

The Internet and Political Equality: An assessment of the internet's impact on Dahl's criteria for political equality under a process-orientated approach to democracy

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Abstract

This study assesses the internet's impact on Robert Dahl's five criteria for political equality, which provides a tool to analyse the internet holistically through democracy as a process. To each of the criteria I take a philosophical approach and when necessary look to the past to aid my conviction that many of the issues with the internet and each of the criteria are not new issues in the debate about democracy. This forms an overall image of democracy as imperfect in itself, whilst the internet is a fundamentally beneficial platform for political equality. I define the internet as being shaped by the social dynamics of its users meaning its problems are more a reflection of its users, rather than the internet being fundamentally perverse to democracy. Through this lens the internet has been encouraging in the strive for political equality, whilst I accept the limitations of this framework as the complexities of the internet may require extending the criteria by number or definition.

Given I reach a positive conclusion the critique of democracy must in large be directed towards individual states who can distort the democratic process, and responsibility must be taken by citizens who use and shape the internet as a malleable platform. The internet has taken us closer to each of Dahl's criteria, but the problems surrounding each requirement are often blamed upon the internet. I instead maintain that they are more a reflection of its users. The internet is made vulnerable by its own construction and definition, but is ultimately a benefit to the process of democracy. The problems are more damning of democracy and its relationship with citizens rather than the internet and its relationship to politics.

Introduction

Democracy has been persistently thrust under the 21st century microscope. In conversation with *The Economist*, David Runciman declared a staple characteristic of democracy is that it has winners and losers, yet the emerging problem lies in that the winners are now “behaving as though they are the victims” (*The Economist* 2018a). This democratic cynicism emanates from deeply embedded problems of democracy. It is therefore pertinent to investigate the changing social dynamics among democratic citizens. The internet represents a monumental shift in citizens engagement with the political process, and is thus worth exploring to determine whether democratic vilification can be rightly directed towards this relationship as a component of the democratic process.

Democracy has never been as simple as synthesising the *demos* and *kratia*. How to approach democracy has been built upon the suppositions of individual nations. As De Tocqueville (2012) concludes, whether society sees the benefits of democracy is very much in the hands of the nation’s themselves; they “cannot make conditions among them not to be equal, but it depends on them whether equality leads them to servitude or liberty, to enlightenment or barbarism, to prosperity or misery” (pg.1285). There are inevitably trade-offs when you attempt to give ultimate authority to all, yet this does not necessarily mean any injustice has been done. Democracy is a contentious subject largely because it is such a nebulous concept. But, as De Tocqueville realised, the notion of giving everyone an equal footing as political citizens is a largely uncontested feature of democracy. There are uniform features of democracy despite its malleability by governments; in return for this democracy expects a citizenship engaged in the democratic process. It is therefore more important when looking at the relationship between the internet and democracy to assess these universal

requirements of democracy, as the authority of individual states cannot distort these without being considered undemocratic.

An informed electorate is a virtue of democratic citizenship and has consequently gained significant critical traction, with the internet often portrayed as the instigator of misinformation. In light of recent elections and referendums it is clear that valid information is crucial and the internet has been partially at fault for this perversion. According to a recent Ofcom report 44% of UK adults use social media for news, most of which from Facebook, although the original source is often forgotten (Ofcom 2018). Yet it is narrow-minded to assume all democracy requires for political equality is integrity behind the ballot box. As Robert Dahl highlighted in his book *On Democracy* (1998) there are five criteria to ensure equality in the process of democracy, one of which is an *enlightened understanding*, to which misinformation would clearly have a direct effect. The other four consist of *effective participation*, *voting equality*, *control of the agenda* and *inclusion of adults*.

The internet has differing impacts on each of Dahl's criteria. After the literature review I will assess the effect and the extent to which its contemporary problems are detrimental to each of these criteria individually. The following chapter will then discuss the criteria as a collective and discuss where further study may explore. I will then conclude that the internet has taken us closer to each of Dahl's definitions. Whilst many of the problems identified with the criteria are not new phenomena, as they are a reflection of citizen tendencies, the benefits for political equality are predominantly unfamiliar to democracy. This ultimately means the internet is a beneficial tool for political equality; the scrutiny must instead pass to individual states and their management of democracy, as well as democracy itself.

Literature Review

Definitions

Given the all-encompassing nature of the internet it is important to define it within this study. I advocate Berman and Weitzner's (1997) interpretation of the internet as a platform that may inadvertently be used for democratic purposes. They were optimistic in their political interpretation stating the internet "offers a singular opportunity to support the renewal of citizen democracy" (pg.1313). They conclude that the internet presents the opportunity to pursue the most ambitious objectives of democracy. Despite being written in 1997 I assert this is not an archaic notion and remains a tenable position to take despite the internet's rapid evolution. Another important feature of the internet's definition for this study is addressed by Coleman and Blumler (2009), defining it as a platform shaped by the social dynamics of its users. Social media, for example, is a product of internet users as opposed to the internet itself. I define the internet as a resource shaped by citizens, with no underlying dogma, and can be used as a platform to bring us closer to political equality in the democratic process.

Political equality among citizens is defined and restricted by Dahl's framework, which is used definitively. As Dahl notes, each of the five criteria are essential for achieving political equality within democracy (1998). His definitions are concerned with both equality of opportunity and outcome within the democratic process. To narrow this study these criteria are treated as archetypal qualities demanded for political equality. Dahl's form of political

equality is echoed by Post (2006) who is concerned with equality in the actions that “constitute autonomous democratic participation” (pg.29). In terms of Dahl’s criteria, its purpose is to prevent a few having a more substantial impact than the majority. Yet equality of opportunity and outcome vary in importance throughout his definitions, for example equality of outcome is more important for *inclusion of adults* than *effective participation*. From this I will explore the internet’s impact as a platform in fulfilling Dahl’s definitions and the extent to which its deregulated problems are detrimental. In his later work Dahl (2006) noted that “political resources, skills and incentives are always and everywhere distributed unequally” (pg.55). I approach this statement from the angle that the internet has helped to negate its pertinence.

To assess the impact of the internet and its democratic problems I will look to the past as a point of comparison when necessary, as this is an appropriate indicator to assess the scale of impact. This is a perspective not included by some sceptical literature when assessing democratic equality, and it is a variable that defends the proposition that the internet remains a beneficial medium for political equality. According to Tilly (2007) Dahl’s approach to democracy is process-orientated, whereby the criteria identified must be in constant motion to be classified as democratic. I do not look to history in terms of the development of democracy itself where the internet is a new form of democracy, as Margolis and Moreno-Riano (2009) maintain; instead I see it as an evolutionary platform that can be directed for democratic use, to encourage the constant motion of Dahl’s criteria. Democracy in the context of this study corresponds with both John Stuart Mill and John Dewey in that democracy is thought of as a culture rather than a governmental form or organisation (Anderson 2009). I am not looking at Athenian democracy as the apogee of governance but

instead assess the internet's ability to take us further towards Dahl's collective criteria for equality in the democratic process. The internet's impact on political equality is a feature of the democratic culture and process at large. Dahl (1998) identified the criteria as necessary for a democratic process meaning democracy should provide an opportunity for each of these criteria.

The Internet and Political Equality

The literature is divided between those that advocate the democratic nature of the internet and are consequently more optimistic in their outlook (Berman and Weitzner 1997, McGinnis 2013), and those whose argument is built upon the dangers of the internet for politics and are naturally more sceptical about its democratic potential. The latter of these groups tend to focus on one particular aspect of the internet's genetic makeup, such as social media, and predominantly relate this to informational problems (Mansfield-Devine 2018, Napoli 2018, Gayo-Avello 2015). A third group arises from the older literature which gives a more ambivalent answer whereby the internet could either emancipate political equality or accentuate divisions (Di Gennaro and Dutton 2006).

When looking at the current literature collectively there is often a focus on the informational aspect but little about how this specifically affects Dahl's criteria. This concentration on information means there is less modern literature relating to Dahl's other criteria for political equality. *Control of the agenda*, when mentioned, is often discussed critically (The Economist 2018b, Cadwalladr 2017); the internet is portrayed as a subversive and manipulative tool used by certain citizens to impose themselves upon others. There is little celebration of the fact that citizens have the ability to influence the agenda. I instead

look at this problem as a consequence of the internet's largely socialised infrastructure and conclude that it is a deeper-rooted problem than the internet, meaning it too often overshadows the foundational success of the internet. This is a theme throughout my assessment of the five criteria in that there is a neglect of the equitable foundations of the internet due to well-documented controversies that have incurred within its system, but ultimately reflect more upon its users than the internet itself. Through Dahl's lens I assert that the internet has still been a successful tool for political equality. However I do not approach this naively and take a stance like that of Coleman and Blumler (2009) in approaching the potentiality of the internet who admit there is a vulnerability to the internet in terms of its democratic nature. I apply this vulnerability to political equality as each of Dahl's criteria are susceptible to the flaws of internet's malleability by its users, but crucially this hasn't yet prevented its overarching success.

A key issue with existing literature is the speed at which the internet evolves and consequently the speed that literature can become outdated. Yet when they do stand the test of time the literature can show an inherent weakness or pattern within the eco-system of the internet. For example DiMaggio et al. (2001) introduce the well-documented dichotomy over the internet improving citizens understanding. They state that those who are conservative or liberal may be drawn towards media that solidifies their partisanship, but also contend that the internet does expose them to the antithesis of their own disposition. This will be later discussed as part of the *inclusion of adults* criteria. There is inevitably some literature that is outdated on the matter, for example there is a collection of literature that contextualises the internet as a supplementary source of information that well-informed citizens would not use as a primary source of information (Pew 1998, 1999). From the 1999

Pew Research report it asserts only 21% use the internet as an alternative to the press or TV for their political news. 15 years later a 2014 report states that 61% of American millennials get their political news from Facebook as well as 51% of *Gen Xers* (Mitchell et al. 2015). This exemplifies the substantial shift in the weight placed on the internet as a political source. As a result more recent literature will give greater importance to its role and therefore associate it more with the current problems. However through Dahl's lens much of the older literature that advocates the internet as a source for political equality among citizens is still pertinent today, much more so than the literature that critiques it. For example Gimmler (2001 pg.32) talks about the internet providing information that "is easily obtained by users and can be made available at a very low cost" and is thus a good means of promoting deliberation. This argument is still germane today despite the pervasive trends of social media. Yet given the speed with which the debate evolves, it is important to use articles reactive to change as well as academic literature to assess the impactful nature of the internet. Journalistic articles will be used as an important source throughout and will show how there is a failure in many cases to look to the past to contextualise the problems identified, which I use as key barometer for analysing political equality.

Alternative Frameworks

Quantitative literature such as Best and Wade's study (2009) are not of paramount importance for this study, partly because they can be deceptive if not fully explored in the context of the internet. An empirical study is also carried out by Pirannejad (2017) showing how the internet can promote democracy. Although this study may supplement my overall positive assessment, it only briefly alludes to the direct and indirect factors affecting the relationship without being explicit about causality. Consequently this literature is not strictly

relevant to this study in which I consider the internet's effect on certain criteria of democratic equality in order to establish a qualitative judgement. When used, quantitative analysis will be as transparent as possible and not kernel to my argument. I focus more on why this relationship might have occurred as opposed to empirical proof that there has been an improvement in the relationship. Democracy in the form I defined earlier is difficult to quantify.

Other literature operates within a certain democratic system such as Dahlberg (2007) and deliberative democracy, or an analysis of a particular country such as Di Gennaro and Dutton (2006) in the case of Britain and political participation. Yet assessing the internet and democracy through Dahl's criteria rules out exclusive use of one particular state that deems itself democratic. It allows a holistic view of the internet's impact on a universal framework of political equality. Dahl's criteria, by their very definitions, are largely concerned with equality of opportunity rather than equality of outcome. A proportion of the literature largely revolves around an outcome-based analysis of the internet such as Best and Wade (2009) and Gayo-Avello (2015). An outcome-based analysis will only be appropriate where it is clear the outcome is affecting the opportunities for internet users to engage with politics. This, as mentioned earlier, is largely the case with the *enlightened understanding* criteria where fake news has in some cases affected individuals' opportunity to learn about the truest meaning of certain policies.

A modern alternative to Dahl's framework may be Bartlett's (2018) six pillars for democracy which are: *active citizens, a shared culture, free elections, stakeholder equality, competitive economy and civic freedom, and trust in authorities* (pgs.5-6). Yet these pillars are

products of internet democracy, and are tied to his definition of democracy in a modern liberal representative sense. Dahl as an outsider to the internet era for politics can give us a better platform for a comparison between the internet and the culture of democracy I described earlier, that is not attached to a particularly timeframe or democratic system. Each of Dahl's criteria can be applied to the internet, and in conjunction with its focus on democracy as a process makes it most appropriate for assessing the internet in this study. Bartlett's background working for a thinktank is less suitable than Dahl's background in political theory as I deemed it appropriate to use a framework not directly related to the internet. Starting from principles not derived from the ambitious expectations of internet democracy presents a framework that generates a more positive perception of the internet's role invoking political equality in the digital age. Bartlett's assessment is instead valuable supplementary literature when looking at the current problems.

My Contribution

I take the view that the internet can impact society through a series of mechanisms (Farrell 2012) and look at those mechanisms most associated with each of Dahl's criteria. There are strands of the internet's complex genetic make-up that I do not include; this is not to say they do not have an impact on politics, but rather they have little impact upon democracy as defined by Dahl. An example may be the vast amount of literature that focuses on the internet and a systemic form of democracy, particularly deliberative (Dahlberg 2007, Gimmmler 2001). As mentioned earlier I am not containing political equality within a strict form of democratic governance. Yet given I am referring to a culture of democracy then it is likely that certain parallels can be drawn to certain conceptual forms. For example *effective participation* incorporates deliberative responsibilities. Features of both representative and

deliberative democracy will be encapsulated within an assessment of each of the criteria, yet this is within the cultural and procedural form of democracy defined earlier. This provides a platform to assess political equality in its most transparent form.

Through Dahl's criteria this study aims to develop a more positive view of the internet than most of the modern literature. When necessary I will intertwine this with a narrative of how the criteria fared before the internet to show that many of the problems are not necessarily new problems, whilst the improvements to each criteria have predominantly originated from the internet's capabilities. I use the past as a comparative tool to defend the internet rather than assessing its impact on political equality in a static timeframe. This makes an important difference to some of the literature on this subject which justifies an advocacy or a vilification of the internet for democracy based on exclusive analysis of the present. Looking to the past forms a narrative that solidifies the notion that the internet has been beneficial for political equality.

Some literature focuses on the media and democracy (Dahlgren 2001) and while I occasionally consider the internet in a media-orientated approach this is not to be confused with the media industry. For example the newspaper industry will only be used in a comparative manner, particularly in the *enlightened understanding* section, as opposed to supplementing an overall assessment of the media's impact on political equality. There is more to the internet than symbolising the evolution of the media. For example through mediums such as YouTube, politicians websites and podcasting the internet can provide greater access to primary sources of information; it is then up to citizens how they use these. Online discussion extends beyond the bounds of social media where sardonicism is too often

rewarded. Internet platforms are often responsive providing greater opportunities to fulfil Dahl's requirements for political equality as I will later explain.

Ultimately through using Dahl's framework as a case study I aim to highlight the often undervalued benefits of the internet for political equality to prove it is a beneficial tool in the evolution of democracy. I assert that Dahl's framework is still a germane method for assessing the equality of political opportunity derived from the internet. I advocate a positive stance as to the relationship between the internet and political equality and highlight how it has been a victim of its success. Citizens relationship with democracy is more to blame. While this study assesses the impact of the internet on Dahl's criteria, it is out of strength of his criteria that in this study it also represents the broader bracket of political equality in the democratic process.

Dahl's Criteria

Effective Participation

Dahl defines effective participation in the democratic process through members having "equal and effective opportunities for making their views known to the other members as to what the policy should be" before a policy may be implemented in society (1998 pg.37). Without delving too far into the semantics it is important for the validity of this assessment to focus on the equality of opportunity signalled by Dahl. To deny sufficient opportunities means a rejection of the "principle of equal consideration of interests" (1989 pg.109). The internet is a more successful platform in regards to opportunity. Given the internet has

introduced new forms of political participation it is important to assess these in terms of equality of opportunity.

Dahl's conception of *effective participation* ties in with John Stuart Mill's justification of democracy. Mill maintained that effective participation could improve the political character and morality of citizens (Brink 2018). He was adamant there were instrumental benefits in providing the infrastructure for citizens to effectively participate in politics. Hobbes was more sceptical on the matter and used it to justify monarchy over democracy given citizens lack the incentive to consider what is in the best interest of the common good when decision-making (Christiano 2018). In connection with the instrumental values to citizenship that Mill advocates, effective participation is necessary for a form of political equality substantially different from Hobbes's *Leviathan*. The importance of participation for democracy has been made clear by Pateman (1970), in that a democracy cannot subsist without the existence of a participatory society. The introduction of the internet has generated a substantial leap in the capacity for citizens to participate in politics. Although at its core the internet is an informational platform, it has been revolutionary in its multifarious ability to transform citizens into active political participants. Hitherto, tangible participation has largely been restricted to voting whilst making your views known to other members has been limited to close associates, or for the select few the opportunity to publish to a wider audience. Yet the internet's socialised connectivity means that anyone can, in principle, publish to an audience beyond their social spheres. Anyone can be a journalist. This has become a ubiquitous feature of political news. Given Dahl's wording it is pertinent to assess whether this is really *effective* or merely a pernicious feature of democracy that still does not

provide substantial enough support for expressing people's views. I take the view that the internet is an effective (not perfect) platform in light of Dahl's definition.

A study by Gibson, Lusoli and Ward (2005) has shown that UK online participation is a different form of political engagement from traditional means. Whilst this is from 2005 I maintain that this is a universal theme that corroborates the changing state of democratic participation. From the same study I take forward the notion that the internet has provided a medium for individuals not previously engaged in political participation to not only have the opportunity to participate but actually pursue this via the internet. Nonetheless there still remains the issue over quality of participation. This is highlighted by Gayo-Avello (2015) who identifies the nature of social media participation as concentrated around antagonistic political moments rather than a breeding ground for analytical and nuanced debate and political proposals. DiMaggio et al. (2001) identified this as an early theme of the internet; lower barriers to entry for participation in a wider political environment do not necessarily indicate a more deliberative political eco-system. Instead online users may choose a more passive form of participation. The quality and motive of online political participation is often questioned, yet Dahl's emphasis on opportunity is an appropriate response. The internet, in its very construction, is not a restrictive participatory environment meaning the degree to which people want to engage is largely unhindered. There is a dominating emphasis on social media in the participation debate, as it is designed for brief interactions. However social media's problem is predominantly one of authenticity not participation which will be discussed later. As it stands the internet provides other means to participate, an example of which may be as simple as finding your local MP's website and then being able to contact them. The multitude of opinion polls and online forums gives the public a further opportunity

to express their individual opinion on policy. The discursive networks of the internet goes beyond social media. An empirical study by Valenzuela et al. (2012) finds that the internet is more effective than in-person discussions for exchanging information and political messages, leading to the conclusion that online modes of discussion may induce more political engagement. The quality of engagement in such circumstances is likely to be high, and important to note is the number of people involved in online political networks should only add to the aggregated interest in high-quality political conversation. Effective participation is not a zero-sum game between the online and in-person participatory methods. From the Economist Intelligent Unit Index, which looks at measures of democracy, found that political participation was the biggest improver on EIU's 2018 index (The Economist 2019).

Two issues can be derived from internet participation: the first of which is the quality of participation which I have just discussed and the second is the inequality of participation. For this latter problem, Post (2006) provides the appropriate response. He maintains that equality of participation cannot be measured in the same way as voting equality because it is dependent on the human act of persuasion and thus any equalising solution by the state can only occur "if it controls the intimate and independent processes by which citizens evaluate the ideas of others" (pg.29). This dystopian vision of government also overlooks the insurmountable problem that ideas are not equal; as Post notes, debate relies upon a distinction between what is a good idea and what is not. Dahl's emphasis on the opportunity for individuals may originate from an awareness that participation is never going to be an equal phenomenon; some people naturally have a more profound attachment to politics, and forcing this to equalise would be counterproductive. The real problem lies where those with a greater tendency for participation can then use this to manipulate more passive

participators. Social media has shown signs of this in recent years through a proclivity to spread political misinformation. Clearly this may subsequently affect participation but at its core it is an informational problem, which will be discussed further in both the *enlightened understanding* and *control of the agenda* sections.

Returning to Dahl's definition it can be identified that the internet, as a free and socialised platform, presents sufficient opportunities for citizens to publicise their policy views through numerous mechanisms, varying in both readership and commitment. What this definition doesn't account for is manipulative practises that have become increasingly apparent in the discussion about the internet's capacity for unregulated content. This problem however is more a reflection of those who use the internet rather than the internet itself. The internet provides the tools for effective participation, it is up to citizens how they use them. The focus on equality of opportunity is important in the online environment as some users naturally possess far greater influence than others. The internet still remains a successful platform of connectivity providing the opportunity for citizens to politically engage with a larger and more heterogenous audience. Politics itself needs to ensure the quality of participation online is high but it should still be celebrated that people are able to voice what's important to them beyond the bounds of their own social group, which remains a new concept for democratic states.

Voting Equality

Voting equality is the least directly affected by the internet and is the most obviously defined criteria. Dahl states "every member must have an equal and effective opportunity to

vote, and all votes must be counted equal” (1998 pg.37). This seems a straight forward definition, more suited to an analysis of a particular voting system than a mechanism that can help citizens voting decisions. Yet I will focus on the equal and effective opportunity to vote and how the internet can influence this, and from this show how the internet may have introduced new forms of voting which provide a more substantial platform to assess the internet's impact.

There should, theoretically, be very little controversy surrounding the opportunity to vote and the weight of each vote as defined by Dahl. This equality of voting is seen in literature as a formality (Christiano 2018) and easier to measure (Post 2006) compared to the more contentious subject of participation in general. The latter part of Dahl's definition will not be discussed, as equally weighted voting is ubiquitously accepted meaning the internet has little impact on such a matter. Dahl (1998) himself admits that equality of voting is practically a self-evident proposition. The contemporary conflict in voting tends to revolve around the voting age and voting system in each particular state, yet the internet doesn't have a direct authority to influence this matter derived from the legal jurisdiction of the state. While the legal barrier may prevent a substantial impact on voting opportunities the internet can still induce those that do not often vote to reconsider their voting habits and introduce citizens to new forms of voting. The ballot box no longer has a monopoly over people casting their political opinion.

First it is necessary to assess whether the internet has extended voting opportunities through making it easier to vote or more persuasive at instigating voting. Tolbert and McNeal (2003) highlight how the internet and the access it provides to election news has the potential

to encourage a new group of citizens to vote. This was written in 2003 meaning it does remain speculative and voting numbers at large have not dramatically increased since the internet's inception. Furthermore the variables affecting voter turnout are myriad, to which internet access may remain relatively insignificant. Yet the internet has by no means decreased the opportunity to vote; if anything it has increased it. Whilst this is not reflected in the numbers it is certainly an important consideration. Election propaganda litters the internet and while debates on such matters can be banal, an active internet user is unlikely to be unaware of an impending election, and how and when they should vote. According to Bartlett (2018) Facebook may have been responsible for an additional 340,000 voters in the 2012 US presidential election through its *I voted* posts where people could share the fact that they voted, thus encouraging others to do so. Given the internet's low entry-barriers there is no discrimination in terms of who has the opportunity to use it. This subsequently links to the opportunity to vote meaning that the internet cannot be detrimental to Dahl's definition of voting equality. As a result the internet only has the potential to increase voting equality. From this I consider new forms of voting which have evolved through the internet and are worth considering within the parameters of Dahl's definition.

New forms of voting have been embedded into political culture with little controversy. Citizens now have multiple ways to express their opinion on policy in a voting format. Online polls can be easily accessed; YouGov is a prime example of the internet bringing voting opportunities to citizens. Of course an online poll isn't going to have as profound an effect as an election vote but it is still a means of assessing the political stance of the country on particular issues, something that voting systems can often struggle with. Logistically this scale of interaction was not previously possible. According to Bennett (Dahlgren 2001) new politics

is associated with an emphasis on single issues rather than possessing an inherent ideological stance, making it a significantly more personalised form of politics. This is befitting to the emphasis the internet places on single issues. Whether this is a cause or a product of new politics is difficult to identify, and is noted by Dahlgren that democratic citizenship is shaped by the media yet it may be that this relationship is reciprocated. Whether or not the internet is responsible for this development in citizen attitude to policy, it can't be denied it has provided an effective platform for the manifestation of single-issue politics. Although online polling is still distinct from voting, the process still remains a reflection of peoples political preferences. Perhaps the reason voting turnouts have failed to increase in recent years may be for this reason; people have other means of expressing their political will. Political citizenship constantly evolves and the younger generation are turning to alternative forms of participation in concurrence with a shift away from voting (Ward and De Vreese 2011). There is a distinction between offline and online participation. Yet in regards to Dahl's definition this does not prevent the opportunity of those who are predominantly online participators from voting. It is an unsubstantiated link between the internet and a fall in voting. It could be argued that Dahl's definition is outdated as voting equality is an established prerequisite for a 21st century democracy, but instead I maintain the discussion should be about extending the definition of voting. The internet has affected this definition in that it has changed what it means to vote. Election voting is not the dominant force it once was for people to express their political opinion.

The internet's effect on voting equality is not as severe as on *effective participation*, yet whilst its impact on the definition is not concrete it has perhaps merged it with the first of Dahl's criteria reducing the importance of election voting as a condition of political equality.

The internet has been a benefit to political equality within the bounds of voting equality, yet it has also become symbiotic with the question of *effective participation*. New voting forms allow a means to be more explicit about your policy beliefs to the rest of society which are no longer dominated by the ballot box. The internet's expansion of political participation has expanded citizens opportunity to vote.

Enlightened Understanding

Dahl's definition of enlightened understanding states that "each member must have equal and effective opportunities for learning about the relevant alternative policies and their likely consequences" (1998 pg.37). This is the criteria most directly affected by the internet as a predominantly informational platform, misinformation is consequently the most established critique of the internet in relation to democracy. Yet this has always been a problem and thus seems an immutable feature of democracy and its strive for political equality. I will look to the past to assess whether the internet has taken us closer to Dahl's definition, culminating in a positive outlook for this feature of political equality.

Plato was highly sceptical of democracy by birthright in that it would likely lead to demagoguery. He states of politicians in *The Republic* (2007) that "provided they profess themselves the peoples friends, they are duly honoured" (pg.294). To avoid Socrates's warning of demagoguery, shown through the societal ship in book VI, political education is of paramount importance for Plato. A properly informed citizenship is a condition that needs to be met for a democratic society to function. According to O'Neil (2004) this was a major concern for Burke in regards to the French Revolution in that the demos lacked "any intellectual or political agency" (pg.214). A critically aware, correctly informed electorate can

starve off the threat of demagoguery and lead to a sustainable form of democracy. In a letter to Charles Yancey, Thomas Jefferson expressed the importance of an informed people for maintaining a society built upon liberty (Jefferson et al. 2012). This has been a persistent issue for democracy throughout its evolution and remains ever-present in the 21st century. Dahl is concerned with the opportunity to become informed and the internet was introduced as the archetypal informational platform; yet the same issues that have dominated debate about democracy have persisted in the internet era. Plato's argument that those who are prominent at winning elections dominate over those that are competent politicians in democratic politics (Christiano 2018) still seems germane.

Barber (1998) echoes Jefferson's sentiment that an informed citizenship with reasoned flows of information is a requisite for a free society. Yet he contends that the latest iteration of democracy has led to new demagoguery. There is a focus on social media in the critique of the internet's distribution of information; this is an appropriate industry to focus on given the proclivity for social media to be used as a source of political information. According to Napoli (2018) the current dynamics of the news industry, and particularly social media, is having a pervasive effect on developing citizens intrinsic partisanship. Social media is a threat to Dahl's definition of what it means to have an *enlightened understanding* because it is changing the very nature of news consumption and is therefore changing citizen opportunities to learn about the political landscape. The saturation of news sources has meant that being critically aware of what information and authorship can be trusted is an important skill for the 21st century citizen (Coleman and Blumler 2009). This need for an inquisitive response to online information has direct implications for Dahl's definition. It is difficult for citizens to affectively learn about politics when their consumption of it is marred

by fake news or the worry of fake news. Echoing Napoli's observation, Bartlett (2018) warns that we live in an age of fragmented information where the overwhelming amount of information is having a pernicious effect on our receptiveness to alternative ideas. However Dahl's definition does concern itself with the opportunity to learn about '*the relevant alternative policies*' and their potential implications which is indicative of a perceptive approach to information and avoidance of myopic partisanship. The balance in the information age is between openness to alternative ideas as well as displaying a critical awareness of information consumed. Dahl's definition emphasises this need to be receptive to new ideas.

A concern still exists over whether the internet has damaged the opportunity for people to identify the authenticity of news, and thus affect the opportunity for a well-informed *demos*. Fake news is not a new phenomenon in a democratic state; in the 20th century the mainstream media was responsible for spreading subversive fabricated stories (Bergmann 2018). Bergmann maintains that while the internet-era's form of fake news may differ from its predecessors in its diffusion, it has not yet altered the nature of fake news. Fake news was previously masked under the term conspiracy theories; a famous 20th century example is *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* false text that described a Jewish plan to take over the world, which had a profound impact on citizens given the "public wanted to believe its pithy explanation of how the world works" (Webman 2011). When featured in the *Morning Post* in the UK the story temporarily increased the newspapers circulation by around 11,000 copies (Wilson 1992). This story mirrors the warnings about the internet and its confirmation bias problem, which I will explore later in the *inclusion of adults* section. Fake news can appear on an equally large scale to conspiracy theories of the past, and yet on a microscale it is

ubiquitous. Its distribution and therefore the exposure people have to fake news has drastically increased (Burshtein 2017). But crucially there is now an awareness and subsequent response to fake news, and not just by governments but by the quasi-perpetrators themselves; the dispersion of news and information throughout the internet is partly due to its unregulated and socialised infrastructure and yet internet giants, such as Facebook, are being pressured to prevent this from escalating into a multitude of fake news by regulating their individual channels of the unregulated internet. Impartiality is becoming fashionable. The opportunities people have to access a wide range of information may combine with verification that the information is not discreetly subversive. Understanding the nature of the information is crucial to a well-informed citizenship.

Equality of outcome is almost as important as equality of opportunity for this particular criteria. Dahl focuses on opportunity in the wording of his definition but he still valued the outcome of an understanding electorate. There are two parts to focus on in achieving this; first of which is equality of access, which the internet has sufficiently achieved. The second aspect is ensuring the information is *effective*, meaning it should allow citizens to be sufficiently knowledgeable about their own beliefs as well as alternative policies and political issues that exist both domestically and globally, therefore hoping to make citizens more aware of their own political environment as Bailard observed (Oates 2016). According to Dahl's definition the internet has achieved this, but it has been a victim of its own success through the growth of a largely unregulated platform where people have access to volumes of information beyond comprehension. Just with newspapers in the past, not everything read will be true; this means the next step for the internet is to ensure the information remains *effective*. The fact that fake news has been omnipresent throughout history is more a

reflection of human nature rather than the internet as a means to distribute it, therefore the blame must fall heavier on democratic citizens.

Dahl's definition does not neglect the importance of outcome, and the internet has made it more important to ensure information remains dependable. Citizens have the opportunity to access the right information, it is now about ensuring they find it and avoid fake news. The internet has meant people are no longer restrained by the geographical limitation of newspapers and their information. Citizens having access to a world of information has meant Dahl's definition is more important than ever for political equality. The internet has provided a platform for politics to get as close to Dahl's definition as any antecedent society. Yet paradoxically the growing dissemination of ineffective and misleading information is still one of the biggest threats to democracy and highlights the demagogic forebodings of Plato's *Republic*. In spite of this the internet still represents progress in this branch of Dahl's criteria for democratic equality given the opportunities it has presented to citizens and it now must ensure that the issue of fake news dissipates to make it a defining success.

Control of the Agenda

Control of the agenda is difficult to assess without referencing a particular democratic system. Dahl tends towards a defining feature of direct democracy when stating in the definition of this criteria that "the members must have the exclusive opportunity to decide how and, if they choose, what matters are to be placed on the agenda" (1998 pg.38). He further states that existing policies are submissive to the authority of citizens. While this

criteria may remain a utopian form of direct democracy there is definite scope to assess how the internet has brought us closer to this concept.

Dahl advocated that a political system that achieves this criteria in addition to the first three could consider itself a “full procedural democracy in relation to its demos” (Dahl 1986, pg.201). The difficulty in achieving this has been expressed throughout history, and I explore it from Dahl’s position of equality of opportunity rather than equality of outcome, which remains too abstract a concept. Democratic thought is divided over the extent to which the people should influence the running of the state. Schumpeter believed the will of the people needed to be channelled through elites, giving them authority over agenda-setting, as it is unrealistic to assume the majority can control agenda and policy-setting without the need for political experts (Putterman 2003). Yet as Putterman notes Rousseau believed that majority rule is not impossible, even if coexisting with political experts. Despite Rousseau admitting democracy is best suited to smaller states (Wade 1976) he advocated the need for a connection between citizens individual wills and the collective will of the people (Post 2006). The historical contention of this issue has shown its enduring importance and was something that Dahl was keen to emphasise. The debate is whether the internet has presented us with a scenario closer to the goal of citizen-led agenda setting and further away from Schumpeter’s model. This concerns whether more people have moved closer to politics through the internet.

Tim Berners-Lee (2014) declared on its 25th anniversary that he doesn’t want the web to be fragmented, he wants it to help provide a basis for democracy. The internet expands the connectivity of people to help shape society in the collective interest. This theme is

advocated by Berman and Weitzner, that “the internet presents us with the opportunity to support the highest goals of democracy” (1997 pg.1319). This criteria is concerned with the highest goals of democracy and it remains evident that the internet shifts democracy towards Dahl’s definition. However in recent years concerns have arisen over the efficacy of the internet for this purpose as some have gained a greater influence than others over agenda-setting. This is an inevitability in the distribution of influence, so the question is whether those with a greater degree of agenda-setting authority are restrictive of the opportunities of other citizens to illustrate their agenda preferences. A recent theme of the relationship between the internet and politics has been regarding how much control citizens have over their own political consumption, which then filters into their internal decision-making over policy. According to Carole Cadwalladr (The Guardian 2018) citizens are “nudged in certain directions”. This political advertising is more subtle than previous forms as it is now conducted in the largely unregulated private domain of the internet. Cadwalladr (2017) believes the Brexit result was evidence of a shift towards a less democratic world, where the result was manipulated by small group of people through the disguise of an archetypal feature of direct democracy: a referendum. If something of this magnitude can be influenced by a few powerful people then it could be argued that citizens have lost, or have not gained, an ability to determine what matters are to be placed on the agenda. There is a greater ease with which people can now disrupt and influence public opinion (Mansfield-Devine 2018). Bartlett (2018) expresses the dystopian idea that power will shift to those controlling the data from those with substantiated ideas. Meaning citizens are being nudged in certain directions rather than being given the license to promote their own agenda preferences. This has become a subversive trend of democratic society but it is an unfortunate side-effect of giving everyone the opportunity to express their political stance through the internet. As Niall Ferguson

explains in *The Square and the Tower* there is substantial evidence of an alternative hierarchy forming from an innovative network being introduced to society throughout history, it is not a new phenomenon (The Economist 2018b). As I will discuss, this macro effect on politics should not mask the positive effect that the internet has had on agenda-setting. While the internet has been used in instances for a few to gain hidden control, this has been a feature and a problem of democracy since its inception. It is more a consequence of trying to give authority to everyone than an inherent fault of the internet. Ultimately people still have opportunities to control what matters are placed on the agenda.

Assessing the overall impact of the internet for this particular criteria requires looking at the various channels through which the internet and politics can connect. Representatives, in order to represent, need to know the issues people have on both a local and national scale (Coleman et al. 1999); the internet has thus far proven to be an excellent communicative means to achieve this. The internet has provided the infrastructure, through weblogs and other online networks, to induce the democratisation process (Pirannejad 2017); some of which translates into greater agenda-setting authority. Leggewie and Bieber (Theiner et al. 2018) indicate that the improved communicative relationship between politicians and citizens is an undervalued feature of the internet. Citizens can now easily express their agenda-preference to a political elite, whether that be through direct contact via social media or personal email, or an indirect medium such as a blog post hoping to gain traction. The connectivity of citizens is also a powerful tool that the internet can mediate into a tangible expression of public will. A pertinent example is the use of petitions. Yasseri, Hale and Margetts (2013) include in their definition the increased propensity for petitions to use social media to gain popularity. Their analysis indicates the success of a petition is reliant on early

traction and there is no better place than the socialised environment of the internet, and in particular social media, to do this. A petition, if brought to a government, is an embodiment of what is important to *the people*, it is an expression of citizens' decision as to what should be place on the agenda. Opportunity is readily available for both the collective and individual. This has not only taken us closer to Dahl's definition but has formed the infrastructure for Mill's hope for democracy in that it is where citizens can discuss and then put forward a public agenda amongst themselves, and aim to form a common good (Brink 2018). The internet has provided problems with the way people exchange with one another as individual users but it has provided the most efficient platform for the public to put forward their agenda, which is crucial for Dahl.

Given representative democracy is ubiquitous it is unlikely that the determinate of the agenda exclusively falls to citizens. The internet has instead provided a more effective means of communicating what's important to citizens; every citizen has the *opportunity* to contribute to the political agenda. Citizens must decide how they do this and what they put forward, and it is the responsibility of the political elites to listen to them. The internet promotes this, yet politics must prevent the manipulative trend of the last few years from escalating to ensure the internet is shaped by more transparent social dynamics.

Inclusion of Adults

This criteria is initially vaguely defined by Dahl and he accepts it was a rarely held belief before the 20th century. Yet he later built upon his definition, justifying it as avoiding the repression of certain societal groups. Full inclusion of citizens in a democratic state means "all

persons subject to the laws of that state except transients and persons proved to be incapable of caring for themselves” (1998, pg.78). I maintain the internet can act as a de facto government resource to achieve an inclusion of adults, similar to it acting as a medium for invoking an *enlightened understanding* as an institution would (which Dahl admitted may be inadequately weak to achieve such ambitions).

Mill was adamant that the protection of minorities from the systemic influence of the majority was a role for the government of the state (Brink 2018). The internet lacks legal authority over the inclusive rights of citizens and is thus limited to internet-induced political pressure. I will instead largely focus on inclusion through the internet as a platform for informational inclusivity. It is important to ask whether the internet, which has extended the jurisdiction of politics, has also introduced the same inclusivity that Dahl demanded from a democratic society. The tyranny of the majority has been a concern for thinkers such as Mill (Brink 2018), but as Dahl (1989) explains it is a logical impossibility that if citizens are governing themselves by the democratic process a majority denies a minority of its primary political rights. The internet represents an expansion of these rights through its socialised infrastructure and the increased connectivity between politics and citizens. The caveat is whether this is at the expense of partisanship and whether the internet has marginalised some political citizens as a result through an exclusion of ideas. As DiMaggio (2001) notes the barriers to entry have been lowered for the opportunity to participate in the digital political environment. It is an inclusive entity. Yet within this socialised environment there are forms of exclusionary behaviour.

As mentioned, the internet is defined by inclusivity. This is evident in its unrestrictive membership; anyone with access to a computer can qualify for internet membership. As Jensen (2003) notes the internet forms active communities amongst those that may be independently remote from one another. Yet Jensen's study concludes that the internet appears ineffective in encouraging ostracised groups in society to participate in politics. However not only is this deduced from a minimal sample size but it was also produced in 2003 so is anachronistic for this purpose given the emphasis on inclusive political practises since then, such as social media campaigning. It still remains challenging to accurately assess the impact of the internet on the inclusion of citizens in the political sphere. A concern, in light of Dahl's definition, is not with the legality of inclusion but with the mechanisms through which a more inclusive political environment can be achieved. The internet is a means to achieve this, which the previous four criteria have shown. Rousseau expressed the need for an inherent connection between the individual's will and the general will of citizens to avoid an oppressive majority (Post 2006). Rousseau (2012) deduced that "the less that particular wills relate to the general will... the more that repressive force must increase" (pgs.59-60). The internet can be considered a medium to achieve such a connection. The internet has made democracy more scalable. Rousseau's concern, as mentioned earlier, that democracy is only suitable for smaller states has been eased by the internet as an inclusionary platform where people can express their individual will, and a collective will can be embodied. Although Rousseau is referring to democracy in the Athenian sense whereby people manage the state on a day to day basis (Bertram 2018), it is still worth comparing.

As discussed the internet has provided the means for inclusion beyond the realm of legality. Dahl advocated inclusion on a deeper political level. There is still debate however

over the authenticity of the internet. Both Facebook and Twitter only require small portions of personal information to set up but have both been the subject of polarizing users. It is worth exploring the pernicious effects of information polarization. A study by Bessi et al. (2016) shows the polarizing effects of both YouTube and Facebook finding that the content itself is driving divisions more so than the algorithms. Another study (Del Vicario et al. 2016) find confirmation bias is driving a surge of echo chambers as online users predominantly “select and share content according a specific narrative” (pg.557); this results in users largely ignoring alternative narratives. Even Jeff Bezos, a paragon of the technology world, highlighted this as a problem with the current model of the internet (Business Insider 2018). Polarized groups of citizens have driven political divisions where individuals become more dogmatic and attached to their own political disposition and less open to alternative ideas. This is a growing, yet undetermined, threat to the internet as an inclusive platform. Yet given confirmation bias is driven more by the user-produced content the blame cannot fall entirely on the platform.

The internet has become less esoteric in its political use; social media has instigated a surge in political inclusivity, meaning the conflict lies between active political users rather than between those in and out of the political sphere. The danger of this for inclusivity is that the political society, despite expanding, becomes more sectarian leading to some being marginalised by more popular groups enforcing their inflexible will. This shows the internet as a victim of its own success; the internet has brought many people into politics, at an extremely low entry-barrier. At the same time it has exposed citizens to more information than they are capable of consuming. The consequence of this rapid expanse of information among a highly connected political community is the clustering of certain groups in society.

However partisanship is not a new phenomenon in politics as the newspaper industry has shown, and while its current form may be on a larger scale, its contained within a platform that can expose people to any alternative disposition. Confirmation bias is prevalent, but in a form of politics where people have a greater opportunity to expose themselves to alternative views rather than secluding themselves to the view of one newspaper or news channel. Citizens are aware of partisanship as a continual feature of democracy, citizens must now become more reasonable to ensure the systemic success of the internet's diversity of ideas.

In conjecture with Dahl's other four criteria, the internet is a platform where politics becomes increasingly about inclusion of political ideas and not just political rights. *Control of the agenda, enlightened understand* and *effective participation* all support this and help take us closer to Dahl's interpretation of the democratic process. Dahl (1998) believed the interests of citizens "who are denied opportunities to participate in governing will not be adequately protected and advanced by those who govern" (pg.77). The internet extends participation and the ability to share and explore different ideas, which has a direct positive impact on citizens inclusionary status within broader political society.

Overall Assessment and Limitations

This study has not been concerned with the democratic state, the political system derived from democracy. I have been concerned with the culture and process of democracy that may occur within any democratic state. This has formed a positive assessment when

focusing on citizens connection to politics rather than political actors. The internet has not created a perfect form of democracy; a multitude of problems still exist. Yet democracy by itself is not perfect and, as I have argued, the problems that coincide with the internet are predominantly new forms of aged, citizen-led problems. These problems are more a representation of citizens ability to exploit the malleability of democracy rather than inherently originating from the internet. Compared to the past there is a greater awareness of these problems, which are essential for Dahl's criteria.

It is a self-evident truth that the internet is not fully understood. Cadwalladr (2016) highlights this as a problem, stating the internet may be responsible for results such as Trump being elected. Whether this election result is a good or a bad outcome, it is the process of reaching that outcome where the concern lies. Yet this responsibility is hard to quantify. For example in Allcott and Gentzkow's study (2017) they do not find fake news to be a pivotal factor in the 2016 election. They discover people on average were exposed to slightly more pro-Trump fake news but find it incredibly difficult to judge how much these stories impact voting behaviour, for example those that came across pro-Trump fake news may already have been predetermined Trump voters. Dahl's criteria are pertinent because they provide a framework to assess what is known about the internet and political equality. It allows a more holistic view of the relationship. Assessing the internet's impact on these criteria has identified undoubted problems in the relationship, mostly surrounding the deregulated nature of the internet. Yet I do not follow the narrative that the internet, led by Google and Facebook, is leading us to a dystopian future of pseudo-democracy. If the internet was a tool of politics, as a centralised publicly-owned platform, then it would be far more threatening to democracy. Instead people can choose not to use Google as a search engine, people can

choose not to use Facebook for political information. Whilst I have looked at social media I have not been centrally concerned with individual actors on the internet, or looked at how their future relationship might develop. This is predominantly because of the obvious impediment of literature focused on hereafter. The literature focused on the present is efficacious in supplementing the notion that society is increasingly aware of the troubles of democracy, and thus citizens are better positioned than the past to shape its future in conjunction with the internet.

Ironically the internet is the best tool for solving its own problems as it is the most effective means of mass communication. For example the prevalence of fake news and the publication of its problems has circulated online and should naturally make people more cautious of online news sources. Change derived from users online behaviour is the best way to solve the political problems of the internet. Facebook has been in the fake news spotlight and perhaps one consequence of this is an average 15% decline of user time spent on it worldwide (The Economist 2018c). In response to growing political and social pressure, Facebook is finally acting on its fake news problem. It has, for example, recently hired Nick Clegg (BBC News 2018) to address their relationship with politics. The political problems of the internet are more a reflection of its users, including Facebook, who shape it through their social dynamics. The internet is a victim of its own success. It may be a limitation looking at the internet conceptually and blaming problems on the users, but as they have been common problems before the internet then responsibility must (partially) fall on democratic citizenship and democracy itself. For example, if fake news has always existed then the burden should fall harder on citizens themselves rather than the means through which this is achieved. As The Economist (2018d) notes there is an overemphasis on the supply side of fake news, which

has always existed, and yet more emphasis should be focused on the demand side for this ideological bias. Where this demand stems from would be for further study, the fact that it is as important is what this study has shown.

Sticking to the semantics of Dahl's definition corroborates a positive assessment of the internet and political equality. The criteria are framed broadly and given the internet has increased the complexity of citizens relationships with politics, further study may look at where the criteria can be extended. Further prerequisites can be added to political equality, yet it is important to remember Dahl's criteria is concerned with democracy as a process. Substantive approaches to democracy examine the relationship between a political regime and the living conditions it promotes (Tilly 2007). Dahl understood that the process of democracy may impede certain rights promoted in the substantive approach (Bühlmann and Kriesi 2013); within this study this would largely be a consequence of societal and technological changes within individual states rather than explicitly the internet. For example Bartlett (2018) highlights the need for a reconsideration of social safety nets given the changing nature of work, to which exploring how the internet affects different definitions of democracy would be beneficial. However when assessing the internet holistically it was necessary to take Dahl's process-orientated approach given it provides criteria that can be applied universally to democracy. This study has been limited and defined by this approach. A further strand to study would be the behavioural impacts of the internet under each of these criteria. For example whether the internet has made citizens less reasonable to alternative political views and distorted citizen's perception of their own political understanding. The behavioural factors Bartlett (2018) talks about may require adding the need for critical awareness in the definition of *enlightened understanding*. Or does the

literature criticising the internet's relationship with politics simply represent a case of declinism, particularly given the same problems have repeated themselves.

The internet is not a tool derived from governance meaning citizens shouldn't expect it to democratise governance (Coleman and Blumler 2009). Instead I have identified a profound impact on three of Dahl's criteria: *effective participation*, *enlightened understanding* and *control of the agenda*. Philosophically the internet has taken us closer to the image of political equality, yet in reality there are still distortions to the archetypal platform for democracy. Political participation is easier and more diverse with the internet, but the complexities of political rule still remain. Nevertheless citizens are now aware of what the past was not and the internet is a resource to address these salient issues. Political pressure is often derived from the internet, particularly when looking at online interactions, and online circulation of social protests and petitions. The internet is not perfect, and Dahl's criteria has not been used to prove it is, but through a more holistic view of the relationship between political equality and the internet the criteria has provided a positive image of the current democratic process. Responsibility must fall harder on democratic states and citizenship.

Concluding Remarks

Dahl (2006) asserted that "more citizens means we create more obstacles for political equality" (pg.56). I have presented a narrative that the internet can help contradict this statement. The growth of the state in conjunction with political equality was observed by Rousseau. This is not a new problem. However the growth of the political sphere

corresponding with the exponentially growing internet has added new complexities in assessing political equality. The enigmatic connections of the internet has meant an assessment requires a conceptual approach to avoid speculation about unknown unknowns.

The growth in the number of political citizens is as important as the growth of the internet; the former drives the latter. Therefore an emphasis is placed on citizen responsibility as well as the responsibility of key internet stakeholders. Internet-based corporations are slowly showing signs of change and citizens are more aware than ever of the dangers of the internet. Through Dahl's criteria I have shown the internet by its very design is a source for political equality. But, as per my definition, it is susceptible and malleable to user behaviour. Therefore the problems of the internet can be placed on the users both individually and collectively (such as corporations) as the internet's tendencies are a reflection of social dynamics. The internet should be used wisely by the political sphere as a means to address Rousseau's problem of large states and democracies.

There are iniquities of the internet and democracy not explicitly explored in Dahl's criteria. However these can be explored under an extension of Dahl's definitions, for example developing critical awareness should be an extension of the *enlightened understanding* definition. The criteria has remained complementary for expressing my argument, it has shown the internet's ubiquitous benefits in achieving the conditions of political equality. All five of the criteria are still kernel to a contemporary discussion on political equality, in particular *enlightened understanding*, *control of the agenda* and *effective participation*. These are the three most important aspects to focus on in such a discussion. Given their definitions are largely concerned with equality of opportunity there must be a prevention of coercion

added to the discussion. Citizens who are better informed or have a greater control of the agenda must not use this to coerce other citizens. *Voting equality* and *inclusion of adults* are concerned with equality of outcome and must remain that way.

Each of the criteria on their own are divisible for further analysis, yet as a collective and as individual criteria they are still relevant for a modern analysis of democracy. The internet has proven to affect each of the criteria to varying degrees and the outcome of this study has shown it to be a beneficial tool for achieving political equality as defined by Dahl.

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