.

Applying this form of reciprocal interaction to the web sites of electoral commissions, voters could reflect critically on political standpoints offered during discursive argumentations. Voters could also for example, make informed political choices by collecting and retrieving relevant information from these electoral web sites, which they could subsequently use during public deliberation. This exercise is called “public opinion formation”, which allows citizens to criticise and keep the “ruling structure” in check.

The web sites of the previously mentioned electoral institutions could, arguably, offer more open, more interactive platforms of political engagement. In respect of the South African situation, the electorate could perhaps formulate some form of consensus on what the role and position of the South African “voting public” is within the developing democracy (Habermas, 1989:49, 54; Jones, 2000:308). Similarly, voters could scrutinise and consider the authenticity of the IEC as a supporting structure of sustainable democracy.

According to Habermas, a bona fide public sphere can however only be realised if the sphere adheres to certain non-negotiable, normative conditions. Firstly, the idealised public domain must be autonomous from commercial and state imperatives. Commercialisation of the public sphere supposedly weakens the critical function of public opinion or “publicity”, since private interests could manipulate authentic public debates into “staged displays” (Habermas, 1989:140, 164, 206). In line with distrustful accounts of computer-mediated communication (CMC), the WWW is regarded by some as the ideal public relations vehicle for special, commercial interests and administrative propaganda. If cyberspace is going to be used in support of establishing opportunities for authentic participatory democracy, the topography of discussion themes must not be limited to the agendas of businesspersons and public officials. Instead of private ownership of communicative spaces, publicly accountable institutions--in the guise of autonomous, public bodies such as the IEC and Elections Canada--could create “alternatives to one-dimensional, narrowed, manipulated, or closed communications” (Louw, 2001:101; Louw, 1993:241). These spaces could be appropriated by means of the WWW that recognises decentralised, citizen-driven decision-making practices.

Assumption 1: For the IEC and Elections Canada to manage their web sites as legitimate public domains of public opinion formation, the commissions should manage their web sites without fear or prejudice of governmental or commercial interests.

As a result, the public sphere must be protected against interests that could corrupt the intrinsic worth of unrestricted, critical-reflective public opinion formation. Secondly, Habermas (1989:2-5, 49, 219) intends, for this shunning of mercantile and state imperatives, to fashion an open, inclusive public arena, thereby allowing participants to congregate in a shared locale as “co-equals”. Participants must thus gather as “common human beings” set free in their subjectivity because they acknowledge the equivalence of one-another’s “humanness”. No preferential or biased treatment is given to any participant based on his race, gender, socio-economic status, educational background or any other defining characteristic.

Even though this ideal may seem implausible and unworkable – especially since the South African reality (like those of many of other developing societies) reveals that Internet access levels are limited – the normative ideal suggests that by creating an “ideal speech situation” (ISS) the Internet could appropriate an auxiliary vehicle of democratic communication and social critique for those structures that already represent the larger social context. While opportunities for the poor and the marginalised are limited, social networks such as NGOs, CSOs and also church leaders could encourage the equal redistribution of socio-economic and political rights for the voting populace deprived of the immediate prospect of Internet participation. The innate interactive quality of the Internet involves not only the ability to choose between political agendas, but also the ability to generate agendas for discussion. Accordingly, expression can be afforded to “voiceless” electors via representative arrangements.

Assumption 2: For the IEC and Elections Canada to maintain their web sites as legitimate public domains of public opinion formation, they should ensure that all participants are able to participate equally, freely and fairly on its web site in order for them to gather the electoral information necessary to make informed political choices.

In the last place, and probably most importantly, the normative concept requires that the public sphere’s existence should be driven by the commitment to on-going deliberation and informed reflection on diverse interests, statements, and values (Dahlberg, 2001:86-87). The unforced “force of the better argument” implies that all claims made in the public realm must be defended, rejected, or revised through the practice of reciprocal, critical public discussion (see Habermas, 1989). This entails that debate or “public will formation” is open to all affected by the topics under discussion, and that these themes may not be restricted to a fixed agenda.

Assumption 3: For the IEC and Elections Canada to maintain their web sites as legitimate public domains, the commissions should manage their web sites in such a manner that the opportunity exists for all participants to impart and receive diverse information, opinions, and values.

This article subsequently investigates whether the IEC and Elections Canada web sites could appropriate the extended “cyberspace” version of the Habermasian ideal of a public sphere of public debate. A comparative analysis between the two case studies will indicate to what extent the public sphere ideal was achieved.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

The overall design of the research was informed by the qualitative research tradition that aims to understand (*Verstehen*) the context in which the research objects, the aforementioned electoral commissions, could operate their organisational web sites as cyberspace public spheres (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000:10; Struwig & Stead, 2001:16-17). This article thus outlines a section of the results obtained during the qualitative content analysis of the IEC (<http://www.elections.org.za>) and Elections Canada (<http://www.elections.ca/>) web sites. The research did not seek to quantify the content indicators used during the analyses, and consequently does not undertake to generalise any of the findings yielded (see Berelson, 1952).

The units of analysis included the home pages of the research objects, defined as the first page a web site visitor views when accessing a web site, in addition to the main information pages that were hyperlinked to these home pages. Basic web site features and contents, for example e-mail links, events and activities calendars, chat forums, etc., were measured against an absence or presence occurrence in order to determine how these attributes could fit with the theoretical assumptions gained from the literature.

Against the above background, the following sections reveal the extent to which the IEC and Elections Canada adhere to the Habermasian public sphere ideal. The dimensions that were taken into account for the purposes of this article include the availability of a) external hyperlinks on the web site; b) the availability of feedback and consultative mechanisms; c) the online presence of organisational publications; d) the availability of public announcements, and e) the universality of access to the electoral commissions' web sites.

3. THE DIMENSIONS OF IMPARTIALITY IN CYBERSPACE

Legitimate deliberative spaces on the Internet need to be non-partisan, non-commercial, and independent from governmental interests (see Habermas, 1989; Noveck, 1999:482). It thus follows that the presence of a) external links on the electoral commissions' web sites, and b) organisational publications could influence the perceived impartiality of the information available on the web sites.

One of the most apparent differences between the IEC and Elections Canada web sites was the availability of different types of external hyperlinks to outside organisations. The IEC web site displayed links to information portals, and online news networks such as CNN (Cable News Network), SABCNews (South African Broadcasting Corporation News), and IOL (Independent Online). Additionally, the IEC web site linked to some commercial corporations, for instance, Accenture and Internet Solutions. In view of the literature review, the neutrality of such external sites could be questioned, since mercantile interests dictate the agendas of such organisations, which might subsequently distort the reliability and accuracy of the related organisations' online information portals (Habermas, 1989:27). By arbitrarily placing external links on its web site, the IEC could injure its claim of impartiality and so injure the likelihood of creating an unbiased electoral

information resource on the WWW (Rola, 2000). It is therefore proposed that the IEC should decide more thoroughly which external web sites, should be “advertised” on its web site and which external links should rather not be featured on its web sphere.

In contrast, Elections Canada’s web site provided a comprehensive inventory of links to non-partisan and non-commercial international, electoral, and democratic organisations that could be very valuable to voters who seek extra, helpful information vis-à-vis electoral matters (Tambini, 1999:312). Contrary to its South African counterpart, the Canadian commission refrained from connecting to the web sites of media corporations or organisations with special or commercial interests. The Elections Canada web site did however direct visitors to the web sites of registered political parties, some of which may facilitate interaction between electors and political representatives via established bulletin boards and interactive chat forums.

As might reasonably be expected, entrance to such external web sites could present potential voters with information on political party policy issues that assist voters to better choose between political contestants and possible political representatives. In contrast, the IEC web site did not include any links to South African political parties’ web sites. In terms of impartiality, the Elections Canada web site fared somewhat better than the IEC web site in approximating an Internet public sphere, since it precluded commercial web sites from linking to its web sphere.

Then again, the Canadian electoral commission did link to the official web site of the Canadian government; as a result, visitors might confuse the information offered on the commission’s web site with the views and values of the Canadian government. This misreading could obfuscate the supposed truthfulness of the electoral agency’s web site; therefore, the commission might appear partial to governmental welfares. As contained by the Habermasian thesis, a legitimate public sphere is only possible once independence from all partial interests is gained. In support of this ideal, it is also imperative that electors and concerned role players fully appreciate the legal and regulative context in which elections are conducted (Habermas, 1989:xi).

Both commissions subsequently published extensive accounts of electoral law and regulations on their respective web sites in which they announced, affirmed, and explicated their legally recognised independence from state and corporate imperatives. For instance, the IEC issued an abridged, online version of the Electoral Act, which declared the agency’s disinterestedness from any “undue influence” in the running of the electoral system (IEC, 2002). As already established, this objective can only be fulfilled if the IEC supplies web site participants with accurate, relevant, and credible electoral information. However, as discussed previously, the indiscriminate placement of external links on the IEC web site might refute the agency’s intention of managing the electoral process in a neutral and transparent manner.

Conversely, the Elections Canada web site contained copious, manifest examples in which the agency illustrated and reiterated its commitment to running the electoral system in a fair-minded fashion. Elections Canada repeatedly published its organisational mission statement online so that electoral participants were reminded of the agency’s obligation of ensuring free and fair electoral

participation for all political participants. To boot, numerous instances of complete financial reports, voting results reports, and corporate or strategic plans were located on the Canadian web site. The financial reports, for example, showed that the financing of political candidates and political party campaigns occurred in an open and fair manner. Supplementary financial records recounted the procedures involved in funding the agency's own administrative processes. Visitors could even view breakdowns of business meal and travel expenses incurred by the chief electoral officer during the course of official electoral business.

The availability of budgetary and financial information on the Elections Canada web site could therefore contribute to the voting public's appreciation of how public taxes were used in support of democratic processes such as electoral events. Voters could thus participate more knowledgeably in the electoral process once they were informed on the financial affairs of the political institutions and individuals who would eventually represent their public concerns in parliament (Noveck, 1999:477; Tettey, 2001:148).

Additionally, several critical thinkers hold that, in modern-day democratic systems, a so-called societal triage phenomenon is emerging in which the political system apparently minds the needs of a two-thirds majority, whilst effectively undermining the "remaining third and allowing it to solidify into an underclass" (Dahlgren, 1991:12). The legitimacy of the system understandably comes into question subsequent to declining popular, political participation levels. However, by providing the voting public with detailed fiscal reports and organisational performance reviews, electoral commissions could ensure that voters become more politically competent in deciding the legitimacy of the democratic process. As argued in the introductory paragraphs of this article, an informed electorate stimulates the establishment of a politically active citizenry able to participate meaningfully in the democratic process.

Although the IEC included various elections results reviews on its web site, the expediency of these reports were somewhat overshadowed by the absence of detailed financial reviews and annual reports. The Elections Canada web pages also included thorough explanations of the electoral agency's mandate and responsibilities. These descriptions described the role and the position of the agency carefully in easy-to-follow language, and as a result, might serve as a "check and balance sheet" by which Canadians could measure the integrity of the agency and the electoral system; hence, the legitimacy of the agency's web sphere. The Elections Canada's web site included several illustrations of organisational information; accordingly, these records could contribute to the veracity of the electoral body regarding the free and fair enforcement of electoral rules and the regulations.

Certainly, for the IEC to function as an impartial electoral management agency its administrators and accredited staff should be held accountable by the public for the policy decisions the agency enforces and the actions it takes to realise its mandate (Noveck, 1999:477). In other words, role players, ranging from legislators, electors, the mass media and international observers, should be able to keep an eye on the activities of the IEC on a continuous basis. This would however only be possible if the electoral agency were to publish its annual reports online.

The IEC should then consider the option of publicising its annual reports via its web sphere to improve the transparency of its administrative functioning and its role and position in a developing democracy situation.

4. THE DIMENSIONS OF INCLUSIVITY IN CYBERSPACE

In order to determine the extent to which inclusivity in cyberspace participation was secured on the IEC and Elections Canada web sites, the general user-friendliness and the content of these agencies' virtual domains and their contents were assessed.

Upon first entering the Elections Canada home page, visitors were offered a choice between English and French editions of the web site's contents. Correspondingly, these language preferences could be modified on all of the web pages, allowing unrestricted web site navigation and participation for persons from the aforementioned language groups. The communicative reach of the web site was thus expanded to include possibly different audiences with dissimilar cultural identities and values.

A voter information guide was also on hand in a choice of languages. These languages were not limited to indigenous, Canadian languages, but also included a wide variety of so-called ethnocultural languages. For instance, Canadian electors of Spanish, Italian, Greek, or even Arabic descent could access important voter information about upcoming federal general elections. Online voter education posters, educational radio and television scripts were also available in a number of indigenous Canadian languages. By allowing electors and political actors to communicate in their preferred languages, participants were encouraged to participate unreservedly in public will-formation practices. More to the point, dominant power relations may be upturned by encouraging previously marginalised persons to participate in public deliberation. Discriminatory, fixed discourses could thus be negated by allowing dissenting, diverse opinions, and values to be voiced by diverse language and cultural groupings (Blumler & Gurevitch, 2000:169).

The IEC's web site contents, on the other hand, were only available in one of the eleven official languages, namely English; hence, the alternative opinions of non-English-speaking political actors might exist to no avail unless larger social networks or activists groups participate in the web sphere on behalf of marginalised groupings (see Curran, 2000:136). The IEC should rather consider developing content in alternative, local languages in order to release more information to eligible South African voters. It should however be noted that the IEC's task of expanding political participation on the Internet is not only subject to inadequate institutional policies or restrictive controls, but is also influenced by the general lack of an appropriate physical infrastructure needed for Internet access (Jensen 2002; Ott, 1998). The number of South African Internet users stands at around the 3.28 million mark (World Wide Worx, 2003), while some 20 million voters were registered for the 2003 elections.

Furthermore, it was noted during the analyses that neither the South African nor the Canadian electoral web sites were available in text and graphic-based interfaces. Elections Canada did however rectify this oversight by including various instances of interactive CD ROMs, which offered

audio-visual alternatives to some of the voter educational materials available on its web site. For instance, one of the CD ROMs described the Canadian electoral system through a series of informative and entertaining, open or close-captioned video clips. These multi-media presentations contained instructive graphics, interactive games, illustrated quizzes, and informative backgrounders on the history of the Canadian vote. It was also discovered that online universality of access to the Canadian site was further supported by an option to view certain web site graphics in larger text formats.

As Tambini (1999:312) insists, the way in which information is visually displayed on computer screens should involve virtual and graphical 'maps' of contents so that even illiterate computer users may discover the meanings of online content. In effect, one is no longer busy with educating the public ear, but as it were, educating the public eye (De Beer & Otto, 2001:17). Web site content could involve illiterate voters, who lack the linguistic or technical aptitudes to utilise the Internet in potentially useful ways, in the web sphere, by using special icons or visual representations to impart and explain voter information. Although these measures do not entail equal, complete participation by illiterate electors, such provisions could fashion generations of so-called "neo-literates" who could expend Internet information even though they are in effect unable to read or write (De Beer, 2001:146-147). The IEC should thus investigate the option of including more instructive, enlightening graphics and illustrations on its web site, which could enable uneducated voters to collect voter information via the WWW more effectively.

The IEC web sphere did however not show any evidence of exclusive download materials such as interactive CD ROMs, video or audio clips, music downloads, electoral brochures, games or other voter-education materials. Online availability of such downloads could allow for wider distribution of educational materials, and thereby engage the voting public in more interactive educational experiences.

On the other hand, the IEC web site did publicise the contact details of a toll-free call centre that assisted people entitled to vote in respect of general voting queries. This automated voice-mail service was only partially functional in that operated to its full capacity only during general elections. The information obtained via this service was therefore somewhat extraneous during non-election periods. The IEC did nonetheless try to augment inclusivity to its web site by providing a special SMS (short text messaging) service to its online voters' registration role database. Electors were able to use their cell phones to determine their voter registration details, as well as verify the details of the voting station where they should cast their ballots. As a result, more voters could possibly participate in elections, since more eligible voters, could obtain accurate, timeous information on where they should go during elections.

A special, toll-free call centre number for visually impaired and heard of hearing or deaf persons promoted access to the Elections Canada web site. Via this support desk, voters with special needs could order some of the materials published on the Canadian web sphere in alternative formats. For instance, Braille printed versions and audiocassettes of major publications and reports

could be purchased online. The IEC, on the other hand, did not offer any online commercial services and did not even include web site materials in more accessible formats.

The investigation also revealed that site search engines, site-map utilities, and “help” functions were on hand on the Elections Canada site to facilitate the retrieval of information by web site visitors. Ease of navigation was also encouraged by an internal site search engine. Key-word prefix searches enabled visitors to determine the location and availability of particular publications or content on the web site. Besides, the web site enclosed a site map on the *Help* web page, allowing information searches to occur according to distinct, practical content categories. For instance, it was possible to locate information purposely designed for the members of the media by linking to the virtual “media room”. Here, journalists and reporters could view special media releases, photos of recent electoral events, or even access a special media FAQs (frequently asked questions) page. The site map subsequently optimised the usability of the Elections Canada web site, as visitors could easily collect information without interference from a “third party” or gatekeeper who might determine what types of information voters could access.

The South African electoral web site, conversely, did not show any patent examples of help functionalities or a site map. A dedicated site map should however be considered as a future web sphere feature, since it would assist and advise visitors in online information retrievals in which they themselves are empowered to actively seek out specific information. As the PSM points out, voters could then formulate public opinion and set agendas for public debate without the mediation of conventional mediating structures.

Additionally, as explained before, admission to external web sites greatly improved, and expanded the richness of the content of the Elections Canada web pages (Clift, 2004:14). Voters could collect information concerning electoral matters on external sites, improving their understanding of political matters by obtaining alternative political viewpoints necessary for public will formation. As cautioned earlier, however, connecting outside organisations to the electoral agency’s web site may perhaps impose upon the perceived impartiality of the information published on the Elections Canada web site. The electoral agency should therefore take care that external links do not allow access to web sites violating the neutrality and accuracy of officially released election information. Rather, these external links must increase the public’s trust in the accountability and legitimacy of the electoral agency, and therefore augment the legitimacy of the democratic system.

Lastly, the opportunity existed on both electoral agencies’ web sites to make contact with them via e-mail. Whereas the IEC web site provided direct e-mail contacts to electoral staff, the Canadian commission established a standardised web form as the only form of direct e-mail contact with the agency. The IEC web sphere also promoted the contact details of its national and regional electoral offices. Although socio-economic discrepancies therefore exacerbate a divide in terms of who participate on the Internet, the IEC ensured that diverse, “under-represented voices” could be heard via more traditional channels of communication (Clift, 2004:20).

5. THE DIMENSIONS OF PUBLIC OPINION FORMATION IN CYBERSPACE

The dimensions that were taken into account for the “public opinion formation” category included a) the availability of feedback and consultative mechanisms, and b) the accessibility of public announcements on the web sites.

As already observed, although no e-mail addresses were observed on the Elections Canada web site, a standardised web form was readily available on all of its web pages. This web form could be used to “interact” with the organisation by submitting queries, or ordering different titles from the advertised electoral publications directory. Though the web site did not release the direct e-mail addresses of electoral employees or agency departments, alternative contact details were however provided lest the public’s e-mail queries remained unanswered or the responses unsatisfactory. Likewise, the IEC web sphere contained numerous examples of personalised e-mail links.

Given that e-mail correspondence does not fully approximate online deliberation, it could, at the very least, facilitate two-way information exchange among the electoral decision-makers and web site users. Simply put, policy makers and voters work through problems via online deliberations and information exchanges. Voters and electoral agencies could debate, for instance, with one another on electoral policy issues and welfares of political matter (Tambini, 1999:315). Once virtual deliberation is completed, voters are empowered to make informed political decisions, corresponding to their unique interests and concerns. Via such an online publicity exercise, a polity can subsequently voice concerns, which, in turn, may pressurise the decisions of political and economic leaders, which may in due course affect the actual life circumstances of the electorate (Louw, 1993:244). This process of public deliberation is therefore equated to a social learning experience that operates as a problem-solving mechanism. In fact, many analysts propose that deliberation amongst different political entities should be the focus of active political citizenship, since it uncovers the bonds between democratic communicative practices and learning processes.

Furthermore, the electoral authorities’ capacity to respond effectively and quickly to online, public enquiries may perhaps enhance “real time” voter campaigns, as specific learning processes could transpire between the regulatory agency and concerned electors. Voters could perhaps share their viewpoints on the information already available on the web site in addition to what types of content should be disseminated online. In line with the Habermasian theory, “the stability of modern governments is especially dependent on opinion”; therefore, electoral agencies should continuously solicit electors to provide them with feedback and input about electoral matters so that agenda-setting powers are equally distributed among all participants and political actors (Koivisto & Valiveronen, 1996:19). Unrestricted and diverse information flows could, as a result, ensure that political participants’ awareness and understanding of the democratic practice expand and strengthen (De Beer, 1998:19; Noveck, 1999:474; Tettey, 2001:136).

Regardless of the copious availability of e-mail links on the Elections Canada and IEC web sites, both agencies’ web spheres lacked distinct opportunities for web site visitors to engage in online

forums such as bulletin boards or chat rooms. Even though distinct opportunities for online deliberation were thus absent, there was a notification service on the Elections Canada web site's media information page. Subscribers could choose to receive updates on the latest news releases along with the alerts on the availability of newly released official reports, statements, and speeches. A choice between French and English notification services was offered. By means of this electronic alert service, the electoral authority's web site fulfilled its function as a valuable resource informing voters on a wide variety of electoral policies, concerns, and activities. The electorate could therefore make fully informed political choices by accessing relevant, regularly updated information. The IEC web site, on the other hand, did not include any e-mail notification services.

In view of the above observations, the IEC should rather consider exploiting the utilisation of online notification services more effectively. Notification services could provide timeous access to electoral and voter information, and could offer voters the opportunity of responding appropriately to such information. For instance, reminders could alert voters to upcoming election dates or the online availability of new documents and media releases, thus allowing users to retrieve such information and applying it to informed "offline" choices – i.e. online engagement could possibly facilitate and support "offline" participatory democracy. Alternatively, the IEC could perhaps invite voter input on important policy issues by notifying web users of opportunities to participate in decision-making practices. Certainly, the timeous dissemination of online notices and alerts could assist voters to act appropriately in respect of political information.

In comparison, Elections Canada augmented their notification service by providing a comprehensive so-called events and activity calendar as a web site feature. A special segment was dedicated to a description of upcoming electoral events, conferences, and symposiums. Electors could even view descriptions of events that had occurred during the last five electoral years. These descriptions were further enhanced by relevant press releases and public speeches, thereby adding to the richness of the already available abstracts. Additionally, one could link to the web sites of the participants who were implicated in the advertised events. Elections Canada also devoted a special segment to the youth vote on its web site. This segment was promoted as the *Youth Voters Web Site*. This section contained an archive of youth activities and events, for instance, round table discussions between the electoral agency and student activists from various Canadian universities were on hand for public scrutiny. Succinct descriptions of these activities were provided; fuller text versions and reports were also however made accessible.

Electoral activities were also publicised under the heading "international activities", which described the foreign projects and initiatives initiated and managed by Elections Canada. An additional handy feature, the so-called "what's new" section accounted for all the latest publications, press releases and other content published on the Elections Canada web site.

After one has reviewed the numerous examples of the "events and activities" category on this web site, it should be evident that the promotion of electoral events on the Internet might contribute to the public's appreciation of the electoral system, since such briefings might engage the electorate in the agency's short-term objectives and long-term priorities.

In contrast to the efforts of the Canadian commission at engaging the electorate in public will formation exercises, the IEC web site did not provide adequate examples of the “events and activities” category. Although the IEC enclosed an “activities page” on its web site, the page merely detailed administrative events that had already been completed. The general transparency of the IEC’s administrative workings could have been improved if current and upcoming activities had also been advertised, as this could build trust in the authority of the agency and secure public accountability.

Finally, during the analysis of the Elections Canada web site, instances of speeches and official statements recurred several times. The “media room” dedicated a special section to the speaking notes of nearly all of the public speeches and presentations of the authority’s chief electoral officer. The accessibility of these records improved the openness of the administrative processes of Elections Canada. Electors and legislators alike could determine whether electoral staff followed the correct procedures involved in managing elections and related activities. In addition to the collection of speeches, the “media room” also added transcriptions of the chief electoral officer’s most recent public appearances to the list of obtainable documents. Minutes of these appearances were accessible via an external link to the Canadian parliamentary web site. Records of transcriptions were also recovered in the online media archive.

As mentioned in the foregoing paragraphs, the transparency of the electoral agency was augmented by the online availability of transcripts of public meetings and speeches, since the electorate could expend these types of information in deliberating the legitimacy of the actions Elections Canada used to enforce its mandate.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The Elections Canada web site clearly fared better at appropriating an Internet public sphere than did its South African equivalent. Although the Canadian authority’s web site did not fully resemble the Habermasian ideal of a public domain of unrestricted debate, it was evident that some of the features and content available on the web site could, at the very least, facilitate “offline” participatory democracy.

It seems that the IEC web site, on the other hand, was mainly used as an institutional image-profiling tool. The online presence of the IEC therefore seemed less concerned with establishing an Internet public sphere – as proposed by the normative principles of the Habermasian theory – than with using the Internet as a “push technology” of information to the electorate. As a result, South African voters would have to be motivated enough to “go online”, collect electoral information, and subsequently use such newly acquired knowledge in real-time public deliberation practices.

The Elections Canada web site was more concerned with securing opportunities for diverse publics to participate on its web site. For instance, by publishing information in various languages, the agency ensured that different, dissimilar viewpoints were represented in electoral politics.

Considering the fact that South Africa is still a long way off from securing universal Internet access for all citizens, the IEC should take more care implement measures by means of which to broaden access to its “virtual offices”.

In addition, the neutrality of the IEC's web site content could be questioned because of the random placement of external links. The availability of these external links would suggest that mercantile and state interests could interfere with equitable cyberspace participation. Conversely, the Elections Canada web site made a deliberate effort to assure web site visitors of the impartiality of external links.

As Curran (2000:135-126) notes, the Habermasian ideal has been criticised and disproved by various scholars and researchers since its original conception. Yet, some of the previously invariable, normative stipulations of the public sphere model (i.e. universal access to the sphere, and impartiality of the sphere to state or commercial interests) have since been revised and adjusted by Habermas himself. For instance, Curran reports that the revised model leaves room for the media to “facilitate meaningful debate, and greater faith in the critical independence of media audiences”. Thus, although the present study has suggested that electoral commissions should not link their web sites to external media corporations and news networks, these informational portals could perhaps broaden the electoral agendas by offering balanced views and alternatives standpoints.

Or, as Osborne (1997:39-40) and Dryzek (1987:661) discern, the liberal public sphere category, though not entirely pleasing, should then rather be utilised in critically theorising the “limits of discursive interactions” in order to inspire the expansion of a model of emancipatory political practice that could invoke a multiplicity of contested public spheres. We conclude that the IEC web site is still a long way off from resembling an Internet public sphere, whereas the Elections Canada web site seems closer to realising the normative ideal.

REFERENCES

- Berelson, B. (1952). *Content analysis in communication research*. Belmont: Wadsworth.
- Berners-Lee, T. (1999). *Weaving the Web: the original design and ultimate destiny of the World Wide Web by its inventor*. (With Mark Fischetti). San Francisco: Harper San Francisco.
- Blumler, J.G. & Gurevitch, M. (2000). Rethinking the study of political communication. In Curran, J & Gurevitch, M. (Eds.), *Mass media and society* (3rd ed.), pp. 155-172. London: Arnold.
- Clift, S.L. (2004). *E-government and democracy. Representation and citizen engagement in the information age*. Retrieved April 10, 2004, from http://unpan.org/dpepa_worldpareport.asp
- Curran, J. (2000). Rethinking media and democracy. In Curran, J. & Gurevitch, M. (Eds.), *Mass media and society* (3rd ed.) pp. 120-155. London: Arnold.
- Dahlberg, L. (2001). The Habermasian public sphere encounters cyber-reality. *Javost The Public*, 8(3), 83-96.
- . (2002). *Democratic visions, commercial realities? The corporate domination of cyberspace and the prospect for online deliberation*. Retrieved October 23, 2003 from <http://www.vuw.ac.nz/pols/Journal/Antepodium/articles/dahlberg-2002.aspx>

- Dahlgren, P. (1991). Introduction. In Dahlgren, P. & Sparks, C. (Eds), *Communication and citizenship: journalism and the public sphere*, pp. 1-27. London: Routledge.
- De Beer, A.S. (1998). Mass communication in society. Pervasive messages of our time. In De Beer, A.S. (Ed.), *Mass media, towards the millennium: The South African handbook of mass communication* (2nd ed.) pp. 5-35. Pretoria: J.L. van Schaik.
- . (2001). The Internet in Africa: A new road to developmental opportunities or a digital highway to leading nowhere? *Critical Arts, Journal of South-North cultural and media studies*, 15(1&2), 135-153.
- De Beer, A.S. & Otto, H. (2001, October). *An e-volution: Will African democracy go digital? A South African case study*. Paper presented at Euricom Colloquium Electronic Networks and Democratic Life. Amsterdam/Nijmegen, The Netherlands.
- Delli Carpini, M.X., Cook, F.L. & Jacobs, L.R. (2004). Public deliberation, discursive participation, and citizen engagement: A review of the empirical literature. *Annual Reviews Political Science*, 7, 315-344.
- Denzin, N.K. & Lincoln, Y.S. (Eds). (2000). *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Dryzek, J.S. (1987). Discursive designs: Critical theory and political institutions. *American Journal of Political Science*, 31(3):656-679, August.
- Ferdinand, P. (2000). *The Internet, democracy and democratisation*. London: Frank Cass.
- Habermas, J. (1984). *The theory of communicative action. Volume One. Reason and the rationalization of society*. (T. McCarthy, Trans.). Beacon Press. (Original work published 1981).
- . (1987). *The theory of communicative action. Volume Two. Lifeworld and system: a critique of functionalist reason*. (T. McCarthy, Trans.). Boston: Beacon Press. (Original work published 1981).
- . (1989). *The structural transformation of the public sphere: an inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*. (T. Burger, Trans.). Cambridge: MIT. (Original work published 1962).
- Independent Electoral Commission. (IEC). (2002). *Independent Electoral Commission: vision and mission*. Retrieved July 17, 2002, from <http://www.elections.org.za/Vision.asp>
- Jensen, M. (2002). *The African Internet: a status report, June 2002*. Retrieved July 10, 2002, from <http://www3.sn.apc.org/africa/afstat.htm>
- Jones, P. (2000). Democratic norms and means of communication: public sphere, fourth estate, freedom of communication. *Critical Horizons*, 1(2), 308-339.
- Koivisto, J. & Valiveronen. E. (1996). The resurgence of the critical theories of the public sphere. *Journal of Communication*, 20(2), 18-36.
- Lodge, T. (1999). *Consolidating democracy: South Africa's second popular election*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press.
- Louw, P.E. (1993). Media, media education and the development of South Africa. In Louw, P.E. (Ed.), *South African media policy: Debates of the 1990s*. pp. 241-254. Belville: Anthropos.
- . (2001). *The media and cultural production*. London: Sage.
- Mattes, R.O., Keulder, C., Chikwanha, A.B., Africa, C. & Davids, Y.D. (2002). *Democratic governance in South Africa: The people's view*. Afrobarometer Working Papers, (24):1-31.
- Newhagen, J.E. & Rafaeli, S. (1996). Why researchers should study the Internet: a dialogue. *Journal of Communication*, 46(1):4-14.

- Noveck, B.S. (1999). Transparent space: law, technology and deliberative democracy in the Information Society. *Cultural Values*, 3(4), 472-491.
- Osborne, P.A. (1997). *Democracy, ideology and the construction of meaning in the electronic age: a critical analysis of the political implications of electronic means of communication*. MA dissertation. Department of Politics. Durban: University of Natal.
- Ott, D. (1998). *Power to the People: the role of electronic media in promoting democracy in Africa*. Retrieved July 10, 2002, from http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue3_4/ott/
- Rola, R.T. (2000). *Cyberspace as a political public sphere*. Retrieved October 10, 2003, from <http://p078.ezboard.com/fthegoreanforum25823frm11.showMessage?topicID=35.topic>
- Seale, T. (2002, May 14). Demokrasie groei in Afrika [Democracy grows in Africa]. *Beeld*, p. 8.
- Struwig, F.W. & Stead, G.B. (2001). *Planning, designing and reporting research*. Cape Town: Pearson Education South Africa.
- Sundar, S., Kalyanaraman, S., & Brown, J. (2003). Explicating web site interactivity: impressions formation effects in political campaign sites [February]. *Communication Research*, 30(1), 30-59.
- Tambini, D. (1999). New media and democracy: The civic networking movement. *New media and society*, 1(3), 305-329.
- Tettey, W.J. (2001). Information technology and democratic participation in Africa. *Journal of Asian & African Studies* (Brill), 36(1), 133-153.
- Thornton, A. (2002). *Does Internet create democracy?* Retrieved December 5, 2002, from <http://.http/www.wr.com.au/democracy/thesis2.htm>
- United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2002). *Human Development Report 2002: Deepening democracy in a fragmented world*. [Web:] Retrieved December 8, 2002, from <http://www.undp.org/hdr2002/complete.pdf>
- Webster, F. (2002). *Theories of the information society*. (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.
- World Wide Worx. (2003). *The Goldstuck Report: Internet Access in South Africa 2004. SA Internet access to leap in 2004*. Retrieved November 25, 2003, from <http://www.theworx.biz/access03.htm>