

# Extended Democratic Space for Citizens' E-Participation

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## INTRODUCTION

Having appeared and rapidly developed in all human environments, the computer and telecommunication sphere considerably changed the structure and organization of social institutions and interaction between social actors.

Without national frontiers, free from time pressure and territorial barriers, individuals connecting create network communities, exchange information with each other and all the rest from a virtual world, interact online coordinating their work and everyday life and all together influence social institutions enhancing democratic grounds of society.

Administrative reform of the public sector already realized or under realization in most of developed countries follows the lead taken from private sector conception, of concentration on consumer needs. Therefore, public administration is considered as a process of "public service" delivery to citizens. With information communication technologies implemented in the process of public administration, a new era of *electronic government (e-government)* has started.

What's e-government? For some people, it is an advanced mechanism of public administration service delivery using ICT, "the way public-sector institutions use technology to apply public administration principles and conduct the business of government" (Riley, 2003, p. 3). It is also described as, "the continuous optimization of service delivery, constituency participation, and governance by transforming internal and external relationships through technology, the Internet, and new media" (Gartner Group, 2000, as cited in Bonham, Seifert & Thorson, 2004, paragraph 2).

Others consider e-government more broadly as, "an Internet-driven activity that improves citizen access to government information, services and expertise to ensure citizen participation in and satisfaction with the governing process" (A Global Survey of E-government, 2002, as cited in Riley, 2003, p. 24).

This article examines the nature and scope of the social changes evoked by the online interaction between citizens and government. It also evaluates the usage of special methods for the creation of extended democratic space for genuine citizens' participation in public life.

As presented in this article the usage of ICT in public administration with citizens-centered applications (*e-democracy techniques*) could create the environment for the appearance of *added social value* evoked by wide public participation in decision-making, increased transparency, efficiency and legitimacy of governance.

## BACKGROUND

What is the social nature of the changes in public administration called up with the application of new methods for interaction with citizens in online environment? Whether it's only the advanced instrument of citizens' behavior regulation or advanced type of social relations (new social order), what is the social nature of this change?

Both of the mentioned hypothesizes are covered by the early grown e-democracy concept. Steven Clift (2004), famous activist and e-democracy promoter, defines it as follows: "E-democracy represents the use of information and communication technologies and strategies by democratic actors within political and governance processes of local communities, nations and on the international stage" (p.1).

Some authors describe it using a functional approach: "E-democracy consists of all electronic communication media which give citizens the possibility to make efforts in keeping leaders/politicians responsible for their actions in public sphere. Depending on democracy aspects being promoted, e-democracy can use different technologies for: (1) political process transparency increase; (2) citizens' direct involvement and participation extension; (3) perfection of opinion creation quality through new space revelation for information and discussion" (Evaluation of the Use, 2003, p.10).

While some researchers think e-democracy is a key element of e-government, others consider these notions crucial though not identical to e-government. Brack and Noble (2001) describe e-democracy as the "use of Internet by government, political parties and advocacy groups to provide information, communicate, deliver services or boost participation to generate a more robust debate among citizens." It follows that, "While "e-government" includes information, service and participation compo-

nents, it is generally limited to governmental institutions. E-democratic use of the Internet is broader in nature" (p. 1).

Pippa Norris argues that ICT can increase activity only of those who are active, without touching "the non-participatory, inactive and not interested," and thus deepening the social gap (Norris, 2001, as cited in Riley & Riley, 2003, p. 20).

Tomas and Cathia Riley have another opinion on ICT's potential to favor democratic processes: "technology is only a medium and an engine of new and important tendencies in society, a measure to which they follow new ideas, conceptual constructions including innovations and creativity" (Riley, 2003, p. 6).

The structural changes in society caused by ICT becomes more visible from the "remote sight" by taking into consideration the internal horizontal relations and interaction of social actors inside the civil society. There is a ground for researchers to prove the appearance of a new advanced democracy type with enhanced possibilities for participation in social relations and public administration. Such an approach would include the following components.

Firstly, it is about ICT applications for self-organization and engagement of socially inactive, remote or disabled groups into public life and overcoming a social divide. These are virtual interest groups, e-citizens' communities based on electronic communications, which create an e-democracy climate. ICT can transform human networks into powerful forms of social organization.

The second component is that we are witnessing ongoing transformation of public management. It has been found that with the implementation of ICT, public management structure changes. The vertical hierarchy of public administration experiences transformation into horizontal networks accompanied with the redistribution of power (public functions). The advanced ways of interaction between government, business and citizens have been greatly evolved by the application of ICT.

This favors the possibility of citizens' participation in public life, policy and decision-making processes at local and national levels. Thus citizen direct participation in the political process by using ICT becomes a reality.

## PUBLIC E-PARTICIPATION IN DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES

ICT makes citizens' direct participation in the policymaking process possible, unconstrained and more intensive. According to Lenihan (2002), ICT can be used "to *extend public space* in ways that might promote consultation and dialogue and between citizens and their governments. Through such dialogue, citizens and stakeholders might

express their views, ideas, explore differences or participate more directly in decision-making, that is, in governance. It could contribute—perhaps very significantly—to the revitalization of democracy and to the strengthening of government legitimacy" (p. 27).

Democracy has proved its extraordinary vitality and stability as a form of governance through centuries. What was less permanent in its long history are the democratic techniques—"specific mechanisms, which transform its essence principles into everyday practice of voting, representation, decision-making, implementation and its observance by citizens and government officials who changed considerably, and most likely irrevocably" (Evaluation of the Use, 2003, p. 7).

In this extended public space, the e-democracy potential is realized through such techniques as *e-consultations*, *e-petitions*, *e-voting*.

The democratic interaction between government and civil society is an important indicator of government legitimacy. This paradigm is based on the understanding of the public administration process as "communication." Its vectors are directed not only on an internal process dedicated to regulate public bodies' activity and the regulatory impact on non-public sector subject activity, but on the dissemination of information in a horizontal direction as well. It crosses the borders of authority domain and encourages citizens and business to communicate with government and each other.

In such communication the dialectical contradiction appears when government has to combine its regulatory power with the function of a contracting party possessing rights and performing the duties of a social contract as equals to citizens and business. It is clear that this partnership equality is one of those factors, which gives grounds to evaluate government legitimacy and the correspondence of government activity to the needs of whole society.

## E-CONSULTATIONS

Consultations are one of the most powerful instruments of government interaction with business and citizens. In the past, it required much more in terms of human and financial resources than is potentially available with ICT application. Today, thanks to advanced ICT, it is potentially easier to undertake the process of public consultations. However, similar resourcing problems are observed in the determination of the context/agenda of these consultations and their subsequent implementation in existing administration processes during all phases within the context of defining directions, formulating tasks, making and realizing decisions.

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