The Internet and Democratic Citizenship: Theory, Practice and Policy (Communication, Society and Politics)

By Stephen Coleman, Jay G. Blumler

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Relations between the public and holders of political authority are in a period of transformative flux. On the one side, new expectations and meanings of citizenship are being entertained and occasionally acted upon. On the other, an inexorable impoverishment of mainstream political communication is taking place. The Internet has the potential to improve public communications and enrich democracy, a project that requires imaginative policy-making. This argument is developed through three stages: first exploring the theoretical foundations for renewing democratic citizenship, then examining practical case studies of e-democracy, and finally, reviewing the limitations of recent policies designed to promote e-democracy and setting out a radical, but practical proposal for an online civic commons: a trusted public space where the dispersed energies, self-articulations and aspirations of citizens can be rehearsed, in public, within a process of ongoing feedback to the various levels and centers of governance: local, national and transnational.

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Editorial Review

Review
"The potential for the Internet to support democracy is substantial, but as yet unrealized. The authors - two world-leading scholars of political communication - provide a penetrating synthesis of theory and research to explain the limitation of contemporary approaches to using the Internet and related media to enhance the communicative power of citizens. Their analysis leads to a bold prescription for creating a new civic commons 2.0 that will enable 'more deliberative democracy'. This is an excellent scholarly book that will stimulate and inform public debate in a vital area of communication research. It is must reading not only for students of the Internet, but also for anyone interested in the vitality of democratic institutions and processes."
-William H. Dutton, Director, Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford

"A refreshingly new and exciting conceptualization of Democratic Citizenship and the potential of the Internet as a public sphere. Coleman and Blumler have written an inspiring, not-to-be-missed book that provides clear and sensible guidelines for creating a Civic Commons in cyberspace."
-Doris A. Graber, University of Illinois at Chicago

"In this authoritative review of current practice and debates in e-democracy Stephen Coleman and Jay Blumler combine a powerful theoretical frame work with a hard-headed analysis of what works and what doesn't. Carefully avoiding technological determinism, they argue convincingly that the 'vulnerable potential' of the internet as a democratic tool will only be fulfilled through the establishment of an independent agency to develop, promote and oversee online deliberation."
-Matthew Taylor, Chief Executive, Royal Society for the Encouragement of the Arts

"This excellent, balanced book explores the intersection between democracy, citizenship, and communications technology, specifically the Internet...[T]he book is a rare and engaging blend of serious normative reflection, strong empirical analysis and engaged policy advocacy."
Canadian Journal of Political Science Leslie A. Pal, Carleton University

"A theoretically and practically rich analysis...Recommended."
-CHOICE, A. E. Wohlers, Cameron University

"A sophisticated and close argument."
International Journal of Press/Politics Lewis Friedland, University of Wisconsin- Madison

Coleman and Blumer have produced a brave and provocative proposal for an online civic commons that could revitalize democratic citizenship....Scholars and researchers concerned with political communication or democratic theory will find that this book addresses important theoretical and empirical questions. Its paperback price also makes it attractive as a textbook or supplement for graduate or advanced undergraduate courses in relevant disciplines." - Michael Margolis, University of Cincinnati, Perspectives on Politics

"Coleman and Blumler are keen on establishing orderly forums for political deliberation, yet also see a positive, tributary role for the informal and at times unruly comments of the blogosphere at large. To connect bloggers and deliberators, they call for the creation of an independent and impartial "civic commons" agency. This body, funded by the government, would digest and depict public conversations and then launch

structured dialogues on topics the general online populace deems urgent, taking care to put exponents of all points of view as well as officials capable of acting upon preference outcomes around the virtual meeting table."

- Michael Cornfield, George Washington University, Political Communication

About the Author

Stephen Coleman is Professor of Political Communication and Co-Director of the Centre for Digital Citizenship at the Institute of Communications Studies at the University of Leeds. He was previously Professor of e-Democracy at the Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford and a senior fellow of Jesus College, Oxford. In recent years he has served as specialist adviser to the House of Commons Information Select Committee inquiry on ICT and public participation in Parliament, a member of the Puttnam Commission on parliamentary communication with the public and chair of the Electoral Reform Society's Independent Commission on Alternative Voting Methods. His publications include Bowling Together (with John Gotze, 2001; Realising Democracy Online: A Civic Commons in Cyberspace (with Jay G. Blumler, 2001; A Tale of Two Houses: The House of Commons, the Big Brother House and the People at Home (2003); and Direct Representation: Towards a Conversational Democracy (2005). He has contributed numerous articles and chapters to academic volumes.

Jay G. Blumler is Emeritus Professor of Public Communication at the University of Leeds, and also Emeritus Professor of Journalism at the University of Maryland. He is a leading, internationally recognized figure in political communication, having published numerous books, including (with Denis McQuail) Television in Politics: Its Uses and Influences (1968); (with Elihu Katz) The Uses of Mass Communications: Current Perspectives on Gratifications Research (1974); and (with Michael Gurevitch) The Crisis of Public Communication (1995) He is a past President of the International Communications Association. In 2006 Blumler was given a lifetime achievement award by the American Political Science Association.

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