The Internet and Public-Government Engagement

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The declining nature of political participation in countries such as Indonesia and other countries alike arises concerns. Are the people having less and less faith towards their government? Or is because too many people believe that government is something that is done to them (Hain, 2003). Coleman and Blumler mentioned that in a discussion of contemporary politics, ‘crisis of disengagement’ has become a shared unease. Therefore, new and a more engaging platforms can help ease these tension.

In dealing with such problems, new media technologies have been seen as a bridge for citizens and their government (McGeough, 2010). In doing so, Coleman and Blumler proposed multiple ideas in their writing, one of which is by incorporating the idea of democracy with Habermas’s public sphere theory, also by conducting studies on grassroots attempts from the internet in its relation with civic discourse. Furthermore, by combining all those ideas to create a policy which supports the idea that the internet could be a panacea in civic discourse related problems.

These ideas are based on three central assumptions that explain the need of utilizing the Internet in a government. First, they argue that the relation between public and political authority are in a period of transformative flux. With the changing and evolving of people expectation, it gets more and more difficult for the government to deal with. The society is always changing and would gradually want something more. As Coleman and Blumler pointed out, this process is
sporadic and its implication on democracy are not clear. Second, they contend that an inexorable impoverishment of mainstream political communication is taking place. Lastly, they suggest that digital media has the potential to invigorate democracy.

We could see that all these ideas and assumption are rooted on two central problems; civic disengagement and communication. As it is mostly a problem in public–government engagement, the case studies Coleman and Blumler examined are on the ideas of E-democracy from both above and below. If both these types of democracy are not in line with each other, different problems will then emerge. Therefore, e-democracy is of such importance because it is a vessel for both democracies from above and below.

In terms of e-democracy from above, Coleman, and Blumler provided an example from the U.K. parliament’s online consultation. These types of internet based portal for engagement are funded and developed by the state to provide wider reach and open new doors for communication between public and state. Although these types of strategy seemed brilliant, it is not without problem. The initial problems that were faced are accessibility. Not only is it a problem, it poses as a critique to this method. Again, internet access is lack of a problem nowadays than it was then.

On the other hand, Coleman and Blumler described e-democracy from below as grass-root initiative types of activities. In which it operates within the law, it draws upon citizens creativity and inventiveness, also the multiple linkage afforded by a wide spread communication network. Similar with the previous one, this strategy is also not without problems. E-grass root attempts have been deemed ineffective by many because of its disconnection from institutional politics.

In facing all these problems, Coleman and Blumler still believed that e-democracy can still be shaped and that the internet still has unpolished potentials for supporting democracy. For this, they provided recommendation for policy makers by arguing that the right policies are able to stimulate the people to participate in democracy. These policies will need five elements which are inclusion, openness, security and privacy, responsiveness, and deliberation. Through these five elements, a policy will be able to shape democratic citizenship by “creating spaces within which social practices are placed, ordered, and discovered.”
In that sense, they proposed the idea of civic commons in cyberspace. Civic commons in their sense is a space that is neither state nor market. It is an accessible and trusted space. It is beyond any sphere of domination and detached from negative relationships to elites. Moreover, this idea of civic commons space is only suitable if done in the virtual realm.

That exact idea of civic commons is where internet plays its most crucial part. According to Coleman and Blumler for any ideal engagement in democracy, three things need to happen. First, political and democratic institution must be sensitive about people’s real fear and desires. Second, democracy itself must keep in touch with those it governs. Third, public interaction with democratic processes needs to leave its mark. For these things to happen, the main goal for e-democracy is to create a place for it.

Coleman and Blumler elaborate a proposal to transform democracy and make use of a new media to do so. They believe that by doing so, real difference will emerge and provide a fresh change to politics. These changes are a combination of respecting public amateurism in politics and by leaving deterministic ideas where politics are only run by elites, interest group, or representative. The internet has the potential to provide more seats for more people to run democracy and creates healthy discourses between the government and the people.

The biggest concern for the whole idea is that in retrospect, there is no record of a government being able to put in motion a sustainable online engagement. The internet is rapidly growing and changing. To go to such length into creating a new democratic sphere with no proof of actual positive outcome, the worth of the whole process becomes questionable.

In addition, the book seemed to generalize people in creating criteria or ideal space for engagement. The people are extremely complex and have different set of wants and needs. Thus, every single difference will need different ideal spaces. These differences are not touched or elaborated in Coleman and Blumler’s idea of democracy, when in fact, it is probably one of the reasons ideal democracy is immensely hard to reach.

Aside from those flaws, this book put out a fresh and interesting perspective on solving democratic engagement issues. They managed to thoroughly conceptualize e-democratic citizenship and the potentials within the internet to support the idea. Given the right
condition and policy, the idea of e-democracy can very well turn into reality. Their idea on civic commons in cyberspace should be used as ground to create a more suitable public sphere for the people to engage in.

DAFTAR PUSTAKA


