Australian federal government online public consultation trials: local learnings in *e-democracy*

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Abstract

After its landslide victory in the 2007 Australian Federal election which was widely described as "the YouTube election", the Rudd Labor government launched a series of trial public consultation blogs in 2008 as part of a commitment to e-democracy through the use of interactive Web 2.0 communication applications. At the same time, Barack Obama swept into power in the United States aided by Web 2.0 media including text messaging, blogs, YouTube, Twitter, and social networks such as Facebook which gained unprecedented levels of online political engagement. While e-democracy and e-government have been emerging concepts in many countries over more than a decade, these two experiences provide new information on the successes and challenges of online citizenship. This paper reports key findings of research into the Australian government's 2008 and early 2009 e-democracy efforts and compares these with US e-democracy initiatives including the Barack Obama presidential campaign and recent international research findings.

Key words

e-democracy, public sphere, public consultation, online consultation

Introduction

As Peter Dahlgren (2009, p. 2) and others note, there are competing notions of democracy with differing views on the level of citizen participation and consultation that is necessary for

democratic efficacy. While some categorise democracy as either representational or direct, noted thinker on the public sphere, Jürgen Habermas contrasts *liberal*, *republican* and *deliberative* models. Liberal approaches privilege individual freedom, often adopting voluntary voting, and function by aggregating the views of private citizens largely through informally gauged public opinion. What Habermas calls the republican model most closely aligns with what others call representative democracy. This involves political engagement primarily through representative elites, while a deliberative approach stresses the importance of active citizen engagement in thinking about political issues and expression of opinions (Habermas, 2006, pp. 411-3).

Habermas argues that a deliberative form of democracy is preferable to republican or representative models as it involves a larger number of people which avoids representatives becoming a 'power elite' and it involves reflective thinking about issues by citizens. A key requirement for deliberative democracy, according to Habermas (1989), is a public sphere in which "citizens come together and confer freely about matters of general interest" and engage in "rational-critical debate" to become informed, contribute to political discourse, and reach consensus. Despite being criticised as a normative ideal, and elusiveness in its realisation, the concept of the public sphere has remained an enduring notion in democratic societies, described by Habermas (2006, p. 412) as "part of the bedrock of liberal democracies". There is also recognition of the desirability and even necessity of citizen engagement and participation in representational and republican models of democracy. For instance, Rowe and Frewer (2004, p. 513) note that there is "a move away from an elitist model … to one in which citizens have a voice".

Noting that politics in contemporary societies, particularly democracies, is largely mediated (Corner 2007, p. 212; Louw 2005, p. 140), a number of scholars including Garnham (1992), Grossberg et al. (2006, p. 379) and Howley (2007, pp. 343, 358) conclude that media constitute a key discursive space for the public sphere today. Habermas (2006, p. 420) agrees, although he warns that "our so-called media society goes against the grain of the normative requirements of deliberative politics". However, Habermas' pessimism about the functioning of a mediated public sphere is based on *mass media* models operating throughout most of the 20th century. Changes in media and public communication during the late 20th century and early 21st century have brought major shifts in how political communication is conducted and prompted a revival in thinking about the public sphere.

Use of the internet for political communication and civic engagement has been examined by many scholars and organisations including Bentivegna (2002); Chadwick (2007); Gibson,

Römmele and Ward (2004) Gibson and McAllister (2008); Hill and Hughes (1998); Jones (1995, 1998); Livingstone (1999); McChesney (1996, 2000a, 2000b); de Sola Pool (1983, 1990); Schneider (1996) and the Markle Foundation (1997) to name but a few. However, the emergence of Web 2.0 and rapidly increasing use of interactive internet applications, many of which were developed post-2004, indicate that online political communication needs ongoing critical review.

The emergent public sphere: 2007-2009 experiences

"The YouTube Election"

Like the 2008 US presidential election (Center for Communication & Civic Engagement, 2008, para. 2), the 2007 Australian federal election was described as "the YouTube election", although research shows these claims to be "greatly exaggerated" (Macnamara, 2008). A study by the University of Technology Sydney found that during the election only 26 of Australia's 226 incumbent politicians (11.5 per cent) had a MySpace site; just 15 (6.6 per cent) had a blog; only 13 (5.75 per cent) posted videos on YouTube; just eight (3.5 per cent) had a Facebook site; and only seven (3.1 per cent) podcast (ibid, p. 6).

However, significant online interaction and public engagement was found in some blogs and on interest and activist group sites such as GetUp (www.getup.org.au) which claimed more than 200,000 members during the election – more than most major political parties. Other active sites included Senator On-Line (www.senatoronline.org.au) which stood political candidates in the election and claimed to be the first internet political party in the world; Election Tracker (www.electiontracker.net.au) which presented a youth perspective on political issues; and You Decide (http://youdecide2007.org) which invited citizens to report on issues in their electorates (Flew & Wilson, 2008).

The Obama phenomenon

In the 2008 US presidential campaign, use of interactive Web 2.0 media to engage citizens reached unprecedented levels. It has to be noted that much of this was aimed at fund-raising which, while demonstrating citizen engagement, does not constitute Habermas' discursive public sphere. A report in the *Washington Post* based on an interview with the Obama Online Operation headed by new media director, Joe Rospars, estimates that US$750 million was raised for Obama by the time of his election (Vargas, 2008, para. 4), although a colleague of Rospars, Ben Self, who was technology director of the Democratic National Committee, says

that total funds raised up to the time of the election topped US$770 million, of which $500 million came from online donations (B. Self, personal communication, February 16, 2008).

However, in terms of the Habermas' key requirements for the public sphere – involving a large number of citizens in reflective thinking and rational debate about political issues – there was also evidence of significant online engagement in the Obama campaign. In a Pew Internet and American Life Project study, Smith and Rainie (2008) report that 46 per cent of all Americans used the internet to access news about the campaign, share their views and mobilize others (p. i). Whereas 13 per cent of Americans said they had watched a video about the 2004 campaign online, 35 per cent reported watching at least one political video in 2008 (p. ii). Perhaps even more significantly, 19 per cent of Americans reported going online weekly to "do something related to the campaign" (p. i). This suggests that political communication was not restricted to the major political actors, but involved significant citizen engagement.

Nevertheless, a further concern by media and political scholars is to look beyond the 'hot spots' of election campaigns to examine use of emergent forms of media in the day-to-day functioning of democracy to identify effects, if any, that they are having on the public sphere. The following discussion examines online citizen engagement initiatives in Australia in the 12 months since the late-2007 national election – in particular, three online consultation trials launched by the federal government in late 2008.

E-democracy and e-government developments
Use of the internet for political and government related functions has been receiving increasing attention around the world since the mid-1990s. However, beyond election campaigns, much of this has focussed on using the internet for delivery of government information and services. A second distinct purpose of online communication is public consultation and civic engagement in democratic processes, and it is this practice that is the focus of analysis here. A number of terms are used in relation to online political and government communication including *e-government*, *open government*, *government 2.0, e-democracy*, *e-citizenship*, *digital democracy*, *teledemocracy* and *cyberdemocracy*, so some clarification is necessary.

A United Nations report on use of technology by governments defines e-government as "utilising the internet and the World Wide Web for delivering government information and services to citizens (ASPA and UNDPEPA 2002, p. 1). The US *E-Government Act 2002* (as

cited in Seifert 2006, p. 26), one of the first pieces of national legislation to enshrine the concept, defines e-government in similar terms as:

> The use by the government of Web-based internet applications and other information technologies, combined with processes that implement these technologies, to (a) enhance the access to and delivery of government information and services to the public, other agencies, and other government entities; or (b) bring about improvements in government operations that may include effectiveness, efficiency, service quality, or transformation.

A United Nations (2008) e survey of 70 countries concluded that "governments are moving forward in e-government around the world", but reported that the main objectives are to "revitalise their public administration and make it more proactive, efficient, transparent and especially more service oriented" (p. xii).

Alongside use of the internet and related ICTs for delivery of government information and services, online communication is increasingly being applied to facilitate participation in the public sphere and such initiatives are variously termed *e-democracy*, *e-citizenship*, *digital democracy*, *teledemocracy* and *cyberdemocracy*. Kearns (2002, p. 11) defines e-democracy as "the use of Web technologies to engage citizens in debate, discussion, consultation and online voting". Other terms are defined similarly, although e-democracy is the term used by the Department of Finance and Deregulation (2008) in Australia for its initiatives in relation to online policy consultation, online discussion forums, e-petitions and e-surveys. Hence this term is used in this discussion.

Australia set out to be a world leader in e-government in the early 1990s with a focus on information and service delivery. A summary of key policies and initiatives can be found in Burgess & Houghton (2006) and publications of the Australian Government Information Management Office (2004a; 2004b, 2006, 2008). A United Nations (2008) survey ranks the Scandinavian countries Sweden, Denmark and Norway highest in overall e-government initiatives, followed by the US, with Australia in 8th place and New Zealand 18th. In e-participation, the UN ranks the United States the leader, followed by the Republic of Korea (South Korea), Denmark and France, with Australia in a commendable 5th place and New Zealand in 6th.

A number of federal as well as State and local government agencies have initiated interactive Web 2.0 sites offering various levels of citizen engagement and consultation, as well as

information and service delivery. In particular, following its much-publicised use of Web 2.0 interactive media in its 2007 election campaign, the Australian federal government announced its intention to use interactive Web 2.0 media to provide forums specifically for public policy debate and consultation. The Minister for Finance and Deregulation, Lindsay Tanner, ordered the Australian Government Information Management Office (AGIMO) to develop a detailed strategy for implementing online public consultation and participation and the AGIMO report *Consulting with Government – Online* was released in June 2008 (Australian Government Information Management Office 2008). In July 2008 the Minister announced the establishment of a trial government consultation blog to "give the online citizenry a chance to interact with the bureaucracy and make contributions to an area of government policy review" (Tanner, 2008).

Subsequently, three trial online consultation sites were launched in December 2008 hosted by the Department of Broadband, Communications and Digital Economy, the Attorney-General's Department, and the Department of Education, Employment and Work Relations respectively. According to AGIMO, the trials were designed to identify whether citizens will participate in this form of consultation, whether they will "behave" (eg. accept moderation and contribute constructively), and to develop expertise in online consultation.

Analysis of Australian e-democracy initiatives

In August 2008, a three-person team of researchers at the University of Technology Sydney commenced a study of how the newly-elected federal government was going about implementing its election and post-election commitments to online consultation and e-democracy and to analyse the progress of federal government departments and agencies in relation to public consultation and engagement as distinct from information and service delivery.

Methodology

A qualitative study based on depth interviews, supported by content analysis of Web sites and documents including relevant reports and strategies, was conducted during the period August 2008 to March 2009. Purposive sampling was used initially, as the study was focused on trial online consultation sites in particular, supported by snowballing sampling as public servants involved in the formal trials knew of and referred the researchers to other spontaneously initiated online consultation initiatives. The research commenced with in-depth discussions with senior officers in AGIMO, the agency responsible for e-government and online consultation, and progressed through depth interviews with senior officials responsible for

online communication in 10 national government departments and agencies actively involved in some form of online public consultation. Most interviews were conducted face to face on site in the organisations' offices and included or were followed by analysis of site content and relevant documents such as plans, policies, guidelines and protocols.

In addition, several prominent authors and commentators on online citizen engagement were interviewed to gain an independent perspective. These included Richard Allan, Chair of the UK Cabinet Power of Information Task Force; Karen Geiselhart, former AGIMO executive and co-author of the Democratic Audit of Australia report *Electronic Democracy: The Impact of New Communications Technology on Australian Democracy* (Chen, Gibson & Geiselhart 2006); and Roger Clarke, visiting professor and consultant on information technology strategy and policy at the Australian National University.

It should be noted that this research examined the 'supply' side of online public consultation and did not explore the experiences of participants in the online public consultation initiatives. As noted by Rachel Gibson, Wainer Lusoli and Stephen Ward (2008) who conducted one of the few studies of the 'demand side' of online public consultation in 2005, this is an important area for future research.

Findings of analysis of trial consultation blogs and Web 2.0 sites

The first lesson learned from the Australian experience with trial online public consultation sites is that they can be easily hijacked by major issues or vested interests. In all three of the Australian trial online consultation sites, a simmering public issue threatened the planned functioning of the sites. Only weeks prior to launch of a Department of Broadband, Communications and Digital Economy public consultation blog designed for discussion of digital economy policy, the government had announced a proposal to introduce internet filtering which attracted widespread criticism from media and groups such as The Australian Network for Art and Technology (2008) and Electronic Frontiers Australia (2008). This controversial proposal subsumed general discussion of broadband developments on the blog. Under a headline stating 'Bloggers pan government's e-democracy bid', the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported:

> Prominent Australian bloggers have lashed the Federal Government over its first
> attempt at public consultation via a blog, which has already been hijacked by critics
> of its plan to censor the internet (Moses, 2008).

Similarly, the Attorney-General's online consultation site was targeted by a long-running campaign to introduce a Bill of Rights in Australia and the Department of Education, Employment and Work Relations online forum for teachers and educators to discuss early childhood education was launched in the midst of the controversial collapse of the nation's largest childcare provider, ABC Learning Centres. Hosts of online consultation sites need to accept that it is contrary to the objectives of democratic public consultation to attempt to dictate topics and constrain discussion. At the same time, the risk of controversial issues taking over and dominating public consultation forums needs to be carefully considered, as well as the potential for vested interests and the 'usual suspects' among political actors to take and hold the stage.

Another key challenge in online public consultation identified by AGIMO and emphasised by overseas research is that online communication occurs in a much faster timeframe than traditional government-citizen communication. Whereas letters to government departments and agencies typically take several weeks or longer to process, online communicators expect a response within a day or a few days at most. In some cases, Public Servants are not authorised to comment publicly on certain matters and must refer questions and public comments to a Minister or senior departmental head. This can lead to frustration among citizens engaged in online discussion and withdrawal from the process. Chair of the UK Power of Information Task Force, Richard Allan (2009) says governments engaging in online public consultation need to establish specific processes as well as allocate specialist staff with necessary authority to acknowledge and respond to public inquiries and comments online in a timely manner. Part of the solution is resources, as opening the doors of government to thousands of Web posts and even e-mails and text messages requires dedicated staff to acknowledge, code, categorize, process and respond to public comments. In addition, Allan says a "change of culture" is necessary to overcome reticence among bureaucrats to engage with the public beyond established formal channels of consultation.

Former AGIMO executive, Karen Geiselhart (personal communication, August 20, 2008) is sceptical that true e-democracy will emerge from current government initiatives. She feels that bureaucracy in the administrative echelons of government will not give up established and entrenched practices such as formal government submission procedures and Ministerial requirements. Nor are they likely to be flexible in the type of input that they accept, she believes. She says the public service needs to "loosen up", but believes this will require a large cultural shift that most are disinclined to make, preferring instead to cling to a control paradigm of communication and carefully framed and managed consultation.

A third major learning from the Australian trials and comparative analysis of international research is that specialist data mining and analysis tools are essential to process and manage online public consultation when large volumes of information are involved. AGIMO is investigating a number of software applications to assist in making sense of the thousands or even millions of words of text that can be received in popular online consultation sites. Innovative experiments conducted by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology also have drawn attention to this requirement and pioneering systems developed in MIT's Deliberatorium provide a model worthy of close examination, as discussed in conclusions to this analysis.

A fourth key finding from this research is that, while controversial political issues and vested interests can overwhelm open online consultation forums and render them unsuitable for "rational debate", within communities of interest and communities of practice there are promising signs of online forums providing expanded opportunities for engagement and participation. A large government agency that extensively utilises online consultation to deal with high volume day-to-day public inquiries and comments is the Australian Taxation Office. Alongside its service delivery initiatives, ATO has developed a large database of Frequently Asked Questions with pre-approved responses and statements. While not able to predict every citizen inquiry and comment, from its experience in providing spokespersons for talk-back radio and the resources of its call centre which handles 20 million telephone calls a year, the ATO is prepared for a wide range of public discussion. When pre-prepared responses are not available, 'place markers' can be effective in buying time, such as message stating 'Thank you for your ideas. They will be carefully considered and we will respond online by [insert time or date]'.

Arts and cultural organisations are extensively exploiting Web 2.0 tools for public engagement and consultation on non-controversial issues. Dr Lynda Kelly at the Australian Museum has created Musuem 3.0, a Ning social network for those interested in the future of cultural institutions (http://museum30.ning.com). In addition to using Ning, the museum publishes blogs, has a Facebook site for communicating with alumni, a YouTube channel, a Flickr site, and uses Twitter extensively to engage communities and visitors in conversations. Kelly (personal communication, December 10, 2008) says interactive communication tools help the museum establish conversations and "build community".

The Australian War Memorial has joined *The Commons*, an international Flickr community established by Brooklyn Museum and now supported by around 30 museums, libraries and archive holders internationally. In a 2008 trial, the AWM selected 30 historic photos from its

collection of 900,000 images on its Web site and posted these to *The Commons* Flickr site. The photos that had been viewed 950 times in the previous 12 months were viewed 15,500 times in just one month (November 2008) on *The Commons* Flickr site. The AWM also engages the public by posting photos taken by people visiting historic sites such as Gallipoli on Anzac Day and solicits comments and feedback in blogs both internally and externally. The memorial also has established a Facebook page, posts videos to YouTube, and launched a Ning site in 2008.

However, an interesting structural problem that this and other arts and cultural institutions have encountered is that YouTube is banned in many schools. Even some universities block or slow down the speed of internet connections so that YouTube videos are not able to be viewed. This denies students access to these resources, as many cultural institutions do not have the bandwidth required for streaming video from their own servers and rely on public services such as YouTube. This illustrates a lag in cultural practices and policies in relation to emergent media and communication.

Online public engagement initiatives such as those of the Australian Taxation Office, the Australian Museum and the Australian War Memorial fall outside what some consider to be the public sphere. Nevertheless, these day-to-day discursive environments should not be ignored in favour of explicitly political forums. Many citizens' concerns relate to matters such as wanting to have a say about publicly funded art exhibitions or comment on Anzac Day celebrations at Anzac Cove.

Conclusions

While this research was limited in that it focussed on federal departments and agencies only and reports the early stages of trials, a number of conclusions can be drawn from its findings and similar international experiences.

While technology is an important enabler of online public engagement and choices affect factors such as simplicity of use, e-democracy is less about technology and more dependent on organisational, social and cultural factors such as openness, equity of participation, management of power relationships, listening, trust, response, language, communication skills, and facilitation tools and procedures. This has been identified by the OECD (2003, p. 9) which in a report, *Promise and Problems of E-Democracy*, states: "the barriers to greater online citizen engagement in policy-making are cultural, organisational and constitutional not technological".

For instance, the language of public consultation and participation needs to be grounded in everyday practice, not the formal tone of submission writing or 'bureaucratise'. While barring of obscene and offensive content is in the public interest, slang, colloquialisms, humour, and even parody and satire are part of popular culture. So increasingly are videos including mash-ups, txt, remixed music and even *cybergraffiti*. Coleman (2008, p. 203) makes an important historical observation that "democracy … is rooted in expressive, cathartic, and carnivalesque practices that connect public policy to mundane culture. But the e-citizenship projects we have explored tend to be characterised by an earnest solemnity". This was apparent in the case of the Australian federal government's three trial online public consultation sites. Melbourne blogging consultant, Darren Rowse, says the Australian government's trial blog looked "very governmental" and would struggle to build a connection with readers. He says the official look and feel, formal writing style and existence of 'terms of use' and a 'moderation policy' "killed some of the spontaneity, playfulness and personal nature of blogging" (as cited in Moses, 2008, paras 7, 11).

Addressing cultural and social issues such as format and language is particularly important in engaging youth. In future, citizen consultation and participation may need to be conducted using SMS text messages, Instant Messaging (IM), Twitter, social network sites, and in Second Life. In addition, consultation and participation in other than English may need to be offered in multicultural societies, and further consideration needs to be given to people with disabilities.

As well as accommodating flexibility in text and visual language generally, online consultation and participation needs to offer easily navigable and flexible forums. Requiring citizens to understand the structure of government and provide their contributions in the correct departmental or topic forum, for instance, erects a substantial barrier to participation.

Also, involving potentially large groups in discussion and argument without it dissolving into confusion and conflict is a major challenge to be addressed in planning online public consultation. An experimental research project at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) initially called The Collaboratorium (Klein 2007) and renamed The Delberatorium in 2008 (Iandoli, Klein & Zolla 2009, p. 70) gives useful insights into the approach and modes of communication that need to be employed to gain and maintain citizen engagement and for users to effectively participate in large-scale online consultation. Klein, et al. (2006) say online engagement needs to include voting systems which provide citizens with simple quick ways of contributing, and requires careful design of rules of community interaction, tools for

assessing well-structured arguments, a "committed community of contributors and expert judges", and 'seeding' of discussions with "an initial corpus of policy options and pointers" to stimulate discussion. Klein (2007) warns that large-scale interactions to date through online applications such as e-mail, instant messaging, chat rooms, blogs and wikis "have been incoherent and dispersed, contributions vary widely in quality, and there has been no clear way to converge on well-supported decisions". In a 2009 paper, Iandoli, Klein and Zolla (2009, p. 69) say that, while large-scale online organisation using low-cost technologies has achieved outstanding results in knowledge creation, sharing and accumulation, "current technologies such as forums, wikis and blogs … appear to be less supportive of knowledge organisation, use and consensus formation" (ibid, p. 70).

The MIT Deliberatorium has been designed in an attempt to develop tools to facilitate logical and focussed discussion and argumentation within large groups online. Three types of tools have been identified as important, based on Aldo de Moor's and Mark Aakhus's (2006) argumentation support model – sharing tools, funnelling tools and argumentation tools. In a report of trials conducted by The Deliberatorium, Klein (2007) concludes that careful system design is essential, including aids such as background articles for users to read to become familiar with issues; summarised pro and con views; 'argument maps' to locate ideas and arguments on a given topic near to each other; and simple tools for users to search, add comments, rate, and vote, as well as post new articles. Also, Klein says editors are essential in the process both to provide feedback to users such as simple 'thank you' acknowledgements for contributions and to maintain a logical argument mapping structure (Klein 2007).

A further key conclusion is that government management of e-democracy initiatives is open to question and potentially self-defeating. Delivery of government information and services online (i.e. e-government) is a function that warrants and requires government management. Issues such as security justify a centrally-managed, top-down control paradigm of communication. However, e-democracy is largely the opposite. Citizen engagement and participation should be characterised by symmetrical communication, or even a preference to citizens talking and acting and governments listening, either synchronously or asynchronously. In expressing their democratic rights, citizens should have a level of autonomy and be free of overarching power relationships that inevitably exist in government established and managed forums. And the ICTs utilised for e-democracy should be geared towards openness, ease of use and a less formal style than 'official' communication.

Sites of e-democracy should include third party sites independent of government control which governments attend and in which, in some cases, they participate. While governments

may need to kick-start some e-democracy initiatives, the locus of e-democracy need not necessarily be government forums or activities. There are political, practical and strategic reasons that governments should focus at least part of their public consultation and e-democracy efforts tapping into existing third party forums. Politically, governments are ill-advised to ignore the wide range of organisations and civic groups actively discussing issues offline and online including industry, professional, trade union, community, environmental and consumer groups and, increasingly, specialist online activist organisations such as MoveOn and GetUp. Practically, setting up new environments for public consultation involves duplication of resources and citizens' efforts in some cases. Government of the people for the people means taking government to the people, not always expecting people to come to the government.

At a strategic level, there are also concerns that government-run e-democracy sites can involve conflicts of interest. This can occur in several ways. While party politics is, in theory, separate from government, ministers, their staff, and inevitably their departments spend a considerable amount of time promoting policies that have been adopted to maintain public support and secure re-election. Service delivery, promotion and political propaganda inevitably overlap and mix in government-initiated communication (Louw 2005). As a result, citizens are sometimes sceptical of government initiatives and may wish to assemble in non-government spaces. Coleman (2008, p. 192) refers to these two types of online citizenship as *managed e-citizenship* and *autonomous citizenship* and concludes that there can be "conflict between the two faces of e-citizenship". He says a key policy question for governments is "are they in favour of merely promoting participation on their own terms or are they prepared to commit to a policy of democratic participation?" (p. 202). Coleman does not propose that it is a case of one or the other. Rather he suggests that democratic societies can benefit from "a productive convergence between these two models of … citizenship" (p. 201).

This research highlights the fragile and emergent nature of e-democracy even in highly developed societies. Until governments look beyond communication technologies and address cultural and organisational issues discussed in this paper, and until research establishes that citizens find online consultation empowering and productive, it is premature to conclude that online consultation and citizen engagement enhances democracy. However, this research identifies some specific barriers to be addressed and, to the extent that these are addressed, a significant expansion of the public sphere is possible.

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