ICTs as Participatory Vehicles

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INTRODUCTION

While citizen participation is central to democratic governance, there is a noticeable disconnect between elected representatives and the citizenry, as evidenced by voter apathy, decreased levels of civic participation, and widespread cynicism toward political institutions (Hudson, 2001; Putnam, 2000; Berman, 1997). Citizen participation advocates, however, are optimistic that information and communications technologies (ICTs) will facilitate direct interactions between citizens and government, thereby altering the dynamics of the policy-making process by affording the citizenry a stronger voice. This article examines the integration of ICTs and digital democratic applications in the context of citizen participation in government.

BACKGROUND

The Notion of Digital Democracy

As ICTs have rapidly developed, the public sector has sought to apply these technologies to digital service delivery, and ICTs have also afforded citizens a more direct means of participating in the public decision-making process. We use the term "digital democracy" instead of "electronic democracy" (Browning, 2002), "cyberdemocracy" (Ogden, 1998; Tsagarousianou, Tambini, & Bryan, 1998) or "teledemocracy" (Cross, 1998; Watson, Akselsen, Evjemo, & Aarsaether, 1999). Digital democracy simply encompasses the use of ICTs in the practice of democracy. Jankowski and van Selm (2000) suggested that while teledemocracy is more related to electronic polling and voting, digital democracy is more generally accepted as including activities related to the democratic process.

Democracy is a form of government in which citizens have a measure of influence over the policies that affect their lives. The relationship between government and citizens is foremost within a democratic system. In a digital democracy, the focus is on the processes and structures that define the relationships between government and citizens, between elected officials and appointed civil servants, and between the legislative and the executive branches of government.

According to Hacker and van Dijk (2000), digital democracy refers to "a collection of attempts to practice democracy without the limits of time, space and other physical conditions, using ICTs or computer-mediated communication instead, as an addition, not a replacement for, traditional 'analogue' political practices" (p. 1). In addition, Nugent (2001) referred to digital democracy as "processes carried out online—communicating with fellow citizens and elected representatives about politics" (p. 223). Digital democracy may be defined as all practices to improve democratic values using ICTs. Central to digital democracy are specific governance issues, which include government openness, citizen participation in governing processes, and digital elections (Arterton, 1988, pp. 620–626).

Government openness is central to digital democracy, and openness is predicated on improving access to government information. That is, well-informed citizens are more capable of playing an active role in government. Citizens can make their voices more powerful with well-informed, active participation in the policy-making process. Thus, citizens may be empowered via e-mails to elected officials, as well as by debating social issues in digital forums.

With digitally available information and advanced ICTs, citizens can participate more fully in the governing process and consult on policies at all levels of government. In addition, citizens can discuss social issues and government policies in digital forums that include public officials. The Public Electronic Network in Santa Monica, California, illustrates a public discussion forum. Launched in 1989, the Network enables citizens to interact with public servants. While initially designed to enhance public access to information, issue forums are now common (Docter & Dutton, 1998; Guthrie & Dutton, 1992; O'Sullivan, 1995; Varley, 1991). Further, the Digital City projects in Amsterdam enable citizens and politicians to interact with each other (Brants, Huizenga, & van Meerten, 1996; Francissen & Brants, 1998).

O'Looney (2002) compared the interaction between citizens and government within the context of traditional and digital democracy. While communications are filtered through representatives and the media in a traditional democracy, direct communications among citizens, public managers, and technical staff are now possible in a digital democracy. Therefore, while public servants' communications with citizens involve a one-message-fits-all approach in a traditional democracy, official communications within a digital democracy may be personalized based on an individual's interests and needs. In a digital democracy, citizens can potentially track and influence decision making at every step in the policy-making process, ranging from agenda setting to a final vote, thereby providing a basis for digital deliberation in government.

Digital Deliberation

Deliberation is the process of thoughtful discussion and consideration regarding an issue or course of action. Deliberative processes comprise discussion and consideration of arguments for and against a proposed measure. According to O'Looney (2002, p. 276), digital deliberation in government is characterized by the following:

- Access to balanced information
- An open agenda
- Time to consider issues expansively
- Freedom from manipulation or coercion
- A rule-based framework for discussion
- Participation by an inclusive sample of citizens
- Broader and freer interaction between participants
- Recognition of differences between participants, but rejection of status-based prejudice

In the context of this discussion, it is important to differentiate between static and dynamic digital deliberation. Static digital deliberation might typically include an online poll without public deliberation, a bulletin board for complaints and recommendations, or citizen participation by mail, fax, or e-mail. Dynamic digital deliberation meets the criteria for the public sphere as suggested by Habermas (1989). It includes applications that are two-way or dialogical, such as digital town hall meetings and digital policy forums. The roles of both public servants and professionals are key elements. True public deliberation includes all participants—citizens, politicians, bureaucrats, interest groups, and the media.

Deliberation is necessary when there is uncertainty, and it proves invaluable when choosing between two equally compelling courses of action (Adams et al., 2002). According to Reich (1990), deliberation is a process of "social learning about public problems and possibilities" (p. 8). Participants in deliberative processes are expected to be open to changes in their attitudes, ideas, and positions, although change is not a required outcome of deliberation. Rather, it is a process of fostering citizen growth both "in the capacity for practical judgment and in the art of living together in a context of disagreement" (Adams, et al., 2002; Roberts, 1997, pp. 124–132; Ryfe, 2002, pp. 359-377; Walters et al., 2000, pp. 349-359; Waugh, 2002, pp. 379-382; Weeks, 2000, pp. 360-372; Zifcak, 1999, pp. 236-272).

Deliberation has long been considered an important element of true democracy, and it is central to public realm theory (London, 1995, pp. 33-55). Scholars such as Arendt (1958) and Habermas (1989) regarded the public sphere as "both a process by which people can deliberate about their common affairs, and as an arena, or space, in which this can happen naturally" (London, 1995, p. 41). According to Habermas (1984, 1989), the public sphere includes requirements for authenticity, including "open access, voluntary participation outside institutional roles, the generation of public judgment through assemblies of citizens who engage in political deliberation, the freedom to express opinions, and the freedom to discuss matters of the state and to criticize the way state power is organized" (London, 1995, p. 42).

Habermas provided an historical and sociological description of European social institutions throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. He conveyed the importance of social institutions as mechanisms by which private individuals passed judgment on public acts. The English coffeehouses, the literary societies of Germany, and the salons of France are examples of such institutions, and they proved extremely egalitarian in the sense that "the

Table 1. Digital deliberation

Type of Deliberation	Characteristics
Dynamic digital deliberation (active)	- Digital town hall meeting - Digital policy forum - Online voting with deliberation
Static digital deliberation (passive)	- Online poll (instant results, presentation of previous polls) - Bulletin board for complaints - Bulletin board for recommendations

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