

# The Civic within the Democratic Project in the Digital Era

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## INTRODUCTION

In 1819, Benjamin Constant gave a speech at the Athenee Royal in Paris on how conceptions of liberty changed from the time of the Athenian polis to 1819. After a period of revolutionary upheaval in the United States and France, observed that in the ancient world citizens defined liberty in terms of their positive participation in the affairs of government, while in the modern world, citizens define liberty in terms of the freedom to secure the desires of their private lives. Constant (1988, p. 325) argued that “in the kind of liberty of which we are capable, the more the exercise of political rights leaves us time for our private interests, the more precious will liberty be to us.” The additional point that can be inferred from Constant (1988) is that democracy is an unfinished and on-going project that needs constant and continuous attention (Habermas, 1996). Others challenge Constant’s (1988) positive outlook and argue that the legitimacy of modern governments is in critical decline, citing falling public confidence and flagging interest in the democratic process (indices which include the low percentage of the electorate that votes; mistrust of politicians; cynicism about the political process and public scandals).

Certainly one modern day determinant that will influence the shape and identity of democracy is the regeneration of information and communication technologies (ICT). The information era is based on the pivotal role of ICT, which now pervades all sectors of society—the public sector as well as the commercial and voluntary sectors (van Dijk, 2001). ICT-based applications provide a new way for citizens to participate in the democratic process through improved

- **Interactivity:** Two-way communication/debate between citizen and government

- **Speed of Communication:** Offering the possibility for politicians to rapidly obtain impressions of citizen’s opinions
- **Reach of Scope:** Providing links from politicians to groups with which they were not previously in contact

On the positive side, ICT enthusiasts foresaw the Internet creating a public space free of interference, both from government control and commercialism. They proposed that new “information highways” facilitated by ICT will open alternate pathways to democratic participation, namely electronic democracy comparable with Jefferson’s (1984) vision of 1834, involving a network of highways which would open new lines of communication between the American States cementing their union by “new and indestructible ties.” The Jeffersonian vision is captured by today’s “amplification theory” of technology, holding that ICT enables citizen participation, inducing qualitative changes in society (Agre, 2002). However, ICT also poses threat, a new form of control. Electronic surveillance of the work place is particularly effective because it is *reflexive*—“management” monitors workers as well as itself (Whitaker, 1999, p. 40). At the societal level, it creates and re-creates new structures and new futures. These newly emerging structures, although variously named as “Virtual Feudalism” (Mowshowitz, 1997); “Post-National State” (Whitaker, 1999); “New Serfdom”; “IT-Harems” (Korac-Kakabadse, Korac-Kakabadse, & Kouzmin, 2000) or “New Shoguns,” all depict increasingly invisible, all-seeing, all powerful control mechanisms, first envisaged by Bentham’s 18th-Century (1787/1995) “Panopticon,” depicting citizens loss of freedom. The Panopticon vision of totalitarian, electronic control, is a compelling metaphor because it represents the architecture of modern power (Whitaker, 1999, p. 28). In the

Table 1. Fundamentals of the Democratic project (Compiled from Kakabadse et al., 2003)

Components	Role/Function
Democratic Principles or Values	Underlying principles or values which define democracy--such as liberty or rights ( <i>liberté</i> ), equality ( <i>égalité</i> ), communality or brotherhood ( <i>fraternité</i> ), and other socio-economic values.
Democratic Processes	Political and governing processes which uphold and support democratic principles--such as free elections, voting, referenda, and participation.
Democratic Organs	Mechanisms that support the implementation of democratic processes—legislative, executive, and judiciary.

information age, the global political economy (globalizing markets) and its major tenants—corporate business and its representatives and lobby groups, exert unprecedented power on sovereign states to introduce “business-friendly policies” which, in turn, lead to (Korac-Kakabadse et al, 2000; Mowshowitz, 1997):

- A retreat of the State (via privatization, outsourcing, and the hollowing out of public functions) and an increase delivery of public services by private parties which exercise authority in their own name rather than in the name of the law which transcends their own power
- A blurring of lines between public and private sectors
- Growing disparities between wealth and poverty and between and within regions and communities (e.g., fortress and affluent suburbia versus desolated quarters)
- A growth of private security and “private justice”

These increasingly business-friendly policies lead to corporate control over impoverished, sovereign governments and the transformation of “citizens” into “customers.” The process of being rendered a “client,” diminishes the value of citizen rights and equity, as clients with higher disposable incomes can afford to procure higher levels of rights and opportunities. A growing literature highlights that

ICT-mediated democratic relationships are not challenging the fundamental ordering of democratic processes but, rather, traditional bureaucracies are being replaced by “infocracies” as explained by technology “reinforcement” or “enactment” theory emphasising how ICT further reinforces existing power and social control structures (Agre, 2002; Fountain, 2001; Korac-Kakabadse, 2000). New ICT reproduces and strengthens institutionalised socio-

structural mechanisms, “even when such enactments lead to seemingly irrational and ostensibly sub-optimal use of technology” (Fountain, 2001, p. 5).

## BACKGROUND

### Models of Democracy

General public opinion is the both the cause and the effect (i.e., the vehicle and the organ) of legislative omnipotence or the power to govern. The opinions of average citizens take on a public significance which is of real consequence in a State in which the idea of popular sovereignty is operative. In discussion about democratic models of governance, Kakabadse et al. (2003) distinguish between *democratic principles*, *democratic processes*, and *democratic organs* (see Table 1), arguing that in order to uphold democratic principles there is a need to re-invent the democratic process.

Appropriate for the ICT age, Kakabadse et al. (2003) identify four distinctive models of Electronic Democracy (see Table 2).

However, while the first three models of electronic democracy are increasingly being implemented in various forms in a variety of countries, they have been adapted to the existing models of democracy (see Table 3). In contrast, the fourth form of democracy, Civil Society, is an inspired form, which resembles Athenian participatory democracy mediated by electronic means, namely ICT mediated deliberative democracy.

### Media Control

Habermas (1996) posited that the “public sphere” can politically function only if citizens accommodate or generalise their interests together so that “state power is

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