

# Handbook of Research on Social Interaction Technologies and Collaboration Software: Concepts and Trends

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Volume II

Information Science  
**REFERENCE**

**INFORMATION SCIENCE REFERENCE**

Hershey • New York

Director of Editorial Content: Kristin Klinger  
Senior Managing Editor: Jamie Snavelly  
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Publishing Assistant: Sean Woznicki  
Cover Design: Lisa Tosheff  
Printed at: Yurchak Printing Inc.

Published in the United States of America by  
Information Science Reference (an imprint of IGI Global)  
701 E. Chocolate Avenue  
Hershey PA 17033  
Tel: 717-533-8845  
Fax: 717-533-8661  
E-mail: [cust@igi-global.com](mailto:cust@igi-global.com)  
Web site: <http://www.igi-global.com/reference>

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#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Handbook of research on social interaction technologies and collaboration software : concepts and trends / Tatyana Dumova and Richard Fiordo, editors. p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Summary: "This book explores the origin, structure, purpose, and function of socially interactive technologies known as social software"--Provided by publisher.

ISBN 978-1-60566-368-5 (hbk.) -- ISBN 978-1-60566-369-2 (ebook) 1. Information technology--Social aspects. 2. Online social networks. 3. Internet--Social aspects. 4. Groupware (Computer software)--Social aspects.

I. Dumova, Tatyana, 1962- II. Fiordo, Richard, 1945-

HM851.H3486 2009

303.48'33--dc22

2008054205

#### British Cataloguing in Publication Data

A Cataloguing in Publication record for this book is available from the British Library.

All work contributed to this book is new, previously-unpublished material. The views expressed in this book are those of the authors, but not necessarily of the publisher.

## Chapter 36

# Emerging Online Democracy

## The Dynamics of Formal and Informal Control in Digitally Mediated Social Structures

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### ABSTRACT

*The emergence and development of Web 2.0 has enabled new modes of social interaction that are potentially democratic, both within and across digitally mediated venues. Web-based interaction offers unlimited opportunities for organizing across geographic, demographic, and contextual boundaries, with ramifications in professional networking, political action, friendships, romances, learning, recreation, and entertainment. The authors conceptualize the democratization of Web-based social structures, defining online democracy as an imperfect balance of formal and informal modes of discursive control. The wrangling between formal and informal modes of discursive control ensures perpetual dynamism and innovation; the wrangling also offers the promise that diverse voices are not only welcome but also potentially responsive and responsible. The conclusion advocated is the importance of paying attention to these tendencies since they demonstrate that the Web's proclivities for decentralization and pluralism do not necessarily lead to relativistic and nihilistic hypertextuality but to potentially novel forms of shared social control.*

### INTRODUCTION

With the advent of web-based social interaction technologies, new opportunities have arisen for user control and interactivity. These opportunities range widely in their relational complexities, span-

ning information gathering and opinion sharing, the formation of interpersonal relationships and online communities, and the development and maintenance of sophisticated organizational and global networks. Across these varied modes of interactivity, control of the technology, the media, and the communicative content is becoming increasingly decentralized and populist. It is necessary, therefore, to address

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60566-368-5.ch036

what is commonly called the “democratization” of the web.

Democracy, as conceived here, is not characterized by wholly unregulated chaos, despite the relativistic potential of hypertextual communication. Whereas interactivity in digitally mediated venues may range in quality from “anything goes” anarchy to rigid authoritarianism, this chapter addresses the emergence of democratic moderation, in which online participants “concertively” regulate their communication. Here we identify some past research and thoughts on the Internet’s democratic qualities;<sup>1</sup> describe and illustrate online contexts as potentially democratic social structures that experience interplay between formal and informal communicative forces; and anticipate future trends of theory, empirical research, and practice.

## BACKGROUND

The introduction of a new generation of social interaction technologies opens a possibility of the transformation of structural and social reality (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967; Ong, 1982). Since its emergence, the Internet<sup>1</sup> has been approached, theoretically and empirically, as a momentous and consequential social, cultural, economic, and political force (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, & Robinson, 2001; Wilson & Peterson, 2002). Some have theorized that the Internet might drastically transform the self, interaction, and social order and serve as a catalyst for social justice, empowering individuals to find spaces within which their voices may count (Negroponte, 1995). Others have cautioned that the Internet constrains and disempowers individuals within structured routines and cultural norms. They have argued that in the new virtual world some would emerge as winners (e.g., transnational corporations and interests) and others as losers (Beniger, 1996). Castells (1996), for instance, proposed that the Internet would follow the commercial path of its media

predecessors and predicted a web “populated by two essentially distinct populations, *the interacting* and *the interacted*” (p. 371): the first group exemplifying the web’s fragmentation potential and, the second, its reproduction of traditional media’s massification patterns; and both groups reflecting the divide between the information rich and poor.

Studies on the Internet’s potential to rearrange social, cultural, economic, and political life have focused on such issues as access to open information flows across national and global systems (Bimber, 2000; Norris, 2001; Schiller, 1995), identity construction (Cutler, 1996; Morse, 1998; Turkle, 1995), community formation and mobilization (Foster, 1997; Rheingold, 1993; Zappen, Gurak, & Doheny-Farina, 1997), and civic and political participation and deliberation (Putnam, 2000). The potential of the Internet to promote civic engagement and political democracy have also gained attention (e.g., Agre, 2002), especially since the 1990s when United States’ congressional, state, and presidential candidates began deploying campaign websites (Hurwiz, 1999). The increased opportunities for interactivity among citizenries through blogs, chat rooms, and Internet forums are now being investigated (e.g., Best & Krueger, 2005; Dahlgreen, 2000; Endres & Warnick, 2004) as are the perceived public risks posed by such online participation (Andrejevic, 2006; Best, Krueger, & Ladewig, 2007). While some suggest that the Internet has the potential to mobilize “netizens” in new ways and to support democratic processes (Carpini, 2000; Deuze, 2006; Min, 2007), at times lending authorial voice to marginalized constituents and concerns, there is also increased support for the polarization of the public and the unfulfilled potential of deliberative democracy (Noveck, 2000; Selnow, 1998; Streck, 1998; White, 1997; Wilhelm, 2000). Still others point out that online deliberative democracy can be actualized, but its impact is greatly diminished when positioned within a dominant commercialized and individualized culture (Dahlberg, 2001).

On a more micro-analytic level, various studies have explored language, communication practices, and social interaction and relations on the Internet (e.g., Crystal, 2001). These inquiries address the emergence and negotiation of “netiquette” rules that socialize online participants, as well as more subtle self-imposed or community-imposed levels of informal control that undermine the Internet’s democratic potential. McLaughlin, Osborne, & Smith (1995) identified early misconduct on Usenet that included misuse of technology, bandwidth waste, factual errors, inappropriate violation of language guidelines, newsgroup-specific conventions, and ethical codes. The extent to which the Internet liberates or simply reproduces patterns of expression and participation, in relation to gender, race, and sexual politics, continues to interest participants, observers, and researchers (Bromseth, 2001; Dibbell, 1993; Herring, 1996; Herring & Paolillo, 2006; Kendall, 2000; Lessig, 1999; Miller, 1995; Stivale, 1997) as do the Internet’s descriptive and prescriptive rules and various interactive forms, where behaviors range from disruption and hostility (e.g., flaming) to disciplinary control and normalization (Dutton, 1996; Lee, 2005; Phillips, 1996; Thompson, 1996). Much of the research has examined online contexts such as MUDs, MOOs, and Usenet communities that are now being replaced in prominence by new Internet venues.

Janack (2006) studied how participants of *Blog for America*—a feature of the 2000 U. S. presidential candidate Howard Dean’s campaign website—discursively disciplined themselves. That study echoes this chapter’s focus: While new social media feature pluralistic participation, interactivity, and ungrounded hypertextuality, they operate within both formally structured and emergent frameworks of values, practices, and expectations that significantly reaffirm and rewrite authority and control. In Janack’s study, for instance, blog participants behaved as gatekeepers, a role traditionally enacted by campaign staffers, to silence Dean’s critics through various

rhetorical strategies (e.g., ignoring or minimizing critical comments, *ad hominem* attacks). If Internet-enabled discourse may be described in Bakhtin’s (1984) language as “carnavalesque,” we can see how it potentially brings people together as equals to revel in liberation from exogenous constraints (legal, governmental, religious, and so on) and social stratifications. At once, though, it is necessary to recognize that the carnival, no matter how liberating, is a social order nonetheless. Its playfulness, unpredictability, populism, and multi-voicedness are inevitably bounded and regulated. This moderation is a hallmark of online democracy, and an important potential characteristic of web-based interaction.

## ONLINE DEMOCRACY’S MODES OF SOCIAL CONTROL

Online communication occurs within and across diverse contexts and forms, ranging from relatively simple information posts to highly sophisticated social and political commentary. Accordingly, discursive qualities vary greatly throughout the web. Some utterances are noisily and chaotically ungrounded whereas others are kept orderly by the moderator’s iron fists. Of interest is what happens somewhere between these extremes, when administrative and lay users participate together to negotiate and maintain their shared social orders.

To understand such potentially democratic qualities, it is necessary to define online democracy and to address how it may be enacted. This section begins with the general idea that all online interaction is governed by tensional interplay between formal and informal modes of control. Then we define online democracy as a particular mode of dialectical tension, and illustrate this dynamic—and the general potential for online democracy in Internet-mediated venues—by exploring some actual online interaction.

## **Online Social Structures and Democracy**

Any social structure is continuously rebuilt through participants' communication (Giddens, 1984). This applies not only to face-to-face and other traditional social contexts but also to emerging venues that are digitally mediated, such as online forums, discussion boards, blogs, wikis, and social networking sites. These online settings may be thought of as both nouns and verbs; they are as much solid frameworks of norms as they are fluid interactions among people. In Giddens' terms, such simultaneously solid and fluid structures comprise socially made rules (implicit and explicit formulas for action) and resources (participants' commoditized abilities, knowledge, designated roles, etc.) that at once permit and limit interaction. The constant "reinscription" of rules and resources occurs not just within a given social structure as a demarcated and unitary body but also *across* overlapping structures that may mediate and contradict each other.

One way to understand this complex nature of social structures is to address how they are enabled and constrained by a dialectical interplay of social forces—what Bakhtin (1981) characterizes as "centripetal" and "centrifugal." Centripetal forces are authoritative, stabilizing, decisive, and preserving of traditions. Directives, punishments, and behaviors that concretize stratified roles are instances of centripetally leaning talk. Conversely, centrifugal forces are insurgent, destabilizing, equivocally open-ended, and change-minded. Questions, evasions, and behaviors that challenge authority are centrifugally leaning.

When examining online interaction, each discrete utterance (e.g., a blog post) manifests a quality that is roughly mappable along the *centripetal—centrifugal* continuum. Directives and pronouncements, for instance, tug the discourse centripetally whereas questions and invitations for response pull things centrifugally. In looking at a communicative context's utterances in

aggregate, it is possible to recognize a particular meta-dynamic, the cumulative tugging of which defines the social structure's general character. How imbalanced are its forces? How do they tend?

If a given online setting experiences a preponderance of explicit rules, web forum moderator-enforced censorship, gate-keeping, and other centripetally-leaning discourses, the social structure tends toward autocracy or authoritarianism as an organizational form. Its social order is maintained by verbal and nonverbal talk that enforces centralized control while stifling insurgence. Leaders are typically designated and recognizable as established roles, and control mechanisms tend to be formally explicit and enforceable as codified rules. At the other end of the sliding scale—the centrifugal one—a given online venue with few (or no) explicit regulations, disciplinary procedures, and plenty of cacophonous interaction leans toward anomie or anarchy as the basis of social (dis)order. Discursive struggles occur through decentralization of authority and destabilization of public order. Leadership is emergent and fluid, and social norms—which are likely implicit—are negotiated among participants rather than imposed from atop or outside of the social structure.

## **Online Democracy**

Whereas social forms such as anarchy and autocracy inhabit the continuum's two dialectical extremes, online democracy hovers (however imprecisely) near the middle. Online democracy may be defined as the quasi-counterbalance of normalizing and destabilizing discursive forces; a subtle and messy negotiation of control in which centripetal and centrifugal pushes and pulls more-or-less even out. The "more-or-less" characteristic of this equilibrium reflects the general idea that social structures, which are constantly remade in participants' interaction, are always dynamic and never static. For this discussion of online venues—which are potentially democratic but



certainly not always—this definition is important. Given the seemingly pluralistic decentralization of discourse in web-based settings, the Internet appears to come to life as a noisy “marketplace of ideas” (Mill, 1956); a panoply of public “spheres” (Gitlin, 1998) in which interaction is most easily described as ungrounded. The risk of these characterizations is that they may overemphasize centrifugal forces while denying or trivializing the emergence and functions of social control.

Control within and among online social structures is ubiquitous, and it comes in two generally different modes that are dialectically engaged. The first mode is what Spitzer (1982) describes as “formal,” embodying centripetal qualities with their hierarchical stratification. The second, “informal” mode advances centrifugal qualities that disrupt hierarchical structures in socially emergent ways. As formal and informal modes of control interact within a democratic social system, discourses that “seem to weaken hierarchies of power may actually establish new channels through which those hierarchies can be strengthened, extended, and made more responsive to the complexities of modern social administration” (Spitzer, 1982, pp. 187-188). Accordingly, in addressing the democratization of online social spheres, it would be a mistake to highlight a presumed absence of discursive control. Instead it is important to acknowledge how control functions, both formally and informally.

### **Formal Control in Online Democracy**

Democratic online venues are, in part, maintained by formal discursive control. There are many common instances of formal control in contemporary Internet life. Registration forms that are created and processed by centralized (usually institutional) website managers, for instance, require prospective users to provide their names, contact information, and other identifiers to gain access to the venue. Often, registrants are required to accept explicit terms and conditions. The con-

tents of posts are filtered, either by moderators or automatically. Rules for conduct are stated, as are enforcement mechanisms, which range from message flagging to censorship to banishment. In short, formal control is usually obvious to participants, manifesting in “power-down” policies and actions that demand and enforce respect while constraining behavior.

### **Informal Control in Online Democracy**

In roughly equal measure, informal control mechanisms also fulfill important functions in web-based democracies. Unlike formal control, which maintains social order authoritatively, informal enactments of control are essentially disruptive. They may directly undermine explicit authority, as do acts of spamming, flaming, hacking, and impersonation. They may also rewrite, reframe, or appropriate the online venue’s content and norms to shift power away from the institution or privileged users. Informal control may be recognized in tagging and other XML-enabled tools that users apply to customize and order online content according to their own preferences.

But this disruption is not as chaotic, unregulated, and destructive as one might assume. If formal control is “top-down” then informal control is “bottom-up,” manifesting what Foucault (1995) addresses in terms of a “panopticon”—an invisible mode of omniscience. Fostered online by the blurring of private and public identities within contexts that are rife with mutual voyeurism, panoptic omniscience compels participants to discipline not only each other, but also themselves. Barker (1999) describes the effect in organizational settings as “concertive control,” through which team members in a “supervisorless culture” develop communicative patterns such as “informal hierarchies, particular power relationships, and team norms” (p. 13). In this negotiation there is both disruption and discipline—as well as the (re) construction of order. So informal control may be

understood as emergent and participant-centered co-regulation.

### **THE DYNAMICS OF FORMAL AND INFORMAL CONTROL IN ONLINE DEMOCRACY: A CASE OF JUICYCAMPUS.COM**

One specific case that offers an insightful view of how formal and informal kinds of control play out on the Internet is JuicyCampus.com, a website that aims to enable “online anonymous free speech on college campuses” (JuicyCampus.com, About Us). The website claims to provide a forum “where college students discuss the topics that interest them most, and in the manner that they deem most appropriate” (JuicyCampus.com, About Us) and promotes itself as the “world’s premier college gossip site” that attracts “nearly one million unique visitors per month, while serving 500 campuses across the country” (JuicyCampus.com, Official Blog Announcements). Critics view the website as a gossip mill and compare it to “a dorm bathroom wall writ large, one that anyone with Internet access can read from and post to” (Morgan, 2008). However controversial it may occur to an outside observer, JuicyCampus.com represents a growing number of unmoderated online forums that promise anonymity to the users. The provision of general communicative guidelines coupled with the absence of gatekeeping and censorship-minded monitoring results in rich meta-discussions among participants about what kinds and styles of talk are appropriate. In the course of this site’s interaction and meta-interaction, an illustration emerges of the carnival that is web-based democracy.

#### **The Web as a Borderless System of Social Structures**

JuicyCampus.com was founded in 2007 by Matt Ivester, a Duke University graduate who character-

ized the site as an attempt to cultivate “gossip 2.0” (cited in Morgan, 2008). The site does not require participants to register, and posts are anonymous. The site has spread to 500 college campuses in the U.S. and has been the center of a number of controversies with regard to its function and nature of participation. For the purposes of this analysis we focus on one of the most discussed JuicyCampus.com’s threads, *The Yale Women’s Center is Genius*, which as of March 2008 had generated 153 responses.

The Internet’s borderlessness and carnivalesque qualities become apparent when one traces the emergence of this forum: a group of Yale students, members of the Zeta Psi fraternity, posed in front of the Yale Women’s Center holding a sign reading, “We love Yale sluts” (Abrahamson, 2008). The photograph was uploaded on Facebook.com on January 16, 2008 and came to the attention of the Yale Women’s Center members and the university community. On January 21 the Center declared an intention to pursue legal action (Abrahamson, 2008). On the same day, a blog posting appeared on IvyGateblog.com (O’Connor, 2008) that generated 216 responses from January 21 to February 28. On February 29 the forum’s thread, entitled *The Yale Women’s Center is Genius*, was posted on JuicyCampus.com with entries followed by the authors until March 16. The list of responses that have emerged or directed attention to this case is not meant to be exhaustive but rather an indication of the dynamic and hypertextual way in which discourse unfolds.

The discursive positions and moves of participation in all these social networks simultaneously invoke, reflect, co-opt, and control the Internet’s carnivalesque potential and offer a macro-analytic glimpse of the centripetal and centrifugal forces that are generally at work in public online interaction. Participants’ posts on JuicyCampus.com exemplify the range of potential discursive positions from which democratic talk can unfurl—with appeals to legal issues and ramifications, celebrations of freedom of expression and feminist



ideology, references to sexual and gender politics, concerns about advertising and the economies of cyberspace, and, of course, frequent mention of netiquette rules and what constitutes appropriate discourse. It is to this exploration of the formal and informal enactments of control that we now turn.

## Enactments of Formal Control

JuicyCampus.com's official policies straddle the legal and contextual. The site has an official policy outlining terms and conditions of use, an intellectual property policy, and a privacy policy. Although the site's *Privacy & Tracking Policy* page claims, "we do not track any information that can be used by us to identify you" (JuicyCampus.com, Privacy & Tracking Policy), the site managers have assisted police in identifying individuals who have made explicit threats (see, for example, Morgan, 2008). The site also has frequent announcements by the site managers that contextualize much of the more formal legal language, at times in contradictory ways. For example, the site outlines specific *Terms & Conditions* with regard to user conduct that also address defamation. However, on the *Frequently Asked Questions* page the site creators note: "Facts can be untrue. Opinions can be stupid, or ignorant, or mean-spirited, but they can't be untrue. And we believe everyone is entitled to their opinion" (JuicyCampus.com, Frequently Asked Questions). Site managers' specific announcements have tackled the issue of defamation (December 9, 2007; December 11, 2007); anonymity (December 9, 2007); use of real names of people being discussed (January 29, 2008); copyrighted material; the posting of contact information; spamming; and what constitutes "juicy," which the site founder says is *not hate* (February 29, 2008).

What is notable in reviewing these announcements is the celebration of the carnival—the recognition that online democracy's nature and form are contested and emergent. What is even more

noteworthy is that it is the *institution* that enacts this celebration of carnival. As JuicyCampus.com (Official Blog Announcements, February 29, 2008) states, "Ultimately, JuicyCampus is created by our users, and we ask that you please take this responsibility seriously." So, at once the site managers are doing two things: advancing and maintaining formal control by inviting and permitting emergent and user-controlled discourse (invitation and permission being particular modes of control); and delimiting discourse in a way that protects themselves legally while defining the parameters of "juiciness."

## Enactments of Informal Control

Anonymous users enact emergent and decentralized control in various ways throughout JuicyCampus.com's *The Yale Women's Center is Genius* discussion. Most basically, informal control is typified in users' ability to initiate discussion threads and reply without fear of monitoring, filtering, censorship, or expulsion. The important point about this is that, whereas users are liberated from formal oversight, they are subject to one another's responses. This cultivates a mode of discipline that emerges among participants, akin to Foucault's (1995) "panopticon" and Barker's (1999) "concertive control." Participants exercise discipline on issues ranging from who can participate, how they may appropriately do so, and why. Informal enactments of control are manifest in various strategies such as name-calling, threats, irony, caution, silencing, confrontation, and othering, among others (see Table 1):

Disciplining potentially defamatory talk (relating mostly to the Women's Center coordinator), participants argue from various positions that engender much more than just the legal perspective witnessed at the formal level of administrative control of the site (see Table 2):

Here we see the carnival's explosively disruptive potential as competing languages and perspectives struggle to frame the legitimacy of

Table 1. Types of informal control

Participation issue	Strategy	Illustration of informal control
Who?	Name-calling	you a * get off the site. “impartial observer?” NEWSFLASH: everyone here is * invested. stop slowing the dialogue down. (3/4/08)
What?	Threat	the author of the other thread – “someone needs to * chase o-m till she cries” and the post on this thread of the same name - should be found, shamed, and lethally injected. how dare you speak of her? (2/29/08)
Where?	Caution	as a fan of the women’s center: can we not talk about their strategies online, let alone on this site? FOR BLARINGLY OBVIOUS REASONS. (3/6/08)
When?	Irony	i just hate feminists and wrongly assumed it was safe to post at 5 a.m. because I wrongly assumed that they would be asleep. but now i see my mistake: they didn’t have any sex so they couldn’t fall asleep. (3/4/08)
Why?	Othering	i just wanted to express my opinion. I am not like any of you crazies. (3/4/08)

participation. We also see the attempts to control, rein in, redirect, and reframe the discussion’s boundaries. The tension between formal (centripetal) and informal (centrifugal) modes of control is evident throughout the JuicyCampus.com site and the Yale Women’s Center forum thread, and point to web-based democracy’s inherent messiness. In these matters, there will be no “resolution.” And, in these matters, as one participant observes, the carnival comes to life meta-discursively: “i love that the most discussed thread on juicycampus is about the women’s center’s attempt to destroy juicycampus” (3/4/08).

## FUTURE TRENDS

As the Internet has emerged in popular use and evolved into Web 2.0, it has become less a medium for the sheer expression and transference of *information* and more a setting for *relationship-making*. Web-based interaction offers unlimited opportunities for organizing across geographic, demographic, and contextual boundaries, with ramifications for professional networking, political action, friendships, romances, education, recreation, healthcare, and so on. One example of real but previously unforeseeable use of online

Table 2. Illustrations of informal control

What counts as defamation?	Illustration of informal control
Moral perspective	The * making these nasty comments about people should be thoroughly ashamed of themselves! (2/29/08)
Democratic perspective	these big anonymous sites make everybody forget that the people we are talking about are not public property, that their lives are not performed for our benefit, that the warriors are people too. * is as good a person as she is a warrior. let’s make sure we remember that. (2/29/08)
Relational Perspective	WHY ARE ALL YOU PEOPLE SICKOS???? SHE IS MY * SISTER. I HAVE HELPED HER FIND TEDDY BEARS THAT SHE HAS LOST FOR YEARS. SHE IS * AWESOME. (3/2/08)
Public Domain Perspective	i am totally in awe of * and i became a feminist since arriving at yale because of two talks i went to at the women’s center that she moderated... but she is a celebrity here. you shouldn’t nipe at kids for talking about her because she is a public person, like a politician. we do have some right to talk about her as a person in a way that we dont have a right to talk about other people. (3/2/08)
Legal Perspective	dude, why are you mouthing off about girls on this thread? ITS LIKE SUICIDE. dumb *. everyone knows that they are planning to sue the site. EVERYONE knows that they have lawyers cuz of the frat stuff. EVERYONE knows that your * will get subpoenaed and EVERYONE will know who you are. (3/5/08)

interaction is *Naughtie Auties*, a resource center in the Second Life virtual venue where those with autism spectrum disorders can practice social interaction (Saidi, 2008). Theorists, researchers, and practitioners of web-based communication will increasingly have opportunities to engage these new relationship structures' discursive negotiations of control, and to recognize democracy when it occurs and assess its functions and sociologic consequences.

Internet scholars and users will also have increasing opportunities to consider how technological populism contributes to open and democratic discourse. It is noteworthy that means for producing and distributing visual, literary, musical, etc. creations are increasingly accessible. The result is that "authorship," broadly understood, is becoming less elite and more decentralized. It is now quite easy for amateurs to self-produce and distribute their art, ideas, and home videos, and to redefine "celebrity" in populist terms via so-called "first-person media." As well, through Web 2.0-based technologies, lay people may co-opt, remix, and redistribute canonic pieces of art in ways that redefine authorship and ownership, problematizing notions of intellectual property. This wrangling between formal control mechanisms (e.g., copyright law) and insurgent, populist inter-activities has everything to do with democracy, and will, in the future, be an important locus of concern.

Generally, the emergent democratization of online discourse is important to study and reflect upon since its social practices both influence and are influenced by life beyond "virtual" space. Democracy as a social order and even as a moral ideal is a historical phenomenon that has yet to be fully realized. It may be enacted in daily life, however imperfectly, throughout many contexts, spanning family, labor, education, entertainment, community, politics, etc. In a sense, participants in online venues that enable democratic interaction have opportunities to learn how to "do" democracy in effective and satisfying ways.

There are particular procedures (e.g., deliberative decision making), responsibilities (e.g., shared leadership), and expectations of decorum (e.g., mutual respect, even in light of disagreement) that support effective democratic organizing. How democracy is practiced in online environment has great consequence for many dimensions of 21st century life, including citizenship (national, global, corporate, etc.), community building, resource management, innovation, and so on. In short, the Internet's new opportunities for experiencing and practicing democracy both reflect and contribute to the emerging democratization of broader social life.

## CONCLUSION

The authors have approached online interaction as potentially democratic. The discussion's emphasis has not been upon democratic political interaction *per se*, but upon communicative practices of online democracy as they may be enacted in (and across) a wide range of online settings, such as blogs, wikis, and social networks. The definition of online democracy that we advance—a subtle and messy negotiation of control in which centripetal and centrifugal pushes and pulls more-or-less even out—is important for understanding how online contexts, potentially, are neither strictly controlled by their institutional creators/managers nor entirely disrupted by their "mobs" of users. This imperfect balance between formal and informal modes of discursive control ensures perpetual dynamism and innovation, as well as the promise that diverse voices are not only welcome but also potentially responsive and responsible.

Our intentions have been to recognize that, first, as in "real" life, so-called "virtual" interactions and relationships may take various organizational forms that range from anarchy to absolute control; and, second, that the Internet provides some new opportunities that are democratic in quality. It is important to pay attention to these opportunities

since they demonstrate that the web's proclivities for decentralization and pluralism do not necessarily lead to relativistic and nihilistic hypertextuality but to potentially novel forms of shared social control. When formal and informal regulatory forces temper each other, there are consequences for the kinds of relationships and communities that interactants may forge. As participants in online venues increasingly engage in online democratic social structures, they may learn to relate on both substantive and meta-discursive levels in order to negotiate mutually recognized rules and resources. Such practice might have great consequence for broader social systems, and for the character of democracy throughout 21st century life.

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## KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

**Carnival:** A concept developed by Bakhtin (1984) that illustrates how people come together as a collective of equals and interact in a way that defies exogenous sociologic divisions. In the experience of carnival, there is an air of playfulness and multi-voicedness that invigorates participants'

understandings of self and community.

**Formal Discursive Control:** Communicative currents within a social structure that are institutionally centralizing, and which impose and enforce regulations in a "top-down" manner that is typically explicit (e.g., codes of conduct). Formal control is manifested in what Bakhtin (1981) terms "centripetal" forces, which are authoritative, stabilizing, decisive, and preserving of traditions.

**Informal Discursive Control:** Communicative currents within a social structure that disrupt institutional authority and enable the negotiation of emergent norms in a "bottom-up" manner that is often implicit and subtle. Informal control is manifested in what Bakhtin (1981) terms "centrifugal" forces, which are insurgent, destabilizing, equivocally open-ended, and change-minded.

**Online Democracy:** The quasi-counterbalance of normalizing and destabilizing discursive forces; a subtle and messy negotiation of control in which centripetal and centrifugal pushes and pulls more-or-less even out.

**Social Structure:** A relational system that is both constrained and enabled by norms (beliefs, values, rules, and roles) that are made and remade in participants' interaction. Social structure is partly stable and partly dynamic; at once a thing and a process.

## ENDNOTE

- <sup>1</sup> We use the Internet here to reference mostly the various examples of mediated networks including the World Wide Web and electronic mail, social and interactive spaces such as weblogs and wikis, and sharing media such as podcasts and social bookmarking tools rather than the technological infrastructure itself.