

Chapter 31

Bridging the Gap between Citizens and Decision-Makers: Are ICTs the Appropriate Means for Reconfiguring Traditional Notions of Citizenship and Participation in Public Affairs?

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ABSTRACT

Over the past few years the concepts of government and governance have been dramatically transformed. Not only is this due to increasing pressures and expectations that the way we are governed should reflect modern methods of efficiency and effectiveness, but also that government should be more open to democratic accountability. The following chapter will introduce the social impact dimension of e-democracy while proposing concrete directions and incentives that should be provided for engagement through electronic means. The intention is to highlight the fact that technology is the result of a combination of tools, social practices, social organizations, and cultural meanings. It not only represents social arrangements, but also has the potential to facilitate and / or limit different types of interaction.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years the concepts of government and governance have been dramatically transformed. Not only is this due to increasing pressures and expectations that the way we are governed should reflect modern methods of efficiency and effectiveness, but also that government should be more open to democratic accountability.

Political participation is arguably the main domain where the impact of Web 2.0 is now visible (Kohut, 2008). Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have considerable potential to make government more transparent and to open new channels for participation, but the incorporation of new technology into democratic processes can also be fraught with difficulty and controversy.

However, it is only relatively recently that there has been sufficient practical design and application of ICTs in support of democracy to enable this ‘po-

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60566-699-0.ch031

tential' to be considered within a real-world context (Weber et al, 2003). The term 'eDemocracy' captures both the intent to support democracy and the study of outcomes and context. Hacker and van Dijk (2000), using the term 'digital democracy' as opposed to eDemocracy, discuss the emergence of the concept. They define digital democracy as "a collection of attempts to practice democracy without the limits of time, space and other physical conditions, using ICT or CMC1 instead, as an addition, not a replacement for traditional 'analogue' political practices."

Previous work (Macintosh, 2004) gave a definition of eDemocracy as: "concerned with the use of information and communication technologies to engage citizens, support the democratic decision-making processes and strengthen representative democracy. The principal ICT mechanism is the internet, accessed through an increasing variety of channels including PCs, both in the home and in public locations, mobile phones, and interactive digital TV. The democratic decision making processes can be divided into two main categories: one addressing the electoral process, including e-voting, and the other addressing citizen e-participation in democratic decision-making." This chapter builds on these baseline definitions and uses a working definition of eParticipation as the use of ICTs to support information provision and "top-down" engagement, i.e. government-led initiatives, or "ground-up" efforts to empower citizens, civil society organisations and other democratically constituted groups, to gain the support of their elected representatives.

Effective information provision is often seen as a corollary of effective engagement and empowerment as declining political interest presents an increasing erosion of legitimisation for traditional, representative politics. The task of eDemocracy is to empower people with ICTs to be able to act in bottom-up decision processes, to make informed decisions, and to develop social and political responsibility. Therefore, eDemocracy is a means to empower the political, sociotechnological,

and cultural capabilities of individuals giving the possibility to individuals to involve and organize themselves in the information society. eDemocracy offers citizens a greater share in political discourse and, in the ability to contribute their own ideas, suggestions, and requests, an as yet unrealised potential that – as far as it is supported and accepted – could modify the understanding of democratic participation.

In a world characterized by a generalized public disengagement from formal political processes, eDemocracy applications are widely recognised as having the potential to support and facilitate participatory and deliberative democracy, enhancing the transparency and accountability of democratic decision-making. However the design and implementation of such e-democracy tools is not at all neutral and involves a series of considerations, many of which have moral/social import. As the knowledge-based economy develops, this increasing use of leading-edge technologies, not only in political but equally in all areas of life, could introduce new threats to sustained growth and social inclusion. Like all technology, ICT comes as a result of a combination of tools, social practices, social organizations and cultural meanings. ICT is shaped by the character of the society that produces them. Social practices, social relationships and social institutions are interrelated with designing, producing, distributing and using technology. Hardware and software applications as well as telecommunication connections could not exist without the variety of social institutions, political and economic arrangements and social bonds, necessary not only for the construction but also for the maintenance of the internet (Goujon et al 2007).

In this context there is a pertinent risk that, despite their many benefits, new technologies could set people apart, create new barriers and increase exclusion. According to 2006 EU eInclusion data, anything from 30-50% of all Europeans are still enjoying few or no ICT-related benefits. The lack of access to equipment or networks, the limited

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