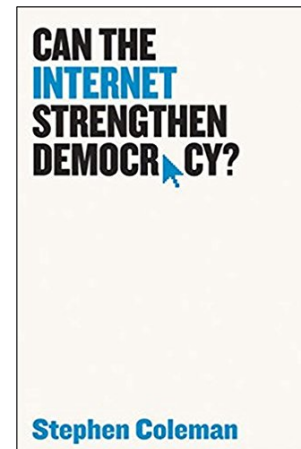


Stephen Coleman, **Can the Internet Strengthen Democracy?** Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2017, 160 pp., \$45.00 (hardcover), \$8.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by
Niall P. Stephens
Framingham State University, USA

The end of history has come and gone. After three decades in which much was written about “democratic consolidation,” we are living through what one leading political scientist deems “democratic recession” (Diamond, 2015, p. 98). A less-than-buoyant mood among the partisans of democracy is understandable; Stephen Coleman, however, has not succumbed to despair. In ***Can the Internet Strengthen Democracy?***, he focuses resolutely on the democratic potential of networked digital technologies.



Like earlier communication technologies, “the Internet”—familiar shorthand for networked digital communications in general—was at first embraced with millenarian zeal by some, and denounced with equally fervid skepticism by others. The enthusiasts tended to dominate, since their utopian vision, like that of the 1960s counterculture that inspired them, had the somewhat ironic virtue of being compatible with consumerist capitalism (Frank, 1997; Turner, 2006). John Perry Barlow’s recent passing figuratively marks what Mark Zuckerberg’s newly chastened public persona makes concrete: Digital utopia is a quixotic fantasy.

Shaped by experience rather than anticipation, Coleman’s hopes are not borne on messianic fairy tales, but on optimism of the will. Nor do they reside obsessively in the Internet. Making sense of the Internet’s relationship to democracy is not, as he says, to choose between opposing visions of Internet-good and Internet-bad. It is, instead, a practical matter of figuring out how to use the Internet deliberately and democratically. The digital media ecosystem allows for a new interface between political mobilization and policy—a more meaningful mode of democracy in which deliberation is more distributed and representation more direct. Indeed, in the democracy Coleman imagines, the gap between deliberation and representation seems to narrow. The two meanings of “representation” relevant to political communication—the semiotic and the parliamentary—begin to converge. A democracy “in tune with the digital era” (p. 61) would involve “communicating in terms of hitherto unrealized democratic norms” (p. 88).

The current populist wave may prove to be the crisis that precipitates this hoped-for renewal. Alternatively, it could lead to a modification of the long-standing compromise by which small democratic gestures paper over a profoundly undemocratic social configuration. For now, Coleman says, we are in “democratic limbo.” The “democratic compromise” of the past century and a half limits democratic input to a “brief plebiscitary moment” when representatives are elected to regulate an otherwise undemocratic social order. It offers a highly attenuated form of representation instead of substantive democratic

deliberation, something that it assumes—reflecting the state of communication technology in the mid-19th century—to be impossible.

Coleman sees politics and technology as “dialectically intertwined.” The monological communication of broadcasting, and most recently, neoliberal technocratic governance, are continuations of the 19th-century compromise. The one-way, one-to-many communicative logic of broadcasting fed into what Coleman calls “audience democracy,” which treated citizens as “pliable political consumers.” It also abetted the faithlessness of elected representatives over the past four decades. Instead of robust public debate, we end up with “market oriented political communication” (p. 32) seeking to sell, rather than to debate, policies. Democracy is reduced to a popular rhetorical trope. Cynicism, alienation, and populist demagoguery result.

Coleman’s hope is that the Internet’s two-way, many-to-many “horizontal” mode of communication is fundamentally more democratic than the one-way dynamic held over from the 19th century. Much can be—and has been—said for this point. There is little doubt that culture and political action have been transformed by (or, if you prefer, caught in dialectical entanglement with) the Internet. Coleman offers four reasons for this. The last of these, a destabilized “media ecology,” brings together each of the other three: globalization, the weakening of centralized institutions, and the blurring of old boundaries between public and private spheres. Digital media can neither be blamed nor credited for any of these developments, but they have clearly played an integral role in each.

The problem Coleman sees is that new horizontal networks have not proven effective in engaging with the vertical institutions of representative democracy. Culture has become more democratic, but policymaking has not. Coleman’s goal is to find ways to use the Internet to connect popular inputs with institutional outputs: to channel democratic energy through the machinery of power. This is a two-way street that requires humility on the parts of institutional actors, who need to learn to listen, and the new networked activists, who need patience for the practical complexity of policy making.

Coleman identifies six communicative tasks that democratic citizens must be able to accomplish, and that the Internet might facilitate. People must be able to share their experiences, gather reliable information, deliberate together, take collective action, experience institutional responsiveness, and scrutinize the powerful. A series of brief discussions of these communicative capacities is framed by two questions: “To what extent has the Internet changed politics—and specifically the role of citizens—since the first website was established in 1990? What can people do now that they could not do before?” (p. 61). This frame blurs the distinction between *actual* and *potential* change, giving expansive room to Coleman’s optimism. By focusing on the technical affordances of the Internet, rather than how it has actually been used—on small-scale experiments, rather than the scaled-up reality the networks have created—Coleman minimizes the ways in which digital technology seems to have weakened, rather than strengthened, democratic communication.

Consider, for example, Coleman’s claim that “the Internet changes the terms of visibility . . . if not democratizing it, as some have rather excitedly claimed, at least making the playing field more level” (p. 80). The evenhanded language notwithstanding, this is a debatable proposition. Improvements in the

transparency of political institutions may be vastly outweighed by the unprecedented powers of surveillance that digital networks give to the powerful. Indeed, these powers have given rise to entirely new centers of control. The panopticon has never been a more apt metaphor for our collective life.

Coleman does acknowledge surveillance in his final chapter, where he is frank about his emphasis on possibilities rather than present realities. Here he suggests four "civic capabilities" the Internet might be used to cultivate, though he notes that by themselves they are insufficient for democratic renewal, which would entail other "radical enlargements of social justice" (p. 89). The first two capabilities—"being able to make sense of the political world" (p. 89), and "being open to argumentative exchange" (p. 98)—are about cultivating a culture of deliberation, slowing the pace of discussion (a counterintuitive suggestion for the Internet, Coleman allows), and helping representatives and their constituents listen to one another.

The last two capabilities—"being recognized as someone who counts" (p. 104), and "being able to make a difference" (p. 110)—are about representation. Here Coleman emphasizes the way the Internet has expanded individuals' capacity to represent themselves, and calls into question the "predetermined labels of economic class, cultural status, ideological loyalty and gender and ethnic identities" (p. 105). Calling these labels "homogenous fictions," he seems to suggest that a democracy "in tune with the digital era" (p. 61) would leave behind the politics of identity no less than the politics of class.

Coleman is right to ask how networked digital communication can salvage democracy given the challenges it faces, but part of this task would surely be thinking about how the Internet itself *is* one of these challenges. Though the populist wave is, as Coleman says, a response to the failures of neoliberal technocracy, it has also been fed by violent, ignorant, antideliberative discourse that has seeped from online spaces like 4chan into the public sphere (Nagle, 2014). To condemn this self-expression is not, as Coleman comes close to suggesting, to engage in the condescension toward "the masses" that Raymond Williams warned against. It is worth remembering too that state-sponsored actors seeking to undermine democracy have used the Internet to amplify these voices.

Media technologies, like communication itself, unleash centripetal and centrifugal forces. Partisans of democracy must harness the former and deflect the latter. Coleman's book is a rich contribution towards understanding how the first of these tasks might be accomplished. Though it has noticeably less to say about the second task, it is essential reading for anyone interested in how digital media can be used to cultivate a democratic public sphere. Coleman's optimism is more measured than Barlow's and less self-serving than Zuckerberg's, and it brings both of their visions down to earth in a spirit of pragmatic engagement.

Underlying Coleman's argument is an understanding that democracy is a process rather than an outcome. The way to achieve it is to persist in taking it seriously. Like the Internet, optimism is hardly sufficient, but it is a necessary resource for any democratic future.

References

- Diamond, L. (2015). Facing up the the democratic recession. In L. Diamond, M. Plattner, & C. Rice (Eds.), *Democracy in decline?* (pp. 98-118). Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Frank, T. (1997). *The conquest of cool: Business culture, counterculture, and the rise of hip consumerism*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Nagle, A. (2016). *Kill all normies: Online culture wars from 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the alt-right*. Arlesford, UK: Zero Books.
- Turner, F. (2006). *From counterculture to cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth network, and the rise of digital utopianism*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.