Chapter XII

e-Democracy and Community Networks: Political Visions, Technological Opportunities and Social Reality

Tom Gross
Institute of Applied Information Technology, German National Research Center
for Information Technology, Germany

Political systems and technology are interdependent and influence each other. On the one hand, political systems and political leaders aim at influencing technological development and benefiting from technological progress; on the other, technological development has a considerable proportion of its own dynamics and potential to influence society and political systems. This chapter particularly focuses on electronic democracy and virtual communities and accordingly discusses recent ideas and plans of political leaders, derives requirements for technology, presents systems and prototypes, and reports cases demonstrating how and what technology is really used.

INTRODUCTION

The interdependence of political systems and technology is unquestioned. In various initiatives of single countries and associations of countries' visions for changes and improvements are tightly coupled to technological development. The 'eEurope 2002—An Information Society for All' initiative of the European Union (EC, 2000) or the 'National Partnership for Reinventing Government' (NPR, 2001) and the 'National Information Infrastructure' (NIST, 2000) of the USA are good examples. In fact, one of the objectives of eEurope is for Europe to become the "most competitive and dynamic economy in the

world" (EC, 2000). And in the USA it is claimed that the NII "can help unleash an information revolution that will change forever the way people live, work and interact with each other" (NPR, 2001).

Many of these governmental initiatives offer huge incentives—in general, in the form of research funding—and therefore have the potential to highly influence the technological development. Nevertheless, the actual technological development and progress is hard to predict and even harder to control. The history of information and communication technology can be seen as a path where for some steps the development could be controlled and for other steps it could not. The Internet and all the services and applications that have become available on top of it are an essential basis for today's information society, e-government and e-democracy. And yet, its development has neither been foreseeable nor controllable. For instance, the ARPANET and TCP/IP were developed by the Department of Defense of USA; whereas applications like Internet Relay Chat, Multi-User Domains, Internet Gopher or the World Wide Web were not developed in governmental organizations (Leiner et al., 1997). The controllability of social development and social change through technology is also unclear. In many cases technological development is stimulated by the social changes, and technological development itself entails social changes (Coleman, 1999).

It is obvious that these interdependencies are very complex and cannot be analyzed in one book chapter. This chapter focuses on electronic democracy and community networks. In the next section political ideas and plans concerning information and communication technology are discussed and requirements for technology are derived. Then electronic communities—virtual communities and community networks—are introduced and their technological requirements are derived. Systems and prototypes providing functionality for e-democracy and community networks are introduced. Finally, we will discuss the actual use of systems.

ELECTRONIC DEMOCRACY

Electronic government can be seen from the addressees,' from the process, from the cooperation, and from the knowledge perspective (Lenk & Traunmueller, 2000). The same holds true for e-democracy. This chapter primarily focuses on aspects related to the cooperation between the public sector and the citizens, and among citizens, as well as the support for cooperation by modern information and communication technology. The public awareness and desire for e-democracy have been there for years. Already in early 1994 MacWorld magazine polled 600 randomly selected adults and found that more than half of the respondents said that online voting in elections is the most desirable service; that 60% of the respondents had a moderate or strong interest in participating in online polls; that almost 60% liked to take part in interactive, electronic town-hall meetings with political leaders and other citizens; and that almost half of the respondents would like to have electronic contact to elected representatives (Piller, 1994).

Subsequently, requirements for e-democracy are discussed. Basically, citizens need to be able to access information and to discuss political issues, and to vote electronically.

Public Access to Information

In order to take active part in democratic processes, citizens need various types of information. They need information with respect to elections—that is, only well-informed citizens guarantee that good and adequate decisions are taken. Furthermore, they need

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