

# E-Democracy as a Contemporary Framework for Citizens' Deliberation

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## INTRODUCTION

The emergence of new media has raised the hope of many politicians, citizens, political activists and scholars from various disciplines to establish a (virtual) space for free flow of information and communication for increasing the quality of democratic decision making.<sup>1</sup>

Interest in the impact of new ICTs on democratic processes and practices is not new. Since the 1970s visions on societal development have been discussed in context with an anticipated potential of ICTs to enhance various features of democracy, matched by a range of equally sceptical conceptualisations. However, policy developments have given a new focus to the study of electronic democracy (e-democracy), as a number of governments have begun to take seriously the potential and effects of these technologies.

Discussing all aspects of e-democracy is interdisciplinary work, it is driven by disciplines such as law, computer science and media studies. Although this inter-disciplinary work is valuable in that it provides a rich assessment of techniques and processes, it also highlights the need for an approach to the study of the topic that is explicitly led by the theories and methods of political science. The focus in this article is therefore not on the technological developments or legal requirements but on the technology of democracy, as, and this is the author's perspective, the source of innovation (ICT) is outside the political, or better, democratic process and primarily gives rise to issues of democracy again.

Given the intention to explain the role and decisiveness of generally participative and especially deliberative communication via new media within vivid democracies, several questions must be raised related to civic participation, political representation, the scope of decision making processes and political decisions (local community, regional, national, supra-national) and political accountability. The article intends to provide a summary of the main arguments and findings relevant for the usage of new media tools in the context of online participation and—deliberation.

## BACKGROUND

Generally, ICTs are perceived as new tools to foster the social, economic and cultural development of regional, as well as over-regional, communities with regard to citizen's needs. New media have extended our understanding of civic engagement as they offer alternative methods for citizens to play an active role in the policy making process.

Given that e-democracy projects intend to increase the quality of democracy, but still "much of the talk about electronic democracy is loose and a-theoretical" (Hacker & van Dijk, 2000) it seems to be necessary, to discuss the theoretical basis of concepts of e-democracy and e-deliberation, involving theoretical aspects pertinent for analysing their potentials and constraints.

Literature (e.g., Coleman, 2004; Coleman & Götze, 2001; Hacker & van Dijk, 2000; Hague & Loader, 1999; Wilhelm, 2000) shows two mainstreams of discussion:

1. Technology shapes democracy—ICTs offer a new quality of democracy concerning inclusiveness and transparency of decision making processes. E-democracy is considered as the result of the presumably enshrined democratic potential in ICTs, high expectations concerning the electronic involvement of citizens accompany e-democracy projects at all levels of governance (Becker & Slayton, 2000).
2. ICT is a contemporary tool for the technology of democracy, which does not touch the dilemmata (public vs private interests, majority versus minority decisions, etc.) of democracy. Rather than regarding ICT as a means of transcending representative structures, it is seen as a tool for refreshing and strengthening the hitherto weak and neglected relation between representatives and the represented (Coleman & Gotze, 2001).

## ORIENTATION

Basically, Zittel (2001) argues that e-democracy is inspired by two major sets of political ideas: Participa-

tory concepts and liberal democracy. According to his distinction e-democracy can be analysed on three levels: A general conception of democracy (e.g the liberal model) an institutional/structural dimension (democratic design), and a behavioural dimension (participatory behaviour). Both, participatory concepts and the liberal idea of democracy involve different views of citizenship. The individual as part of the political community sets the basic conception for the participatory ideal—he or she is, rationally thinking, able to submit individual interests to the common good. Citizens should become engaged in political processes as much as possible. The participatory idea involves elements of direct and representative democracy and is partly reflected in the “cyberdemocratic” and the “teledemocratic” paradigm. Becker and Slayton (2000) discuss this teledemocratic paradigm as “the coming age of citizen power” (p. 211), as it will answer the challenge of flattening hierarchies by engaging all those citizens in the policy making process who are disappointed with representative politics and not attracted to community politics. The key to a more truly democratic politics of the future, so they put it, lies in the greater realisation and materialisation of teledemocracy—a “new democratic paradigm” (p. 5) strongly intertwined with the development of ICTs.

A “new democratic paradigm” based on the development of ICT, as the authors describe, is thought to transform representative government into a system much less responsive to traditionally organised pressure groups and more responsive to a broad base of its citizenry.

Simple majority, win-lose systems would give way to consensus building as the best way for politics to plan, decide, and administer the public sphere.

## CONTROVERSIES AND PROBLEMS

Facing the problem that a number of already existing governmental e-democracy projects (whatever level of governance) lack usage and acceptance (Macintosh & Whyte, 2002), the author argues that high expectations are mainly disappointed because the promises of a new democratic design cannot be fulfilled—they neglect the discussion of existing structural problems of democracy per se, which occur whatever technology for decision making is chosen.

Several paradoxes do accompany democratic processes. We can see, that in a nutshell, they are closely related to *three dilemmas*:

- The dilemma of how to balance ideas of freedom and equality;
- the question of how to balance conceptions of representation and/or participation of citizens; and
- the question of how to generate collective decisions out of individual preferences.

To discuss these questions might be a better starting point for the analysis of digital participation options within a local, regional, national or even a supra-national context. Moreover, this approach involves all those aspects pertinent for *deliberative* communication processes, as deliberation is the core term accompanying discussion about increasing the quality of democratic decision making, either on or offline, either on community or supra-national level.

Referring to Abromeit (2002), for reasons of orientation, it is a first step to identify key criteria illustrating some “hot issues” linked to the above mentioned difficulties:

- The definition of a *Demos* (the definition of the community, involving aspects of inclusion and exclusion, led by the main question: who is entitled to participate and what are the criteria for inclusiveness?)
- The role of the individual within a *Demos* (this includes concepts of self-autonomy, ideas of rationality and responsibility for the community)
- The pros and cons of political representation (this includes the question of which issues have to be discussed on a broad including level, when do we use mechanisms of representativity)
- The tension between majority driven decisions and the consideration of minority interests (private versus public interests, mechanisms to deal with conflicts)
- The context between decision making and the public legitimating of decisions (is there a link between institutional and non-institutional decision making processes and how should it be designed)

Against this background it seems clear, that every e-democracy concept/project is linked to interpretations of democratic participation, visions of citizenship and the public sphere, ideological concepts of democracy and the design and use (patterns, challenges and constraints of usage) of ICTs.

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