

Chapter 4

Democratising E–Democracy: A Roadmap for Impact

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ABSTRACT

As tensions and conflicts are inherent in modern society, the Internet can do little but project tension and conflict back to the socio-political reality. As a result, although there has been significant progress in developing e-democracy over the last decades, the authors observe that many scholars/practitioners still pay little attention to three fundamental action items for overcoming these tensions and conflicts: catering for social justice outcomes in the design stage of programmes, projects, and initiatives; appraising the ways in which people change themselves through their interaction with technologies; linking local enactments of e-democracy to global agendas and evaluation experiences. Ignoring these aspects has impeded a full appreciation of the impact of e-democracy on democracy itself. Adopting a systems change approach derived from Hargrave and Van de Ven's (2006) collective action model to define a roadmap for impact, the authors propose to leverage international e-democracy events for eliciting a collective reflection on how to dynamically (re-)configure the priorities of e-democracy. They use the example of their attempt to do this with the We Decide learning landscape to show how they are starting this reconfiguration. Basically, the intention is to enable both practitioners and researchers to build bridges that have never been there, and to open up new conversations about "democratising e-democracy."

INTRODUCTION

E-democracy is normally referred to as the use of electronic tools to reinvigorate the democratic process, both pragmatically (e.g. by the provision of e-voting systems at the ballot box) and

idealistically, through reversing the cynical vision nurtured by most contemporaries towards elected officials and representative institutions (Schmitter and Trechsel 2004, Tommasoli 2005). In that sense, e-participation (i.e. the facilitation of people's inclusion in public decision making

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via the adoption of electronic tools) could be regarded as an instantiation of deliberative democracy, in the Habermasian meaning – though the term was originally coined by Joseph Bessette (1980) – whereby political engagement and open discussion among educated peers help create a space of convergence in which all citizens are enabled to recognise themselves as co-working for a common deed.

Such idyllic visions are disconfirmed, not only by empirical evidence, showing the systematic lack of correlation between voter turnout and Internet activism in most Western countries (Shahin 2010), but also by pure common sense. In fact, contrast (where not conflict) of interests is the norm for modern societies: between the governing and the governed, between the privileged and the excluded, between the have's and the have not's. Likewise, even harsh tensions may occur in any democracy between the incumbents and their opponents, the orthodox and the heterodox, tradition and innovation, current and future generations, not to mention the endemic inequalities of class, gender and race. E-democracy, like any other discursive and social construction, can do nothing but mirror these tensions, and project any divergence back into the socio-political arena. For sure, anywhere and at any point in time, mediation can be (and actually, very often is) achieved among those contrasting interests or conflicting groups, but the power of technology in promoting or achieving this mediation remains largely unexplored.

From the perspective of program/project evaluation, this question could be answered in principle by means of counterfactual analysis (Lewis 1973, Kwart 1986), i.e. through comparing the results of a given e-democracy experiment to what would have happened in the case no electronic tools were applied to the same situation. Intuitively, an important contribution of ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) to the case of discursive democracy should be to dramatically scale down the raw costs of institu-

tionalised, large-scale deliberation trials. Ackerman and Fishkin (2004) estimated those costs in an order of magnitude of 2.5 billion dollars per single trial with an attendance of 70 million, or about 35 dollars per person involved, which is not that big amount *per se*. Despite this, were it possible to migrate any public discussion to a suitable online platform without losing much of the intensity, heat and transparency of running it face to face, viability of direct deliberation would become more apparent – also in light of its higher replication potential. Going the other way round, the key evaluation question in measuring impact of an e-participation experiment, should be (but is typically not) whether and to which extent its results would have been achieved (or simply aimed to) in the case no support was available from technology at all.

Going on in this way, another issue that would soon come to the forefront is the quantity and quality of online participation. A typical syndrome that affects most (if not all) Internet based communities is the so-called lurking phenomenon, first discovered by Blair Nonnecke and Jenny Preece (2000). Their original research – never disconfirmed by later evidence – indicates that lurkers, i.e. people who read discussions on message boards, newsgroups, chat rooms, online forums, but rarely or never participate actively, make up over 90% of online groups. Other studies show that the share of Internet population who is really engaged on e-participation has never exceeded the 1-2% ceiling. Provided that direct e-democracy is not like responding to a one-off survey poll or adhering to a Facebook group, if the intention was to use ICT to increase the number of people who actively engage in public decision-making, we seem to be very far away from achieving that target.

More recently, a new wave of optimism has been supported by the realisation that Web 2.0 – or the advent of social computing and the self-organisation power of Internet networks (Shirky 2008) – can have a political edge (Osimo 2008).

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