Benchmarking Electronic Democracy

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INTRODUCTION

Electronic democracy refers to the use of information technology (IT) to expedite or transform the idea and practice of democracy. (Street, 2001, p. 4397)

From the beginning, a common assumption in many discussions of e-democracy is that ICTs have the power to augur in a new political order. There are of course different ideas about what constitutes as an e-democracy, but it appears to be taken for granted that ICTs have this constructive power regardless of the conditions and environment in which they are used (Barber, 1984). Whilst the most significant experiences in the field of ICTs have been generated by bottom-up processes rooted in civil society, a great deal of e-democracy projects are characterised by the political action of national and supranational institutions. The enormous resources spent on e-democracy initiatives and the institutional structure of democratic societies that place pressure on politicians and decision makers to justify their decisions in relation to those they represent both generate a need for public evaluation tools and shared instruments of analysis. Moreover, as information technology tends to create spaces of interaction that are easily accessible and interconnected on a global scale, the need for standardised empirical definitions and indicators is attracting more and more attention (Gibson, Ward, & Rommele, 2004; Trechsel, Kies, Mendez, & Schmitter, 2004).

Benchmarking, in this context, is a method of analysis that comprises the identification of significant factors that influence the perceived quality of an interactive virtual space and that facilitates a constant process of comparative monitoring and evaluation of experiences. Many institutions and research centres are currently committed to this task, deducing empirical frameworks of analysis from theoretical reflections about computer-mediated communication (CMC) and democracy, whilst simultaneously seeking to improve theories regarding electronic democracy—and democracy *tout court*—by the observation and comparison of diverse projects. The output of this kind of research is often a set of best practices, intended to export successful approaches from one country to another.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

The theoretical foundations upon which benchmarking and standardisation depend may be related to the "institutional isomorphism" (Di Maggio & Powell, 1991) that establishes a pattern of analogies between the working of different organisations. This perspective is founded on the idea that technological innovations in different environments all work toward a similar organisational form (La Porte, de Jong, & Demchak, 2002; Zittel & Bush Hall, 2002). From the perspective of values, the strategic choices of key actors and existing institutional forms prior to the advent of ICTs are of little significance (Yang, 2003). This idea has much in common with the technological determinism which contends that the powerful and ubiquitous nature of communication technology and the speed by which it is being implemented may overwhelm the differences between political and institutional contexts and structures. It can be argued, moreover, that a deep conceptual link exists between institutional isomorphism and theories of globalisation. Ideologies of globalisation in actual fact continue to identify the impediments to development with factors internal to nations, emphasising on the other hand the advantages of integration and interdependence in global markets. Thus, institutional isomorphism and benchmarking practices are strictly linked to the possibility—and desirability—of a global organisational harmonisation that should function as a driver of mutual understanding and shared knowledge. These concepts echo the debate which in the social sciences has taken hold since the 1960s, concerning the concept of modernisation, and render extremely pertinent the differences between two kinds of strategic processes often ambiguously included under the same umbrella: electronic democracy and electronic government (Chadwick & May, 2003). While the latter is conceived as a process of public administration rationalisation in bureaucratic structures that are similar in Western countries, e-democracy relates to the transparency of political processes, to participation in public life and to the quality of opinion formation, all factors deeply influenced by socio-economic variables and the political culture in specific contexts. This is the main reason why benchmarking finds its privileged field of implementation in the analysis of

public service delivery, while on the side of democratic quality of life this approach still encounters difficulties and obstacles to its development. Thus, in analysing e-democracy benchmarking we should take into account both the emergence of a new branch of benchmarking, more adapted to the public sector and deliberative networks, and the whole set of theoretical problems posed by the measurement of democracy, by its culturally and ideologically characterised tools, by its assumptions about progress toward (more) democratic government.

BENCHMARKING: A TECHNICAL OR POLITICAL TOOL?

Benchmarking is an evolving concept that has developed since the 1940s toward more articulated forms. Watson (1993) argues that this practice has evolved through five generations: reverse engineering, competitive benchmarking, process benchmarking, strategic benchmarking, and global benchmarking. This development follows the shifts from a focus on products to one based on processes, from a competitive scenario to an interactive and cooperative one. Most recent studies have, however, discussed two further steps in this evolutionary process. The first, termed "competence benchmarking" or "bench learning," is founded on the idea that organisational change is for the most part based upon individual behaviour and group learning. The second step in the contemporary development of benchmarking is the so-called "network benchmarking," which extends the idea of learning by cooperation beyond the individual and group levels (Kyrö, 2003). New forms of benchmarking, and new fields of application (small firms, public and semipublic sectors, etc.) introduce a wider horizon for benchmarking practices, allowing its adoption even in more articulated and complex areas of policy. One of the areas in which benchmarking is assuming a prominent role in evaluation practices is that of public projects of electronic democracy. In this field, institutional action is benchmarked on the basis of its efforts to enhance democratic life through the use of information and communication technologies. In particular the process of democratic development can occur in three ways: (1) increasing the transparency of the political process, (2) enhancing the direct involvement and participation of citizens, and (3) improving the quality of opinion formation by opening up new spaces of information and deliberation. This conceptual pattern is the outcome of collaboration and research carried out between the European University Institute and the University of Geneva, conducted on the basis of empirical findings concerning the assessment of the impact of new communication tools

on the state of democracy in Europe (Trechsel et al., 2004): "the main goal was to design an instrument that not only counted features and assessed quality but also included an evaluation of interactivity. Indeed, it is precisely the latter feature—the increased scope for deliberative and participatory interactivity offered by ICTs—that has been one of the principal concerns of the literature on e-democracy" (p. 11). The quantitative indicators relating to electronic democracy are construed on the basis of the presence of parliament or political party Web sites, with close attention given to communication systems and not merely limited to the distribution of information, but dedicated to citizen participation. The properties of the sites examined are as follows: (1) information provision, (2) bilateral interactivity, (3) multilateral interactivity, and (4) user friendliness. A similar approach is at the root of contributions presented in Brussels at an international seminar on electronic democracy (Riley, 2004), in which the fundamental assumption of the role of national parliaments is the fulcrum of projects of network involvement of citizens:

There was a consensus that the goals of e-Democracy will not be met by any one particular strata/stratum of society though many thought that the process of e-Democracy should be guided and driven by legislatures as, in the tradition of representative democracy, these bodies are the drivers of democracy. (p. 3)

In these examples we find a form of benchmarking that is still product oriented, that is limited to the counting of characteristics related to access, usability, and interactivity. Benchmarking electronic democracy is, in other cases, construed on the basis of indicators that measure the participation of citizens in decision-making processes and greater emphasis is placed on experiences in the sectors of e-consultation and e-voting. Examples are provided by the corpus of studies focused on deliberative democracy and online forums. In their general view of the factors that could affect online deliberation, Janssen and Kies (2004) elaborate a "typology based on three general categories that correspond to three avenues in which research could advance in order to get a better understanding of online deliberation: (1) the communicative structure of the discussion space, (2) the "major"/ "minor" distinction, and (3) political culture and ideology" (Janssen & Kies, 2004). Relying on the work of Lincoln Dahlberg (2001), whose list of criteria of the idealised public sphere represents, in essence, an operationalisation of Habermasian concepts, the authors find a set of indicators useful for evaluating online forums with deliberative goals. Even more complex is the methodological approach used in a report commissioned recently

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