Chapter 26
ICTs: Convenient, Yet Subsidiary Tools in Changing Democracy

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ABSTRACT

Within Western democracies there has been a growing demand to use ICT to enable citizens to get more involved with local political issues. Western local governments have claimed that ICT can empower citizens and strengthen local democracy. This paper will focus on one aspect of this and examine the provision of online direct democracy and whether citizens do indeed have the opportunity to vote more in local policy decision making. Using Michel Foucault's concepts of power and domination this research will explore if local governments and their citizens, through strategies of power, use one type of ICT, online forums, to change local representative democracy. In order to examine whether online forums can increase direct democracy for citizens, a quantitative data collection method was implemented in this study which produced a data set of 138 online forums. This article argues that online forums do not increase direct democracy, because citizens along with local governments use ICT to maintain the political status quo online?

1. INTRODUCTION

In 21st century Britain there is an expectation of openness, a need for flexibility and a greater understanding that people, the "consumers of democracy", use and do not use modern technology in a manner that suits them. - Bercow, 2014

Apart from saying that citizens consume democracy, I think that the above quote highlights one important fact about people in the West – they use technology to engage with democracy and political institutions at a level and in a manner that suits them. In other words, citizens determine their own level of online political participation.

Political participation is a mechanism by which citizens express their political attitudes, beliefs, opinions; and by using it, citizens attempt to influence goals or implement policies (Clarke et al., 2004). In attempting to influence decision making, participation can take many forms – voting, referendum, demonstrating, canvassing, and

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-9461-3.ch026

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engagement in community activities. Even online, citizens via a plethora of online engagement tools (rooted in representative democracy) can affect local decision making processes by influencing democratic representatives. Representative democracy is distinguished here as any democratic mechanism where citizens' representatives take decision on their behalf as opposed to citizens voting directly on the political decisions to be taken. Pateman's (1970) seminal work provides us with an applied categorization of political participation according to its impact on decision making processes. Using the latter, this paper defines direct democracy as: a group of individuals where each member of the decision making body has equal power to determine the outcomes of decisions. Such a group is unsupervised and is self-regulating. Here, citizens must have the necessary information on which they can base their decision. This model can be summed up as:

In a participatory democracy, decision-making is the process whereby people propose, discuss, plan, and implement those decisions that affect their lives. This requires that the decision making process be continuous and significant, direct rather than through representatives, and organized around issues instead of personalities (Benello & Roussopoulos, 2005, p.6).

A participatory system in contrast to self-serving elites is committed to full dissemination of power. Direct democracy in this context may or may not include deliberation.

In the early days of E-Democracy many spoke of the revolutionary impact ICT (Information Communication Technologies) would have on Western democracy and levels of citizens political participation within democratic processes. By all accounts this has been a slow revolution (Wright, 2012). If this is the case and levels of online political participation are very low then who is too blame: local governments, wider national political institutions, or citizens?

This paper will firstly examine if the introduction of ICT on Western local government websites has brought about an increase in direct democracy? On the basis of the result of this, the paper will then explore the theoretical causes of such a situation. There are many ICT tools available to use to provide a platform for E-Participation, and this research has chosen one of these to study - a local political online forum, defined here as: a web based forum that has a threaded asynchronous platform for discussion open to all individuals within a local area to discuss local political issues from a non-consensual position. Local political online forums were chosen because they are one of the best forms of E-Democracy for encouraging deliberation in contrast to Online blogs, Listserves, Webcasting, E-consultations and E-Petitions. Data collection was conducted at a time before social media was established as a mainstream form of online political engagement. In order to conduct this research, an international sample of 138 online forums from around the world was collected and entered into a data set for analysis. Even though a quantitative data collection method was employed, this paper is mainly conceptual and does not employ content analysis of the discussions within the online forums, but instead focuses on the method of voting employed within online forums.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Within the West, local governments and certain E-Participation advocates have claimed that ICT can empower citizens and strengthen local democracy. I want to examine if this is the case and more specifically whether citizens have the opportunity to participate more in local politics i.e. is there an increase in local direct democracy. Using Michel Foucault's concepts of power and domination, I will explore if local governments and their citizens, through strategies of power, use online forums to change the traditional political power structures, or maintain representative de-

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