



Chapter XI

Technology to Support Participatory Democracy

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on the development, application and impact of information and communication technology on civic representation and participation in the democratic process.

Governments, at local and national levels, need to restore public confidence and interest in the democratic process. They need to improve the turn out at elections and, importantly, they need to address the underlying sense that, except during election campaigns, the views of the public are not actively sought or, importantly, listened to and taken into account. This chapter gives practical guidance on how parliaments and governments can develop, apply and manage information and communication technology (ICT) to address this concern and to support the public to participate in setting agendas, establishing priorities and making policies—to strengthen public understanding and participation in democratic decision making. However, the question is still unanswered as to whether ICT will enable more open, democratic and effective government. In this chapter we will explore this question and consider the positive and negative affects of technology on the democratic process.

The first section in this chapter briefly summarizes a range of perspectives that have provided the impetus for researchers and practitioners to envisage roles for technology in the democratic process. Increasingly, theoretical perspectives are becoming informed by practice, as technologies developed for corporate or consumer use are applied in pursuit of collective political ends and to meet needs and demands of individual citizens. Policy makers and analysts have articulated priorities and frameworks which cut across conventional policy-making divisions, making ICT considerations central to their vision and action. At the end of the section we summarize recent developments that are typically considered.

Section two considers the issues and constraints that have to be taken into account when designing ICT-based tools for “democratic” purposes. Specifically it highlights

the major differences in developing systems such as these that are intended for widest possible accessibility and ease of use, from those that are developed to support commerce and entertainment. These differences are important, since government operates under quite different conditions. Some similarities bear careful examination though. In commerce, corporate governance and marketing borrows the language and action of politics more and more ('guerrilla marketing' for example). E-commerce strategies, like those of government, are increasingly based on the idea of community-building.

In the third section we focus on a significant trend for policy makers concerned with electronic government that also echoes trends in electronic commerce. A trend for consumers to adopt roles traditionally taken by producers has been evident in commerce for some time. The entertainment industry, as a special case, illustrates dramatic shifts in its symbiotic relations with people as end-consumers on the one hand and producers of popular culture on the other. So while governments may be seen as (electronic) providers of services and deliverers of policy, citizens may choose to seek ownership of service provision and policy making for themselves. As our examples show, this trend marks out an area of some uncertainty. The ends and means of electronic citizenry may be seen as legitimate and welcome forms of democratic renewal or alternatively as threats to the democratic process, and the prevailing view can change with revolutionary speed. We provide examples of ICT-based 'activism' that contrast, in values if not in core technology, with the more commonly reported 'hacktivism' and 'cyberterrorism.'

In the fourth section, working examples of citizen participation, specifically in Scotland, are fully described. The section focuses on the use of the Internet by democratically constituted organizations to gather opinions from citizens and also by citizens to lobby government and public agencies. A Web-based e-democracy toolkit, developed to motivate and facilitate public participation in governance, is described. The International Teledemocracy Centre, working with BT Scotland, developed the toolkit in late 1999. The tool helps to demonstrate how relatively straightforward computing techniques can be deployed to enhance public participation.

In the fifth section, the importance of monitoring and evaluating teledemocracy systems is stressed. Far too many government-related departments are introducing teledemocracy systems without putting in place the mechanisms by which they can assess the impact of the systems on both civic society and the government processes they are meant to interact with. In this section we describe some recent work in this area and future projects that could support teledemocracy evaluations.

BACKGROUND

Towards the end of the 1980s, there was recognition that the world was changing qualitatively and political practices were remote from the electorate (Hall & Jacques, 1989; Wright, 1994). Shapiro and Hacker-Gordon (1999) suggest that "in reality democracy often disappoints" (p. 1). The argument has developed that modern politics needs to renew public trust, and a new shared framework of beliefs and interactive links between state institutions and civil society is required. New social and economic structures are also being articulated in the new millennium, to tackle the opportunities and risks of the 'Information Society.' Democratic governments are forced to re-think the way they undertake their business, deliver services and interact with citizens. This applies to all levels of government--local, regional, national and European--which need to be able to respond to the needs of the people

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