

Information Strategies and Democracy

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Abstract

*Many attempts have been made to define the concept of democracy. These definitions are usually accompanied by certain basic ideas such as that of self-government by and for the people (i.e the state is a *res publica* and not the dominium of the people). The problem with this and similar definitions is that they don't reflect a true and valid picture of a political reality, but rather something like an abstract ideal for which a working realization is envisaged. To this could be added that experience with democratic systems have shown that the formal system of determining the formation of the collective will is not sufficient for guaranteeing democratic life as such. One of the consequences from this recognition is that the formal rule of voting and holding elections is not by itself sufficient for granting the realization of democratic ideals; it must be accompanied by an effective system of discourse about political and social questions, by transparency of public relations and by appropriate access to relevant information. It is the intention of the author to indicate what relevant information in a true democracy is and the negative results of withholding such information.*

1. Preliminary remarks on the nature of democracy¹

Many information scientists² argue that information surfaces best in a democratic state. This is not only a bold statement, but also one that needs verification, which will be the aim of this paper. Before attempting this, a few general remarks in this regard. Democracy is a method which is defined by some basic ideas, primarily by the idea of self-government of the people. The state is not the *dominium* of a person, a family or an institution, but is a *res publica* of the people who rule themselves, in their own interest and by their own considerations and decisions.

Such a definition is, of course, not a picture of a political reality, but something like an abstract ideal for which we try to find a working realisation. The fundamental method of realising democracy consists of rules for forming a collective will and/or how to empower delegates for the administration of the state and political matters. These procedures - at least in the prevailing liberal conception - aim at minimalising restrictions on the freedom of citizens and social groups in choosing their form of life and in planning their activities. To this can be added that experience with democratic systems has shown that

the formal system of determining the formation of the collective will is not sufficient for guaranteeing democratic life as such. It is, for example, possible to destroy democracy by establishing a dictatorship by means of a democratic procedure, and formal democratic decisions may destroy the democratic rights of some groups and introduce harmful discrimination. At least three consequences follow from this recognition. Firstly, the formal rule of voting and holding elections are not by themselves sufficient for granting the realisation of democratic ideals; they must be accompanied by an effective system of discourse about political and social questions, by transparency of public relations and by *appropriate access to relevant information*. Secondly, democracy cannot be adequately defined solely by formal rules of will formation; it is an indispensable part of the democratic world view to hold and discuss an open system of material postulates containing *inter alia* tolerance, non-discrimination, the idea of the rule of law, freedom of speech, of opinion, of religion, of association and so on. None of the liberties previously mentioned is unlimited, yet the limits are always a matter of careful deliberation. Thirdly, even a well established democratic system is open to misuse; democracy is not a place for rest, but a system in vivid evolution and dependent on social discourses. It can be efficient and stable only if it is institutionalised in an open society.

Democracy, therefore, is kind of *community* whose members *participate in the determination of policy for the community as a whole*³. This by itself does not, however, guarantee the success of democracy. Its successful practice requires that a number of further conditions be met. One of these basic conditions of democracy is the existence of a *community*⁴ within which it may be operative⁵ based on the principle of *rationality*⁶. However, to be a social or political community, certain *relations* must exist between its members, created and maintained by the *rational capacities* of each of its members. It is further imperative that rational faculties be *developed* and *used* if the democracy is to operate successfully. The community is the essential context of the democratic process. Within that context the members must be supposed to have at least the fundamental capacities that general participation in common affairs require.

2. Democracy and information

Democracy can only be realised successfully by education⁷ and communication. Norms and directives are forms of information which guide and control the behaviour of the citizens, determine social interaction and produce the organisation of social institution. The development of political programs is based on a great variety of information about the social state and

interrelations in society. Political and legal decisions are underpinned by relevant information about the matter which has to be regulated.

To inform someone is to *in-form* him/her. The word *inform* also means, by virtue of its origin, *to be the formative principle* of and hence *to animate*. Information received gives shape to the issues, helps to form opinions and principles, invites appropriate action⁸. A society fully and correctly *informed* a society fully and correctly *formed or* animated.⁹ In cases where information is distorted or incomplete, the character of the public policy relying on that information will also be distorted or incomplete. The sufficient flow of essential information and ready public access to it, are thus vital conditions for a thriving democracy.¹⁰

There are also further aspects relating to the role of information within the electorate. The people are invited to determine the path of political decisions directly by vote, or indirectly by the election of political representatives. Democratic procedures themselves are a kind of information process, and if democratic voting is to be reasonable it has to be based on appropriate information available to the electorate. Political parties are also linked up with the information processes. Every political party realises a certain position, which leads to a programmatic conception. Discourses concerning program problems are in fact indispensable for every political party. Programs provided to the electorate provide information about the basic line of the party, but they have increasingly achieved the character of propaganda.

Information and propaganda are as essential for the work of political parties as the administration of public affairs when the party has achieved a political mandate from the electorate. The task of informing people is not restricted to the endeavour to gain party members and win voters, but involves showing the importance of objectives which are basic to the political movement. Parties are institutions which are entitled to promote social plans and political visions¹¹.

An important mode of information which has a great influence in a modern society and its political life is the *mass media*. The major part of the information the people receive is provided by newspapers, radio and television. On the one hand, the institution of mass media improves people's insight into political relations and into the political, economic and cultural development of a democratic society; on the other hand, the mass media is a powerful instrument for influencing public opinion and can be used for propaganda and indoctrination. The institutionalisation of the freedom of mass media is a necessary prerequisite for democratic life.

A great deal what has been said has more to do with the *reception* and *interpretation* of information, than the *presentation* thereof from various sectors in society. In this respect, it is important to bear in mind that not every presentation of information plays has an effective and lasting influence on the individual. Our knowledge is not only a result of our own experience, but has in many respects a *social* character. It *is formed by what we have learned and what has been presented to us by information from a cultural background*. The message by which we receive information does not by itself indicate whether the information is true. In this regard, three theses are important. Firstly, our system of communication is based on the presupposition that the sender of a message presents it as true information, but this presupposition of communication does not imply that any actual message is in fact true. Secondly, there are two forms of reception of information, namely active and passive reception¹². A great deal of information concerning politics and the citizens attitude towards it, is more a matter of *passive* reception of information.

A further important component of information is its *accessibility*. If the members of democratic society are to govern themselves successfully, they must have easy access to a reasonably accurate and reasonably complete account of the facts needed to make intelligent decisions upon the issues facing them. When inconsistent versions of the facts appear, all must be made available to the public. Quantitative detail of information must be *interpreted*. Facts must be integrated so as to present to the public an intelligible picture of the past, present and predicted states of affairs. Differing interpretations of some situations are inevitable. Their proper arbiter is an *informed* public.

The copious provision of such materials is an intellectual condition of successful democracy. If the members of a democratic society jointly decide important issues (or choose representatives who will do so) without the information intelligent decisions require, or on the basis of deception or one sided accounts, they invite catastrophe. A community, if it hopes to make democracy succeed, must hold itself responsible for the provision and publication of all the information required for government by general participation. In this respect, it is not only the freedom to publish facts and opinions that is important - a freedom that is a necessary constitutional condition of democracy. Beyond the freedom to publish there must be actual publication; without the fact of publication, the freedom to provide it is a practically a hollow shell.

The greatest enemy of democracy is *secrecy*, which is the intentional withholding of information¹³. What usually begins as secrecy, and sometimes qualifies as being in the interest of the state, is soon likely to result in

widespread ignorance concerning issues of grave public concern. Intelligent participation is thus undermined. In this way, secrecy and distrust of the people become viciously self-justifying. When the people are not informed because it is believed they cannot be trusted to act wisely with that information, the capacity of the people to act wisely is further reduced. Then, the likelihood increases that yet more information will have to be kept from them for the same reasons. It has been proved time and again that secrecy invariably tends to create the need for more secrecy. Deliberate restrictions upon the flow of information thus begin by injuring the intellectual conditions of democracy, but may result in the elimination of democracy in some spheres, and in the curtailment of its range and depth. The deterioration of the conditions of democracy leads to the deterioration of democracy itself.

3. Information and education

The preliminary remark in the previous section was that democracy can only be realised successfully by education and communication. The placing of the concept *education* before *communication* or for that matter *information*, has been done intentionally because I am of the opinion that an educated society is the major¹⁴ pre-condition for a successful democracy. Three questions are of importance in this regard. Firstly, what do we understand under the concept *education* and an *educated citizenry*? Secondly, why is an *educated society* the major pre-condition for democracy? Thirdly, *how much education* does the operation of democracy require of its members?

The word *educate* is derived from the Latin term meaning *to lead forth*) *education* is thus *the leading forth of someone, drawing the best out of the individual* and developing his/her skills in order that the citizen can participate in his/her world/society in the best way possible. Education as the major condition of democracy is thus *intellectual* development aimed at successful co-operative coping with a common social world. Cohen, distinguishes four types of intellectual skills which are associated with democracy, namely: (i) practical education; (ii) basic education; (iii) technical education; and (iv) humane education¹⁵.

Practical education is the preparation for dealing with the everyday problems of human intercourse. It is the development of "common sense" so often regarded as essential for the wise conduct of human affairs. It is common, being the natural outcome of a normal upbringing, and the more or less well developed talent of most human beings. General problems pertaining to the community can be resolved by the application of common sense, but those related to most political democracies where issues of war and

peace, economic growth and social welfare, public health and population control come into play, require more than practical education.

Basic education is training in the handling of fundamental intellectual skills of the individual. Its simplest measure is the literacy rate, the percentage of those in the community who can read and write. Needless to say, this form of education is sadly lacking among the vast majority of political communities around the globe. Although this phenomenon is present in many developed countries, it is especially in the third world countries where illiteracy is encountered the most. Illiterate citizens cannot read the newspaper, cannot be fully informed on the alternatives presented to them, cannot effectively criticise or make proposals of their own, cannot partake successfully in deliberations, etc. They cannot even read the ballot¹⁶. Therefore, when, under autocratic rule, the literacy rate shows no significant improvement, we may infer that any claim that "power is being held only to prepare the ground for democracy" is almost certainly fraudulent. Where basic education is missing and where illiteracy prevails, democracy may be professed, but it can hardly be realised¹⁷.

Technical education, requiring years of study and specialisation, is essential for those in the community who are busy with narrow issues for which all cannot be prepared. This kind of education is neither possible nor desirable for every citizen. Although the political community need not consist exclusively out of scientists and engineers, it cannot function without them. For a democracy to succeed, it must develop, among its citizens, those special capacities its intelligent management requires. As the technical complexity increases, so must the capacities of its technical servants, as well as the capacities of the citizenry to appraise their services on its behalf.

Humane education is least common and least well-appreciated. A democratic community must choose ends as well as means. To do this appropriately and wisely, its members must exhibit a considerable measure of *rational* ability. In a democracy, the wisdom and humaneness of policy depends on the wisdom and humaneness of the citizens who determine it.

From the abovementioned analysis of the forms of education required in a democratic state, it could be deduced that education in the human sciences is not only essential, but also an important precondition for a successful democracy. The study of history, the appreciation of literature, the practice and criticism of the arts, the understanding of philosophical inquiry are the intellectual requirements of a society who would wisely govern themselves. The aim of the democratic society should be the intellectual development of a each member in using his/her intellectual capacity, in order to ensure that the ends of the state be met.

This answers to a great extent the first two questions posed. What remains is how much education does the operation of a democracy require of its members? A clear-cut answer is not possible because everything depends on the nature of a specific community and intensity of the problems it faces. Everything depends on the nature of the community's problems and their ability to understand and to solve these problems in a rational manner. It must be stressed that *formal schooling* is not the only method and measure of education in order that citizens can cope with their problems. Democracy may be sustained if the issues confronting the citizenry forces an education on them which will enable them to cope with their problems. In classical Greece, for example, democracy succeeded with a minimum of institutional support for education.

The educational demands of a contemporary democratic society are high. These demands are mitigated by the fact that most of the more technical issues facing the national community are directly handled not by the members at large, but by their representatives. Hence, the education chiefly required for the members is that needed to select representatives wisely. A citizen cannot be expected to know, and does not need to know, all that is necessary to resolve every problem or issue in the community. He must, however, be able to judge the solutions and the consequences of the solutions proposed by others. Aristotle¹⁸ pointed out that he who is unable to prepare the feast by himself, may yet be very competent in appraising it. This competence needs to be developed. The cook needs a full education in culinary technique; he for whom the cook toils needs an educated palate. Even in representative democracies, therefore, the education of the members is a condition of success; the citizens must be intellectually prepared for the tasks that participation in their government imposes.

4. Concluding remarks

The intention of this paper is to stress the importance and need for information and education as necessary pre-requisites for a successful democracy. The development of the skills of communication and information will always remain the central aim of education for democracy. Any joint effort to deal with communal concerns depends upon communication - through papers, books and the electronic media, but also through direct interpersonal relations. Democracy needs members who have learned to speak clearly and concisely, who can think rationally and who can write effectively. It is a given fact that citizens engaged in a democratic order cannot be mere listeners. They must be able to transmit their own ideas and those of others. They must be able to express their own concerns and perspectives.

Cultivation of the arts of communication and information is an unrelenting demand the citizens of a democracy must take upon themselves. In part, they fulfill it through formal institutions e.g. public schools, libraries, museums, universities, etc. Such institutions are concrete manifestations of a community's concern to develop and sustain the intellectual capacities of its members. But, communication must extend well beyond and below formal institutions. It must pervade the community at every level. In this respect, we can learn a lot from ancient Athens. Benefiting from tools of communication of which the Athenians could hardly dream, we have allowed the arts of conversation to degenerate badly. Conversation is the finest and probably the most effective of communicatory instruments. A democratic society is one in which the members frequently *con verse*, turning ideas and proposals about one with another.

In short, a democratic society should be an educated, informed and conversing society. It is therefore fitting that the institution most perfectly characteristic of a working democracy is called a parliament, being a place for thinking, talking, speaking and for making decisions. In a parliamentary system, the members of a democracy must participate in their government and this could be done largely by talking, listening, reading, writing and arguing about community affairs. It is imperative that every citizen in a democracy spends as much time as possible exchanging ideas and opinions thereby forging links of their community. This could be done through the reading of books, newspapers, periodicals, letters, etc. The Ancient Greeks had an appropriate word to describe a person who refrains from reading or the exchange of ideas and opinions and thus only concerns him/herself with his/her affairs, namely, *idiotes*. He/she will be ignorant, dumb, truly an idiot in the pejorative sense. Of democracy in Athens, Pericles said:

"Our citizens attend both to public and private duties, and do not allow absorption in their own various affairs to interfere with their knowledge of the city's. We differ from other states in regarding the man who holds aloof from public life not as 'quiet' but as useless; we decide or debate, carefully and in person, all matters of policy, holding, not that words and deeds go ill together, but that acts are foredoomed to failure when undertaken undiscussed. For we are noted for being at once most adventurous in action and most reflective beforehand. Other men are bold in ignorance, while reflection will stop their onset. But the bravest are surely those who have the clearest vision of what is before them, glory and danger alike, and yet notwithstanding go out to meet it." (Thucydides, The Peloponnesian War, II, 40).

The realisation of the intellectual conditions of democracy is a matter never easy to access. Figures like literacy rates, school and university attendance, library book circulation are helpful indicators, but they are not conclusive. The quality of interpersonal communication is hardly measurable in quantitative

terms; it is a complex function of individual capacities, the degree of their development, and the inclination to apply them.

The failure to realise fully enough the intellectual conditions of democracy is often the cause of catastrophic errors by democratic governments. Some believe that mistakes by democracies are the rule rather than the exception. There is enough evidence, especially in Africa, in support of the argument that bad governors are usually poorly educated or misinformed. The remedy for this danger is not the abandonment of democracy, but the improvement of the rational capacities of the citizenry.

Endnotes

1. It is not within the scope of this paper to give a detailed analysis of the concept *democracy*. However a few remarks will suffice. Democracy is usually typified as government by the people, of the people and for the people. The Greek roots of the concept illustrates this clearly: *demos*, the people, and *kratein*, to rule. Aristotle, after distinguishing several kinds of democracy, says: "We may lay it down generally that a system which does not allow every citizen to share is oligarchical [*oligos*, few) and that one which does so is democratic." (*Politics*, iv, 6). All in all, democracy is a system in which the people govern themselves.
2. Edward Weiland, Felix Oppenheim, John Ferejohn, James Kuklinski, Judith Lichtenberg, etc.
3. Cohen, C. 1971. *Democracy*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, p.6.
4. Communities in which democracy functions may or may not be geographically delineated; their requirements for membership may be formal or informal, exact or inexact. What is absolutely essential in every case is that there be some common interest or problems, some concerns which bind them, however loosely or briefly into a self-conscious unit.
5. The process of democracy is the process of group participation in common government. For that process to go on there must be, implicitly or explicitly realised, a body with some common concerns and some roughly identifiable membership. Only when some community of interest exists is it conceivable that its members can resolve to deal jointly with common affairs through general participation. What is absolutely essential in every case is that there be some common interest or problems, some concerns which bind them, however loosely or briefly into a self-conscious unit. Only within some community can self-government be realised.

7. Rationality is one of the major suppositions of democracy. Three criteria can be laid down for a rational involvement in democracy. Firstly, the faculty of forming a plan or grasping a rule for judgement or action. Secondly, the faculty of using that rule, by applying it to particular cases, or following the plan of action. Thirdly, because the rules and plans that must function in a democracy are interpersonal, the faculty of intellectual communication, of reasoning with one another.

8. Education will be discussed in the following paragraph.

9. Cohen, C 1971. *Democracy*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, p.157.

10. In an article entitled The White House Conference and Democracy, published in the *Government Information Quarterly*, Volume 9, Number 3, pp.341-346, Joan C. Durrance refers to the Kettering Report where the following quotation is taken up in the preamble of librarianship's Statement on Professional Ethics.

11. In the mid-fifties, Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee set forth a standard for the democratic citizen that political scientists came to cite routinely: "the democratic citizen is expected to be well informed about political affairs. He is supposed to know what then issues are, what their history is, what the relevant facts are, what alternatives are proposed ... what the likely consequences are." Berelson, B.R., Lazarsfeld, P.F. and McPhee, W.N. 1954. *Voting: A Study of Opinion Formation in a Presidential Campaign*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p.308.

12. Weinberger, O. Information and Human Liberty in *Ratio Juris*. Vol.9 No.3. September 1996 (248-257).p.253.

13. If we hear or see a message our senses are always active in some sense, for example, our eye adapts itself to the situation. But the difference between active and passive reception of messages concerns something else. Either we direct our attention towards the message, so that we incorporate the information into our system of knowledge by intention, or we notice the message only passively because we are exposed to it and accept it automatically, and not intentionally.

14. There may be occasions where the demands of self-defence are so pressing and military secrets so crucial to that defence, that information in special categories is made available only to those who must use it. But these occasions should be very much the exception rather than the rule.

16. Some scholars will argue that an educated society is *one* of the conditions for democracy. Others will say that it is *a* major condition. The author of this paper is of the opinion that an educated society is the *basic precondition for a* valid and successful democracy.

17. Cohen, C. 1971. *Democracy*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, p. 164.

18. During the elections which took place during 1994 in South Africa, photos of the candidates were printed on the ballot paper. Prior election education was also undertaken in all parts of the country.

17. As in South Africa and many other states in Africa.

18. *Politics*, (14.2)