Chapter 1
Introduction:
Searching upon the Limits of E-Government and E-Participation— A Systemic Appraisal

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ABSTRACT

This chapter gives an overview of the phenomenon of e-government within the context of the information society. The importance of values, critical thinking and boundaries is raised for the study of this phenomenon. The chapter offers a critical appreciation of the dominant discourse of e-government to open up new possibilities for enquiry, intervention and citizenship.

INTRODUCTION

Those of us who have had the fortune of witnessing the last years of the twentieth century and the beginning of the new millennium would say that the pace of change is still increasing. Computers are now essential part of our daily lives, and so is electronic information. Worldwide we see that we have become a global information society, and as such, it is time to think about how the ways in we relate to each other have unfolded.

This book is about the phenomenon of electronically mediated participation (e-participation) in society, which it has been commonly associated with electronic government (e-government). One could say that e-government seems to be an explicit or visible manifestation of e-participation in the same way in which one could say that the internet is an explicit manifestation of the information society. In both phenomena we have to say that neither e-government nor the internet as visible manifestations can account for all past, present and future developments. Our task is then to go beneath the surface of these phenomena, and try to understand the thinking behind their development so we can contribute in theory and practice to better it. We do this to see if as policy makers, practitioners or citizens we need to positively change the ways in which both e-participation and the information society are being developed.

This chapter presents an introduction to the topic of e-participation and the book in general. We contextualize it within the information society, a discourse that can help us make sense of the changes in societies that we have been witnessing and will continue to be either witnessing or intervening in. Our initial contextualization aims to dispel a common idea about this phenomenon as something completely revolutionary or emerging out of the blue. With this conceptualization, we offer two main alternatives to talk about e-participation. We hope to give the reader some elements that they could explore when reviewing the collection of essays that the book contains.

The chapter presents then two main perspectives to understand e-participation by looking at e-government in official and non-official ways. The first one refers to what has dominated the development of e-government in the context of the information society. The second one emerges as a response to the need to go beneath the surface of the official version and complement or challenge what we see is in place in e-government initiatives. The emerging nature of this second perspective also gives us the opportunity to include developments in the use of technologies by people in society. At the end of the chapter we propose some ways forward to inform the thinking about e-participation.

To start our discussion we put ourselves in the picture of the network idea of society.

SOCIETY AS A NETWORK OF INFORMATION

Individuals who ventured to make sense of the changes happening in our societies in the 80s and 90s talked about the emergence of a new paradigm for society: That of a network. What they meant was that a society (national, regional, local or global) could be conceived of as a network of flows of information. Such network was de-centering traditional centers of power in organizations. It

was supposed to open space for the emergence of new forms of organizations. De-centering of power was possible because information could now flow instantly through different and geographically spread physical locations, and ultimately through different groups of individuals.

Through history we are used to think of society in terms of flows of resources, influences, relations with governments and power. However and recently, information and communication technologies were greatly contributing to a shift in our understanding of society as a network of information. Technologies have contributed to enhance information exchange as well as generate economic opportunities. With them not only there would be the possibility for societies to facilitate the creation and exchange of information anywhere as a capability to leverage economic growth. Technological change then leads to change the nature of job structures, consumer behavior and ultimately institutional arrangements (Perez, 1983)

The information-based network idea of society presupposes that social change is to be a partial result of technological one and conceived as a societal improvement in itself. Little is explicitly said about how social changes are to take place, or the sort of institutional impacts that are to unfold at different levels in society. We only know that there would be exclusions when traditional nodes of power (e.g. institutions) would be –in principle displaced to give way to 'hubs' or particular locations. Such hubs would attract talented individuals and leave behind those not so-talented or with little possibilities to skill themselves to participate in this network of flows of information and knowledge. Institutional resistance was considered but with time overcome due to the inevitability of technological adoption. How institutions could make use of technology to perpetuate them-selves at the expense of society was considered part of such change (Toffler, 1992).

Thus, within the network idea there was consideration of changes at high cost for those not

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