

Transforming Democracy through ICT

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INTRODUCTION

This article explores the potential of ICT to be used to transform the processes of citizen engagement such that a citizen-centred approach to e-democracy becomes both viable and desirable. It will do so by exploring three tensions relating to democracy and civil society: first that participation in traditional democracy is falling, yet new technologies are mobilising citizens on a global and local scale (such as antiglobalisation protests and electoral protests in the Philippines and Spain); second, ICT increases the technocracy of government but also offers citizens a chance to become closer to it; and third, that macro strategies for ICT access are not enough to remove localised exclusion.

The transformation of government and democracy toward online models does not predetermine that our communities will be strengthened or that satisfaction in or engagement with civil society will increase. The potential success of technology in this field lies in its value as a tool or conduit, the ability of technology to remove barriers of time and space and to provide access to information. To do this effectively, we need ICT solutions that transform the processes of civil society such that citizens are privileged at the centre of the discourse and so that systems and processes are citizen-centred. This article will attempt to resolve these tensions through the description of a simple evolutionary framework that privileges activities at the citizen-led end of the continuum. The model can be used to identify issues, maturity, and progress of ICT in a community or group of communities and act as input into the development of policy and localised models for community ICT that privilege citizens.

BACKGROUND

Observers such as Putnam (2000) note that engagement in traditional community activities has been declining since the 1960s. Although this decline is mirrored in the political realm, Coleman and Gøtze (2002) see a drift away from participation as having more to do with apathy brought about by the increasing technocracy and perceived distance of governments, rather than apathy for democracy itself. ICT, they and others suggest, offers the potential to dramatically change the processes of

government and the interactions between government and citizens (Coleman & Gøtze, 2002; Mäkiä, Anttiroiko, & Savolainen, 2004).

The potential for citizen-led agencies to successfully harness new and emerging technologies in order to subvert hegemonic discourses can be seen in the role that text messaging played during the 2001 Presidential Elections in the Philippines. SMS-enabled mobile devices are now considered ubiquitous in Manila, and a technology-savvy subculture is able to effectively utilise the Internet and new mobile technologies (Quintos de Jesus, 2002). On this occasion, the actions of over a million citizens were coordinated, and street demonstrations organised in what became known as the Manila "People Power II" demonstrations. These events led directly to the downfall of the regime of President Estrada. The 2004 terrorist attacks on Madrid's rail system occurred days before a general election. While Spain prohibits political demonstrations during the 24-hour period before an election, Spanish citizens used text messaging to self-organize spontaneous demonstrations. Text traffic was 20% higher than normal on the day before the election and 40% higher on election day (Rheingold, 2002, 2004). On a local scale, Williamson (2003) discussed how community activists were able to subvert a political discourse through the use of a Web site and online publishing: A study of housing development in an environmentally contentious area commissioned by Waitakere City Council surprisingly came out against all but a very limited amount of further subdivision. The prodeveloper council attempted to hide the report, refusing to publish it, and, even when forced to by a Parliamentary Commissioner, the city council made access difficult. Obtaining a copy of the report, community activists then scanned and published it on two local Web sites. E-mail networks were used to widely publicise links to the report. Those with access to the Internet were encouraged to print and distribute the report, thereby ensuring as wide a circulation as possible of this controversial public document.

MAIN THRUST OF THE ARTICLE

News media has long been considered a bridge between the public (and public opinion) and government, yet today it offers little more than "an uneasy compromise

between quality and popular news discourses—that represents the worst of both worlds” (Atkinson, 2001, p. 317). This reduction in diversity has occurred alongside a dramatic increase in the management of news, leaving only limited opportunities for citizens to express their own views (Gustafson, 2001). Technology clearly offers citizens the potential to reclaim their voices at a time when there is ever-increasing decentralisation of decision making away from elected representatives toward “experts.” In this new technocracy, decisions are based on science and professional knowledge, not public opinion (Mälikä et al., 2004). The Internet is a powerful tool for connecting people with information. ICT is valuable when harnessed (like other media) for communicating a message; however, it also extends the traditional concepts of media into an interactive experience, where the views of many can be expressed and potentially disseminated widely. It is this potential that sets ICT apart from traditional print and electronic media and that offers great potential for citizens to become more involved in the political and democratic processes.

Schuler (2000) observed that ICT provides tools for strong democracy, such as e-mail, forums, and online access to documents. Organisations such as Minnesota e-Democracy (www.e-democracy.org) and the Waitakere E-democracy Group (www.wedg.org.nz) demonstrate the potential for citizen-led engagement. Examples of top-down, government-led initiatives include Brisbane City Council, Camden Council (UK), and Rutland County Council (UK) (online fora), the Queensland and Scottish Parliaments (e-Petitions), and Estonia, Queensland, and Camden Council (broadcasting of legislature and executive). In 2002, Ronneby (Sweden) created an e-democracy Web site and discussion forum with the intent of increasing interest in the upcoming municipal election. Council candidates were able to present their views, and the public could enter into online discussions. An evaluation of the project rated it as a successful pilot, and it was well received by citizens, however, it was not successful in increasing voter turnout (Ronneby Kommun, 2002). While many of these examples are aimed at engaging online with those already engaged in the democratic processes, Queensland has also gone further, creating a Web site for the State’s youth to connect with government (www.generate.qld.vic.giv.au).

While the rhetoric of government values engaged citizens and governments feel the need to solicit “feedback in order to develop good policy and services at all levels” (Office of the e-Envoy, 2001, p. 1), citizen involvement should not be assumed. Ranerup (2000) observed that, while on-line fora can be initiated by governments, the community, or other active stakeholders (such as researchers), her own experience of Swedish local government was that citizens, while seen as participants in a forum, were not necessarily consulted

over its establishment and design. This highlights a gap between the technocracy of public administration and the desire of those citizens interested in democratisation and the revival of representative bodies (Chadwick, 2003).

Although most developed countries have an e-government strategy, there is no clear articulation of the link between the often-stated efficiencies gained in the delivery of government services and strong democracy (Coleman & Gøtze, 2002). There is a discourse within governments that sees e-government as a tool for the management and delivery of services from the centre out. While the New Zealand e-Government Unit observed that “new technologies will enable easier access to government information and processes. People will be better informed and better able to participate” (2003, p. 1), the strategy for achieving this identifies only three limited objectives:

- Make government information easier to find.
- Publish key government information online.
- Provide multiple channels for contact with government.

ADOPTION OF TECHNOLOGY

ICT is not ubiquitous, and clearly, a significant number of citizens remain excluded from the “information economy.” Many more are yet to acquire the skills needed, first, to become effective users of ICT (Gurstein, 2003), and, second, to become producers of information, news, and knowledge.

The Australian Government noted that in June 2003, 62% of people in metropolitan areas and 53% of those in nonmetropolitan areas had accessed the Internet (a total of 59% of all Australians). They observed that 55% of the Australian households had Internet access in the home. Although these statistics show encouraging growth over previous surveys, they still point to 45% of Australian households having no Internet access. Only 7% of this group are able to access the Internet elsewhere, and the overwhelming majority cite the high cost (25%) or a lack of interest (25%) as the reason for no Internet access (National Office of the Information Economy, 2003).

Beyond statistics, Zhu, Taylor, Marshall, and Dekkers (2003) observed that, in considering the adoption of ICT, it is important to consider the microlevel motivators, both societal and personal. They suggest that individuals need to first be aware of and then motivated to want to use ICT, and, subsequently, that it is important that individuals and groups are able to identify value in its ongoing use. As Moore (1999) suggested, adoption is based on an individual’s perception of the value and

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