



Re-constructing digital democracy: An outline of four 'positions'

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Abstract

There is currently a diversity of understandings of digital democracy being deployed within popular commentary, research, policy making, and practical initiative. However, there is a lack of resources clearly outlining this diversity; this article undertakes such an outline. It provides a reconstruction of four digital democracy positions. These four positions are referred to here as liberal-individualist, deliberative, counter-publics, and autonomist Marxist. The delineation of each position draws from critical-interpretative research and has been developed with respect to three elements: the democratic subject assumed, the related conception of democracy promoted, and the associated democratic affordances of digital media technology. The aim is to draw attention to different understandings of what extending democracy through digital media means, and to provide a framework for further examination and evaluation of digital democracy rhetoric and practice.

Keywords

autonomist Marxism, counter-publics, deliberative, digital democracy, liberal-individualist

Introduction and approach

For well over a decade there has been widespread enthusiasm about the possibility of digital media technology advancing and enhancing democratic communication. This enthusiasm comes from a surprisingly diverse array of political interests, ranging from government officials to anti-government libertarians. As a result there are very different understandings of the form of democracy that digital media may promote, with associated differences in digital democracy rhetoric and practice. Despite this diversity, digital democracy (or e-democracy) is often talked about as though there was a general consensus about what it is. In this article I bring attention to this diversity and provide a starting

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point for comparative analysis and evaluation. I do so by outlining significant features of four digital democracy 'positions', reconstructing these from the complexity of currently articulated e-democracy commentary and practice. The internet is the focus here because it is increasingly becoming the basis for networking all digital communication media and is the central technology in digital democracy rhetoric and practice. The article provides a critical-interpretation rather than evaluation: the purpose is to sketch the four positions so as to sensitize researchers and policy makers to the existence of a range of democratic possibilities that can be found in digital democracy hopes, assumptions, and practices, and, moreover, to provide a resource for researching and evaluating such possibilities.

It is important to clarify what I mean here by a 'position'. By position I am grouping within a general category a set of phenomena (rhetoric, practices, identities, and institutions) that can be identified as sharing similar characteristics. As so described, positions seem to resemble Weberian ideal types. Like ideal types, the positions here are the result of abstraction and generalization. The particular positions of individuals or groups will only ever approximate such generalized positions, which are reconstructed from the complexity of everyday situated experience. However, the positions here are not pure analytical concepts, as is understood to be the case with Weberian ideal types. Rather, the positions provide a general categorization of existing empirical instances. Furthermore, in contrast to Weber, my aim is not to provide a value-free scientific description of social 'reality'. The process of the very determination and description of the positions is necessarily context dependent and value laden, even if such values cannot be clearly or consciously expressed.

Following from this, I understand the reconstruction here as influenced by my selective reading and judgement. I make no pretence to producing a transparent explication of an unmediated reality. Rather, my reconstruction develops from a critical-interpretative approach that sees knowledge and social objectivity as constituted through the contingent and contextual articulation of meanings and practices into (seemingly) coherent and convincing wholes (Glynos and Howarth, 2007). As such, there is a 'double hermeneutic' here: I am interpreting (or reconstructing) positions, which are themselves interpretations (or reconstructions) of social reality. Moreover, 'critical' indicates my focus on the 'ends' assumed by various understandings of digital democracy, rather than simply upon the instrumental means for achieving predetermined (often taken-for-granted) ends. This focus opens space for critiquing dominant understandings and for thinking possibilities beyond such.

Given this critical-interpretative approach, my research procedure was as follows. I first drew upon the explicit and implicit identification by e-democracy commentators and practitioners with certain understandings of digital democracy. At the same time I took account of understandings embedded within different digital democracy practices. I then explored various groupings of these understandings around a range of interlinked elements (including activism, community, economic relations, civil society, conflict, governance, interactivity, radicalism, representation, and conflict). Any number of these elements could potentially be deployed to develop a characterization of digital democracy. I choose to use three that I found to be central in the articulation of digital democracy meanings. These were: the democratic subject assumed, the related understanding of democracy, and the associated democratic affordances of digital media technology. The

third element refers to the specific ways in which digital media is seen to be supporting the development of the other two elements. I have chosen the term affordances as it broadly captures how all the positions tend to understand the human–technology relationship. In general terms, the relationship is one where the technology is seen to have certain features that enable (afford) particular democratic uses and outcomes.¹ Finally, I explored how digital democracy commentary and practice was positioned in relation to these three immanent, interrelated, and mutually effecting elements. This enabled me to reconstruct a number of positions, including the four outlined in this article.² As interpretatively reconstructed representations of the articulations of empirical instances, the resulting positions are open to (and indeed invite) challenge and rewriting in digital democracy scholarship.

The empirical material from which I reconstructed the four positions consists of a combination of e-democracy commentary, academic research, and digital democracy practice. I do not specifically differentiate between ‘theoretical’ and ‘practical’ materials. I see these as mutually implicated. Practices embody systems of ideas, and such systems are not only themselves a form of practice but draw from practical experience. Moreover, given the heterogeneous and ever-changing nature of this material – the ‘set’ of all to do with digital democracy – ‘representative’ sampling was rejected. Rather, in accord with a critical-interpretative approach, I drew upon my knowledge and previous research in the field to choose what I considered exemplary digital democracy texts and practices. My choice of exemplars, as well as my subsequent reading, is necessarily marked by my subjective experience and judgement, and given ongoing developments in the field invites rereading.

I name the four reconstructed positions liberal-individualist, deliberative, counter-publics, and autonomist Marxist. My research indicates that these positions characterize widely influential understandings in digital democracy rhetoric and practice. However, I do not claim that they in any way exhaust the e-democracy positions that could be explicated. Given more space and research resources we could identify and explore a number of other e-democracy articulations, including cyber-feminist (for example, Fernandez et al., 2004; Fuller, 2004; Hall, 1996; Plant, 1996), communitarian (see Dahlberg, 2001a), cyber-libertarian (see Dahlberg, 2010), liberal digital commonism (for example, Benkler, 2006; Lessig, 2001), and postmodern (for example, Nguyen and Alexander, 1996; Poster, 2001). It would also be interesting to ask if distinct positions could be seen developing out of experiences of subalternity, particularly in relation to the Global South. In addition, we could outline more cautious, and even dystopian, positions (see Kroker and Kroker, 1997; Kroker and Weinstein, 1994). Moreover, e-democracy would be characterized differently if we were to identify, and deploy as organizing dimensions, elements immanent to rhetoric and practice other than the three used here (such as those listed above). However, I found the three elements deployed to be central in digital democracy articulations. While necessarily limited in scope, I believe that the resulting outline brings much needed attention to digital democracy’s diversity and provides a framework for further research.

Liberal-individualist digital democracy

Much digital democracy discussion and practice draws upon what I refer to as a liberal-individualist understanding of democracy. I refer to this position as liberal-individualist

because it focuses on the opportunities afforded to individuals to have their particular interests realized through liberal political systems. I will briefly outline the democratic affordances offered by digital media that this position highlights, before identifying the assumed democratic subject and associated understanding of democracy.

Liberal-individualist digital democracy understands digital media as offering a means for the effective transmission of information and viewpoints between individuals and representative decision-making processes (for example, Gore, 1994, in relation to the early internet, and Chadwick, 2009, in relation to digital social networking developments). Digital media are understood here as enabling individuals to gain the information they need to examine competing political positions and problems, and as providing them with the means for the registration, and subsequent aggregation (as 'public opinion'), of their choices (through e-voting, web feedback systems, petitions, e-mail, online polls, etc.).

This liberal-individualist position is being advanced through a range of local and national government e-democracy initiatives (see examples in Chadwick, 2009, and at Steven Clift's site at <http://www.publicus.net/>), as well as through commercial sites (for example, australianpolitics.com, speakout.com, vote.com), corporate media-politics sites (in particular, corporate news sites providing 'public opinion' polling and 'have your say' comment systems), 'independent' e-democracy projects (for example, calvoter.org, mysociety.org, theglobalvote.org, votinginfoproject.org, vote-smart.org, 2gov.org), and civil society practices (for example, Amnesty International, Avaaz.org, Avaaz's parent Moveon.org, and Avaaz's founding partner Getup!). In the case of Amnesty International, the internet (text, audio, and video) and other digital media (cell phones and video cameras) are deployed as tools through which liberty-interested individuals can take action on exposed 'rights' violations around the world, transmitting information on human rights abuses and providing the means to undertake individual actions (e-mailing government officials, signing e-mail petitions, making electronic donations to appeals, participating in online polls, and filing membership applications).

This Amnesty case demonstrates how the international communication enabled by the internet is being harnessed by certain organizations to extend liberal-individualist democratic actions globally. Avaaz.org, for instance, looms as the largest campaigning organization in history, if one measures size by numbers of individuals *virtually* participating in its campaigns. It uses e-mail and simple internet petitions to enable (and encourage) individuals to add their names (if not voices) to those of others with the hope of bringing global 'public opinion' to bear on decision makers in relation to a wide range of international issues, including global warming, transnational military actions, 'natural' disaster relief, and global economic management.

The democratic subject of this liberal-individualist position combines a couple of aspects. First, it is understood to be an individual, rational, self-seeking, instrumental utility maximizer who knows his/her own best interests. This self clearly reflects the classic liberal economic agent found in Schumpeter (1976: 169), through which 'citizenship becomes less a collective, political activity than an individual, economic activity – the right to pursue one's interests, without hindrance, in the marketplace' (Dietz, 1992: 67). However, room is also made for the self as, in a more Rawlsian vein, it is capable of empathizing with and supporting the needs and 'rights' of other individuals,

as can be seen in the examples of Amnesty International and Avaaz. Still, at the heart of this subject is the rationally calculating and choosing individual.

Democracy here becomes the expression and aggregation of the wills of individuals, and the competition between representatives for these individuals' support. The vision is of a 'marketplace of ideas' (London, 1995: 45). The free transmission of information is necessary here for the liberal-individualist subject to make their strategic cost-benefit calculations and choices. As a result, the position aims to promote and protect the 'rights' of this subject to freely partake in communication and to encourage the provision of systems that allow for the maximization of information flows and the registration of choices. Digital media are seen as particularly important as they are believed to already function as reasonably independent of centralized controls, although digital-liberty groups like the Electronic Freedom Foundation are working to ensure such independence is safeguarded.

The position embraces digital media for enabling and enhancing direct individual-representative communication. It looks to bypass state, corporate, political party, and lobby group interference in this individual-representative relationship. However, it does not go so far as cyber-libertarianism, which celebrates an online democracy free of representative government (see Dahlberg, 2010). As such, the liberal-individualist position promotes the realignment of current democratic systems, drawing upon liberal democratic ideals to advance digital media's facilitation of bottom-up, individual participation in democracy. Because such ideals tend to be hegemonic in many places, the liberal-individualist position is often embraced without regard for other digital democracy possibilities, some of which I will now explore.

Deliberative digital democracy

The possibility of digital media in general, and the internet in particular, supporting the extension of a deliberative democratic public sphere of rational communication and public opinion formation that can hold decision makers accountable has been of significant interest in digital democracy commentary and practice for some time.³ It is a position that draws strongly from the deliberative public sphere theorizing of Jürgen Habermas (1989, 2006), and can now be found quite often explicitly articulated and promoted, if in varying ways, in e-democracy theory, research, and civic initiatives (for example, The Public Sphere Project and the Deliberative Democracy Consortium).⁴ The deliberative position has become prominent because of the seeming 'elective affinity' it has with online interaction, as well as the interest that deliberative democratic theory has gained in political science and policy (Bohman, 1998).

Advocates of deliberative democracy identify many examples of deliberation, of varying quality, taking place through digital communication. Exemplary cases where rational deliberation is seen to be approximated include organized deliberative initiatives (for example, Minnesota E-Democracy and Kuro5hin) and online government consultation projects (for example, the Hansard Society's e-democracy forums, see Coleman, 2005). Rational deliberation is also identified as taking place, if less ideally, through the writing and commentary of online citizen journalism and 'serious' media sites (from the BBC's and the *Guardian*'s online discussion boards to Niqash.org's Iraqi debates, and

Scoop.com's critical and independent journalism); online discussion forums of political interest groups; and the vast array of informal online debate on e-mail lists, web discussion boards, chat channels, blogs, social networking sites, and wikis.

The democratic subject here is seen as developing from out of rational deliberation, rather than being pre-defined as in the liberal-individualist position. Such deliberation is understood to constitute a rational public sphere in which private individuals are transformed into publicly oriented democratic subjects interested in the 'common good'. The result is critically informed public opinion that can scrutinize and guide official decision making processes.

Democracy is then based on deliberatively constituted consensus, rather than upon the aggregation of independent instrumental interests. Consensus – rational public opinion – is seen as the driving force behind deliberation, although the democratic validity of such consensus is understood to be ensured only through close adherence to idealized criteria of deliberation, including reflexivity, reciprocity, and inclusiveness (Graham, 2009; Janssen and Kies, 2005). Deliberative democrats believe that such criteria are immanent to everyday communication aimed at reaching understanding or can be extrapolated from the highest ideals of really existing democratic cultures (following, respectively, from Habermas, 1984 and 1989). The realization of deliberative democracy is seen to follow from the application of these criteria to everyday political practice.

Digital media in general, and the internet in particular, are seen as enabling this democratic conception. The two-way, low-cost, user-friendly, pliable, and readily moderated form of much digital communication is understood as affording information sharing, rational debate, and public opinion formation (Graham, 2009; Janssen and Kies, 2005). As a result, there is a growing body of research into the possibility of digital media in general, and the internet in particular, realizing deliberative democracy.⁵ This research focuses on the extent and quality of rational deliberation in online communicative spaces and on identifying those factors that facilitate and those that retard deliberation, with the aim of finding ways to further extend it. In general, this expanding body of research suggests that ideal deliberation can be closely approximated in online interactive spaces that expressly aim at achieving rational debate through effective rules of engagement, moderation systems, and interactive software tools (see Dahlberg, 2001b; Graham, 2009). However, research has largely focused on exemplary deliberative spaces, and it remains an open question as to the extent to which rational deliberation can be realized in general online debate, particularly given the ever increasing colonization of digital communication systems by state and corporate interests, which deliberative theorists see as a significant threat to democratic communication and needing regulation.

Counter-publics digital democracy

What I refer to as the counter-publics position emphasizes the role of digital media in political group formation, activism, and contestation, rather than rational individual action or rational consensus-oriented deliberation.⁶ The democratic subject here is constituted through engagement in such group formation, activism, and contestation. This is a more affective subject than in the previous positions, moved to act by a perception of systemic exclusion and injustice. The subject is also one that identifies and bonds in

solidarity with others, and as such the subject here goes beyond the individual to include groups (or publics).

Democracy here is based on two major assumptions: first, any social formation necessarily involves inclusion/exclusion relations and associated discursive contestation, where discourse is understood as a contingent and partial fixation of meaning that constitutes and organizes social relations (including identities, objects, and practices); and second, that this antagonistic situation is the basis for the formation of vibrant ‘counter-publics’: critical-reflexive spaces of communicative interaction (a first meaning of ‘publics’ here) where alternative identities and counter-discourses are developed and subsequently can come to ‘publicly’ (second meaning) contest dominant discourses that frame hegemonic practices and meanings, including the boundaries of what is considered legitimate public sphere communication. In democratic theory, ‘counter-publics’ are normally associated with a critical public sphere theory tradition that develops out of a sympathetic interrogation of deliberative theory (see, Fraser, 1992; Habermas, 1996; Negt and Kluge, 1993), while ‘counter-discourse’ is a term used more often in relation to post-structuralist political theory (see, Mouffe, 2005). However, the emerging counter-publics digital democracy position draws upon both the counter-publics and counter-discourse traditions and terminologies, contributing to their articulation and development (Dahlberg, 2007a, 2007b).

The counter-publics position sees digital communication technologies as supporting both dominant and counter-publics. The position points to the reproduction of dominant discourses through digital communication, including through political spaces identifying themselves as deliberative. Digital media is also seen as facilitating counter-publics. In particular, digital media is seen as enabling voices excluded from dominant discourses to do three interrelated things with respect to democratic politics: to form counter-publics and counter-discourses; to link up with other excluded voices in developing representative, strategically effective counter-discourses; and subsequently to contest the discursive boundaries of the mainstream public sphere. I will briefly discuss examples given in e-democracy rhetoric and practice of these three perceived digital media affordances.

First, digital counter-publics are seen as forming through the practices of alternative online media sites, social movement digital initiatives and subaltern online spaces, by means of e-mail lists, websites, and digital audio and video. Examples pointed to in the counter-publics literature, and also clearly observable as counter-public, include: the anti-globalism (or alter-globalization) movement, supported by the Indymedia network (Downey and Fenton, 2003: 186–187; Langman, 2005), the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan (Bickel, 2003), South Asian Women’s Network (Mitra, 2004), movie discussion lists in China (Zhang, 2006), the Zapitistas (Kowal, 2002), refugee groups (Siapera, 2004), ‘right to die’ advocates (McDorman, 2001), sars.org’s countering of government and news media representations of SARS (Gillet, 2007), and Aotearoa Café. Aotearoa Café, for example, offers online discussion spaces that take seriously reasoning based on Maori spirituality, language, myth, tradition and sovereignty claims, reasoning that is largely ignored in New Zealand’s officially democratic mainstream public sphere.

Second, the articulation of politically diverse counter-publics, leading to the formation of stronger and more effective oppositional discourses, can be seen taking place in a

number of ways, including through social movement e-mail lists and sites (for example, APC.org and in the global networking of the World Social Forum),⁷ alternative media digital networks (for example, Indymedia and OneWorldTV – see Wimmer, 2008: 36), and social networking sites, wikis, and blogs (Kahn and Kellner, 2005). The most widely cited examples of digital media supporting counter-public articulation are in relation to alter-globalization, including: the e-mail list and website mobilizations of global support for the Zapatistas and the articulation of their anti-neo-liberal discourse with the discourse(s) of the growing movement against global capitalism (Downey and Fenton, 2003; Kowal, 2002; Ramírez de la Piscina, 2006); Indymedia sites linking the geographically and ideologically dispersed voices of the alter-globalization movement (Downey and Fenton, 2003: 186–187; Langman, 2005); and the transnational advocacy movement that utilized the internet to transmit information about, and successfully organize resistance to, the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) in the late 1990s (Johnston and Laxer, 2003; Langman, 2005). Digital networks are also seen as supporting discursive articulations developing in relation to resistance to the United States' invasion and occupation of Iraq (Gallo, 2003; Kahn and Kellner, 2005). A range of social movement counter-publics – from student to alter-globalization to human rights to ex-servicemen – have found commonality and have been strategically articulated through the anti-Iraq-war discourse with the help of digital communication networks.

Third, in relation to inter-discursive contestation, digital media – from mobile phones and digital cameras to the internet – are seen as helping excluded voices to be heard through online and offline activism. Two forms of direct online activism are of particular interest to counter-publics digital democrats: electronic civil disobedience,⁸ including 'electronic-sit-ins' that slow down or block targeted websites; and digital culture jams, including 'viral' dissemination of reworked-decontextualized signs, website 'tagging', and parody sites such as those produced by The Yes Men (Cammaerts, 2007; Kahn and Kellner, 2005, 2007; Palczewski, 2001). These online actions are believed to help bring attention to excluded voices. As evidence, counter-publics commentators point to how contestations of dominant discourse undertaken in e-mail discussion spaces, weblogs, alternative media, and via direct online activism at times make enough 'noise' to get noticed by, and followed up in, online and offline mass media (*ibid*). In terms of offline activism, counter-publics commentators point to the indispensable support digital communication gives to the coordination of protest and publicity (Downey and Fenton, 2003; Kahn and Kellner, 2005; Kowal, 2002). However, these commentators tend to see online and offline discursive contestation overlapping, with protests over specific issues normally taking place across online and offline spaces at the same time. Prominent examples of the deployment of digital communication for the above forms of inter-discursive contestation include, once again, the digitally supported activism of the alter-globalization movement and of the protests against the United States' invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq (Downey and Fenton, 2003; Kahn and Kellner, 2005; Kowal, 2002; Langman, 2005; Ramírez de la Piscina, 2006).

Digital communication networks are themselves seen as contested terrains, sites of discursive struggle, and the focus of counter-publics activism. This is particularly so in the case of the internet, as digital democracy advocates and activists begin to challenge its increasing colonization by state and corporate interests (Jordan, 2007), and as

activisms are provoked by the extension online of offline forms of cultural domination (for example, in response to perceived 'systemic gender bias in wikipedia' a 'WikiChix' list developed (Reagle, 2007)). In contrast to the deliberative position, which responds to such colonization by promoting the development and protection of more 'rational' digital communication spaces, the counter-publics position looks more to the possibility for progressive change taking place through counter-discursive challenges.

By enabling counter-publics and contestations of power, digital media are seen as strengthening the voice of alternative, marginalized, or otherwise oppressed groups. As such, advocates of counter-publics digital democracy often refer to their position as radically democratic. The fourth position to be outlined here also sees digital communication technology as advancing radical democracy, but in another sense. I now turn to this position.

Autonomist Marxist digital democracy

The fourth, autonomist Marxist, position sees digital communication networks as enabling a radically democratic politics in the sense of self-organized and inclusive participation in common productive activities that bypass centralized state and capitalist systems, which are understood to be necessarily anti-democratic.⁹ Digital *networking* is thus posited as the basis for producing an independent, fully democratic 'commons'.¹⁰

Democracy here is understood as self-organization autonomous from systems of centralized power. Democratic decision making is seen to take place organically (and rhizomically) through the collaborative, decentralized productivity of peer-to-peer networking. This conception suggests a political revolution. It goes beyond the extension or reform of liberal democracy that all three previous positions in some sense support, envisioning instead the formation of an entirely new democratic society – a 'commons'-based socio-economic arrangement as the foundation for democratic community.

This 'commons' is constituted through a decentralized, networked, open source intelligence, the 'general intellect' of 'the multitude' (Dyer-Witheford, 2007).¹¹ Antonio Negri (2008a: 173), one of the key theorists of this position and himself an enthusiast of the radically democratic potential of digital networks, states that 'to become the multitude is to become democracy'. The collective networked subject is referred to as 'the multitude' in order to reflect its irreducible plurality, a 'community of singularities' (ibid: 67, 71). The subject emerges not as a part of 'the masses' or 'the people' or 'the working class', which all indicate unity, but as an autonomous agent asserting difference through productive (net)working in concert, constituting the common and yet not reducible to the common (that is, an individual and group subject at once).

Digital media networks are seen as enabling the extension of this commons networking, particularly in terms of 'dematerialized' open source cultural production and distribution, including software (for example, Linux), publishing (for example, wikis, Indymedia), and music (including 'piracy').¹² There are also cases of digitally organized production and (re)distribution of 'material' goods that can be read as 'fitting' the autonomist Marxist position; for example, Freecycle.org consists of thousands of groups around the globe that use the internet to organize the redistribution of second-hand goods. Moreover, autonomist democratic communities are seen as evolving via

social networked activism (see examples below) and even through pirated information distribution.¹³

Challenges to non-democratic systems are understood to take place more through developing alternative productive networking than through explicit protest movements. So, for example, the Indymedia network is understood by autonomist commentators and many of its participants as not just the basis of alternative and contestatory media discourse, as in the counter-publics reading, but of a radically democratic community whose very 'autonomous' existence challenges the necessity of a capitalist organization of society (Kidd, 2003).¹⁴ What matters here most of all is the extent of rhizomic, cooperative, and creative productivity. According to Negri (2008a: 66–67), 'the commons consists of the sum of everything produced independently of capital', and it is the totality of autonomous production that will bring about radical democracy. However, specific examples given in autonomist literature of digital media-based challenges to the dominant (capitalist) system largely focus upon explicit contestations of capitalist society. Particularly cited are the global, digitally networked activism of the alter-globalization movement (Clever, 1999; Dyer-Witheford, 2002, 2006, 2007). Here, the multitude can be seen acting through digitally enabled forms of protest including electronic civil disobedience and 'smart mobs' using mobile phones to organize protests (Clever, 1999; Negri, 2008b). In contrast to the articulation of such practices in the counter-publics literature, the focus for autonomist Marxists is on the cooperative productivity involved, through which autonomous democratic community arises.

Such autonomous digital media practice is understood to always be precarious. The 'immaterial labour' of the general intellect is seen as constantly appropriated by global capitalism and state control (Coté and Pybus, 2007; Terranova, 2004). This is clear from basic acquisition and ownership statistics (see Alexa.com). However, autonomist Marxists are more upbeat than are many other commentators about the possibility of democracy developing through digital media. Autonomist Marxists do not believe, as other positions do, that democrats have to *react* to capitalist appropriation and state control. It is the latter that are understood as always reacting, reacting to new autonomist systems developing through digital networking. As a result, Autonomists seek the expansion of this networking, rather than thinking in the terms of legal challenge or political resistance, which are promoted to various extents in the other three positions.

Further comparative remarks and conclusion

The purpose of this article has been to provide an outline of four prominent digital democracy positions reconstructed from critical-interpretative research, with the aim of facilitating reflection upon, and research into, possibilities for the extension of democracy via digital communication technology. Here I will make some general comparative remarks, before suggesting how I see the sketch of the four positions as useful to digital democracy research and practice.

The four positions were reconstructed with respect to their understandings of the democratic subject, the related conception of democracy, and the democratic affordances of digital media technology. Table 1 provides a summary and contrast of the positions in relation to the former two elements. Table 2 gives a series of descriptive signifiers, listed

Table 1. Subject and democracy in the four digital democracy positions

	Subject	Democracy
Liberal-consumer	self-sufficient, rational-strategic individual	competitive-aggregative
Deliberative	inter-subjectively rational individual	deliberative-consensual
Counter-publics	discursive-antagonistic individual/public	contestationary
Autonomous Marxist	multitude of singularities	commons networking

Table 2. Affordances in the four digital democracy positions

	Digital Democratic Affordances
Liberal-consumer	aggregating, calculating, choosing, competing, expressing, fundraising, informing, petitioning, registering, transacting, transmitting, voting
Deliberative	agreeing, arguing, deliberating, disagreeing, informing, meeting, opinion forming, publicizing, reflecting
Counter-publics	articulating, associating, campaigning, contesting, forming groups, identifying, organizing, protesting, resisting
Autonomous Marxist	collaborating, cooperating, distributing, exchanging, giving, networking, participating, sharing

in alphabetical order, as a summary of the democratic affordances that each position identifies with digital media technology. These signifiers should not be taken as a hard or final defining of these positions, which are dynamic. Neither should the signifiers be seen as unique to each position. Rather, the list of signifiers in Table 2 represents a rough indication of each of the positions with respect to how they understand the democratic affordances of digital technology.

With respect to these affordances, I have not attempted to differentiate between how positions understand the relationship between human agency and technological effects. An investigation of such a differentiation is complex and beyond the scope of this article. I will simply note that the rhetoric and practice from out of which the four positions were reconstructed assume an understanding somewhere along the spectrum between ‘uses’ and ‘constitution’ models of human–technology relations (see Dahlberg, 2004; Poster, 2001). Sometimes the technology is understood more as a ‘tool’ for uses determined by independent human agents, as in communication conduits or the means for engaging in activism. At other times digital media are seen more constitutively, as bringing into being particular spaces, objects, subjects, and practices. One general observation, however, can be made. This is that the rhetoric and practice of the liberal-individualist position tends to read digital media as most tool-like (able to be developed and deployed at will by individuals and groups to meet their needs and desires), while the autonomist position takes the most constitutive understanding, seeing digital communication networks as bringing into existence a new democratic society. However, within all four positions we

find a complex range of readings of the relationship between tool-like uses and technological determination.

More relevant to the focus of this article is that the technological affordances associated with each of the positions clearly seem to be affected by pre-given understandings of democracy and democratic subjectivity. That is, the democratic affordances of digital networks can be seen to be selectively read in accordance with particular democratic forms. However, the positions also modify previous democratic traditions through articulation with readings of digital media. The result is that we are seeing a number of democratic traditions being advanced and renewed, and at the same time some aspects of digital media technology emphasized and promoted more than other aspects through linkage with particular traditions. The question left hanging is: to what extent do readings of technological affordances influence democratic understandings, and to what extent do the latter influence readings of democratic affordances?

It is also worth noting the take up of the four positions in academic, activist, and policy rhetoric and practice. The deliberative, counter-publics and autonomist positions are mostly promoted by academics and activists, and can be found in many online experiments and projects. The deliberative position has also become influential in some policy circles, particularly in the United States, Great Britain, Oceania, and parts of Europe. However, in these same regions, it is the liberal-individualist position that dominates mainstream digital democracy thinking and practice. Liberal-individualist understandings are taken-for-granted in much government, business, and public interest e-democracy initiative and commentary. Moreover, developers and users in most nations are largely interpolated by, and thus instinctively understand, liberal-individualist rhetoric and practice. As such, a liberal-individualist model is clearly the easiest option to realize. According to Chadwick's (2009) research, democratic representatives and digital participants show little interest in online deliberative initiatives. As such, Chadwick concludes that digital deliberative democracy advocates are expecting too much from digital participants. We could similarly argue that due to the near-universal hegemony of the liberal-individualist interpretation of the democratic subject and democracy, the online activism and cooperative production central to the counter-publics and autonomist positions will also be limited to small numbers of activists and digital enthusiasts (see Hindman, 2009, for empirical support for this marginalization thesis). We can thus predict, against the hopes and claims found in the other positions, much greater 'success' in liberal-individualist projects than in projects driven by other positions. However, this empirical dominance does not mean normative superiority. The latter depends upon evaluation using particular democratic criteria that are themselves drawn from, and justified in relation to, particular traditions. Moreover, further research is needed to explore this dominance and the limits on each position being realized.

As a precursor to such research, it is worth mentioning here that all four positions do not only point to concrete examples that give them substantive grounding, but also recognize various restrictions to the full realization of their visions. As well as limits resulting from the naturalization of taken-for-granted conceptions of politics, the positions point to explicit political and economic constraints on digital democracy. As indicated in the body of this article, they all note certain limits on digital democracy

due to state and capitalist surveillance and control over digital media technology, as well as due to structural inequalities that lead to digital participation inequalities. However, the positions also interpret differently, and emphasize different aspects of, these systemic constraints. In turn, they provide significantly different proposals for how to overcome these limits. Proposals range from the protection of the 'communication rights' of individuals (liberal-individualist), to the resourcing and development of formal and informal online deliberative spaces (deliberative), to the encouragement of direct contestation of state and capitalist domination (counter-publics), to the promotion of networking forms that radically bypass state and capitalist systems (autonomist).

In conclusion, it should be emphasized that these positions are reconstructed from my reading of how particular empirical instances stand in relation to the three inter-related elements (the democratic subject, democracy, and digital affordances). The question remains as to how useful is such a characterization. I believe that there are a number of ways in which the positions outlined here are useful. First, the four positions highlight the diversity of possibilities already being articulated in digital democracy rhetoric and practice. In particular, the outline indicates the potential to go beyond dominant liberal-individualist forms of political practice. Second, following from this first point, the reconstruction of the different positions brings to digital democracy research a much needed critical focus on democratic ends rather than simply instrumental means. Third, the outline offers a framework for further research, including for the identification of other digital democracy positions (some of which are suggested in this article's introduction), the in-depth exploration and detailing of actually existing rhetoric and practice, and the sociological evaluation (necessitating further analytical criteria) of the realizability of each position. Finally, extending the critical focus, the outline invites normative evaluation of the democratic value of each position, where evaluators would need to identify and justify the point from which their judgement is made. Whatever the case, normative judgement cannot be avoided, as even an attempt to escape such judgement (through, say, an appeal to value-neutral science) is itself a judgement, normally in favour of status quo power relations. While my research here has not itself explicitly undertaken normative (nor sociological) evaluation, it has implicitly done so in its reading of positions. I aim to undertake more explicit normative and sociological evaluation of these positions in the future, as well as to engage in the further critical-interpretative reconstruction and empirical detailing of these positions. I encourage others to do so as well, with the objective of building towards a critical reflection upon the democratic possibilities of digital communication technologies.

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Notes

1. Affordances refers to how a technology encourages and enables users to perform certain activities, and indicates the complementarity of technology and user. See Gibson (1977) and Norman (1999).
2. Given the articulatory nature of the positions reconstructed here, I could describe them as discourses, as I have done elsewhere (see Dahlberg, 2007b, 2010). However, here I want to reserve the term discourse for its specific use in one of the positions (the 'counter-publics' one).
3. See, for example, Ackerly (2006), Benson (1996), Bohman (2004), Coleman and Blumler (2009), Dahlberg (2001b), Fang (1995), Friedland et al. (2006), Gimmler (2001), Graham (2009), Janssen and Kies (2005), Tanner (2001), and Wilhelm (2000).
4. See <http://www.publicsphereproject.org/> and <http://www.deliberative-democracy.net/> (all URLs in these Notes were consulted in February 2010).
5. See, for example, Ackerly (2006), Benson (1996), Coleman and Blumler (2009), Fang (1995), Friedland, et al. (2006), Gimmler (2001), Graham (2009), Janssen and Kies (2005), and Tanner (2001).
6. For commentary on digital democracy where a counter-publics position can be clearly found articulated, see Bickel (2003), Dahlberg (2007a, 2007b), Dahlgren (2007), Downey and Fenton (2003), Gallo (2003), Gillet (2007), Kahn and Kellner (2005, 2007), Kowal (2002), Langman (2005), McDorman (2001), Palczewski (2001), Ramirez de la Piscina (2006), Salazar (2003), Warf and Grimes (1997), Wimmer (2008), and Zhang (2006).
7. See <http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/>
8. Electronic civil disobedience (ECD) refers to mass, global, decentred digital activisms that are based on 'unbearable weight of human beings online', not secretive cracking or distributed denial of service attacks using zombie machines (representing only one or two people). The two most prominent groups that have been involved in ECD are the Electronic Disturbance Theatre (activism focused first on supporting the Zapatistas in Mexico, now expanded to other issues) and the Electrohippies Collective (focused on the 1999 WTO meetings in Seattle, and the Afghan and Iraq wars). See <http://www.thing.net/~rdom/ecd/ecd.html> and <http://www.fraw.org.uk/hippies/index.shtml>
9. See, for example, Berardi (2009), Cleaver (1999), Coté and Pybus (2007), Hardt and Negri (2004, 2009); Kidd (2003), Negri (2008a, 2008b), and Terranova (2000, 2004). Nick Dyer-Witheford's (2002, 2006, 2007) work is particularly important here. For an overview of the autonomist Marxist tradition that these commentators draw upon see Wright (2008). In short, autonomism draws upon Marxist understandings of the central role of forces and relations of production in social and political formation. Yet, against much Marxist thinking, autonomism emphasizes productive labour's (defined broadly) self-activity and potential leadership with respect to capitalist and state systems, and de-emphasizes the need for centralized (party, union) organization. For most autonomists, communication media are seen as vital supports in the realization of this potential.
10. A liberal commons discourse has developed in the United States and elsewhere that focuses on increasing the creative use of cultural products through the legal protection of a property commons. As such, it relies on the hegemonic liberal rights tradition (see Lessig, 2001). The autonomist Marxist position promotes a more radical commons, autonomous from the liberal legal system, the latter being seen as supporting private property and capitalism. The autonomist position also needs to be distinguished from cyber-libertarianism, which embraces capitalist markets and individual entrepreneurship (see Dahlberg, 2010). Moreover, the autonomist position must not be confused with communitarian digital democracy, which grew out of

earlier community media projects, and understands common life as grounded upon immanently shared identity and values (see Dahlberg, 2001a).

11. The general intellect, according to Negri (2008a: 103), is 'an immaterial, intellectual, linguistic and cooperative work force that corresponds to a new phase of productive development'.
12. The Pirate Bay has drawn on autonomist Marxist terminology in a 'Piracy Manifesto' to call for the multitude to unite and act against capitalism through an internet-based global movement of copyright infringement. See <http://piracymanifesto.com/>
13. On how pirated distribution of information can be read as autonomist Marxist see Torsson (2005) and Piratbyrå ('The Piracy Bureau') at <http://www.piratbyran.org/>
14. The view that Indymedia is a radically democratic community revolutionizing society through its very existence was strongly expressed by many attendees at the 'Indymedia debate', which I attended, at the Next 5 Minutes Festival of Tactical Media, Amsterdam, September, 2003. See <http://www.next5minutes.org/program.jsp?menuitem=2>

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