

Introduction to the Special Issue on E-democracy in Practice: Methods, Infrastructures and Discourse

Over the past few years there has been some interest for “e-democracy,” a term that most correctly can be defined as IT use in democratic processes. This is a broad definition, but it is the most correct as there are many such processes, and many ways to use IT in them. There has been much speculative writing in the field, but as more experiences have been made there is an increasing, if yet small, number of empirical studies. Most can be said to be interesting early observations; after all, lasting changes in democratic processes take a long time to show. This said, there are three developments that have been going on for some time and are examples of ongoing developments rather than isolated occurrences of IT use.

Generally, democracy is both a decision-making system and a social system. The first aspect refers to the formal processes by which societal decisions are made, including both formally appointed decision makers – politicians – and the relations between those and the public. The second aspect refers to the general societal design which is set up to include democratic features, such as a free press, freedom of speech, etc. A lot of IT use would go into all that, so for practical purposes it seems easiest to limit the term e-democracy to direct relations between governments and citizens. Though seemingly convenient, the limitation does not hold, as intermediaries of different kinds have begun to interfere in those relations. This includes both service intermediaries (see the Ranerup paper) and “democracy consultants” (the Grönlund paper).

For the purpose of ordering the different e-democracy uses of IT, I find the following categories useful, as they cover both different qualities of IT use and different threads in the history of e-democracy:

Information: Information processes pertaining to government-citizen interaction have since the mid-1990s been increasingly “informatization” (built into computer artifacts and thus formalized and objectified; Snellen, 2001) by means of use of the web. Starting as local trials, already from the start there have been government attempts at organizing the development. Early initiatives include the 1993 US National Information Infrastructure Initiative (NIST, 1996) and the European Bangemann Report (High-Level Group, 1994). Currently the concepts of “Government Online” and “Electronic Government” are used to discuss the development towards “24/7” services (around the clock). This development is mostly about services, but there are also democratic implications, including (equal and easy) access to services and “service dialogues” for service quality discussions where users are supposed to take part. There is also a direct coupling to the political decision-making from which the services emanate; one of three top priorities of the European Government Online project – a part of the *eEurope Action Plan* of 2000 (European Commission, 2000) – is consultation via Internet on major decisions.

As various intermediaries (“cybermediaries”) are employed to carry out service delivery, service dialogues, or both, there is a need to define quality standards for both the services and the dialogues. From the IT side, data mining and Customer Relationship Management systems are important ingredients in this development.

Consultation: Starting with pre-WWW hackers, community networks (CN) have been developed as mainly social forums (e.g. Rheingold, 1993; Schuler, 1996; Gurstein, 1999).

While earlier completely separate from governments, there is today a trend of integrating elements of this culture into citizen-government relations. On a global scale, this can be seen in the effort to organize what has so far been a large number of detached and disparate communities into a global civil movement, which would potentially have considerable size. The yet not formalized "CN Movement" has been approached by influential policy groups such as the G8, which initiated the "dotForce" task force (Government of Japan, 2000) to organize an open (electronic) consultation on how to achieve inclusive IT use in developing countries for over a year in 2001-2. The first CN World Congress was held in November 2000,¹ and should be seen as a way to create a platform for the purpose of being able to act against such groups.

On a national scale, ongoing consultation trials at the Scottish Parliament and the recent UK Government e-Democracy Paper, "In the service of democracy" (HM Government, 2002), which expresses a great interest in developing this form of government-citizen interaction, are the currently most prominent examples, but it is probably not a wild guess to believe that they will be followed by others, not least as the official EU agenda prescribes consultations and "interactiveness" in national politics.

On a local scale, there are examples of towns trying to develop community-network-style forums for interactions with their inhabitants (examples in the Grönlund paper). These efforts have a 20-year history including use of different technologies in "teledemocracy" trials or "electronic town hall meetings," different terms for engaging people in local political discussions (Becker & Slaton, 2000).

Decision-making: The interest for electronic voting is today less on the newspapers' front pages than the year following the 2000 US presidential debacle, but quietly important development projects are underway. One is Cybervote (<http://www.eucybervote.org>), an EU project aimed at developing and using secure voting technology, but also at putting some pressure on the process of changing legislation in EU member states towards allowing electronic voting. Already, some trials have been made and more will follow despite the yet not so great success (see the Ohlin & Hällgren paper).

This special section considers different aspects of all three threads of development. The papers attempt to go beyond the actual applications and their usability and rather consider them in a context. E-democracy has so far most often been discussed in terms of ICT use. The following papers take a closer look at how ICT use is related in practice to the underlying processes and organizations defining democracy. How are these new systems integrated into the operation of democratic processes? How, if in any way, do they change the processes? And, since the processes by which technical systems are developed and implemented are important not only for technically correct but also socially acceptable uses of new technologies, questions about these processes are also asked.

The papers report cases beyond the experiment stage, where lasting change is already to considerable extent achieved, asking questions about the interplay between technology, human actors, and existing infrastructures:

1. How are, and should, political participation using the electronic medium be evaluated?
2. What do users make of electronic voting systems in terms of practices, attitudes and values?
3. After a few years of regular use of ICT tools in local democratic processes, what new information infrastructures are emerging?

¹ <http://www.cnglobal2000.org/>

4. Information and tools to calculate best choices are important ingredients not only at markets but also for individuals choosing public services and examining policies in the public sector. How do web sites meet the needs?
5. E-democracy projects take place within a political framework - what is the discourse of the political communities defining the action space for the projects? How does it reflect the social choices the technology open up for?

Evaluating participation: Angus Whyte and Ann Macintosh discuss analysis and evaluation of e-consultations. E-democracy relates electronic delivery of the processes of democratic representation to practices of communication, consultation, and participation in public decision-making. The evaluation of e-democracy initiatives has not developed as quickly as public debate about the potential impacts. The paper reviews general criteria for evaluating participation, and outlines common methodologies relevant to the evaluation of electronic consultations. The paper draws on work-in-progress by the International Teledemocracy Center on the evaluation of an e-democracy toolkit. The authors suggest using a case study approach combining survey data, user panel consultations, ethnographic methods and website usage data, rather than a quasi-experimental approach to impact measurement.

E-voters' attitudes and practices: Tomas Ohlin and Markus Hällgren report Internet voting in practice as implemented at Umeå Student Union (Sweden). Drawing on a survey of 2,500 students and expert evaluations of the technical system and the manual routines, the paper reports on a comprehensive evaluation of the election, examining logistics, security, and voters' and non-voters' views on several issues regarding e-voting, including accessibility, usability, privacy, security, and the symbolic values of the voting act. While the technology worked well, the manual routines were problematic as lack of understanding of the technology used led to improvised solutions having to be used to take care of several incidents. These improvised solutions not only in themselves increased the risk of further problems, but may also have resulted in increased user organization dependency of the software provider. The paper discusses issues raised by the evaluation and the government decisions made based on the results - the view of local popular votes, the relation between user organizations and software providers, and voters' view of symbolic values associated with the voting act.

Emerging infrastructures: Åke Grönlund investigates emerging infrastructures for E-democracy in Swedish municipalities in search of institutionalized patterns of use. In 2000, the Swedish government Official Report on Democracy served as the starting point for a nation-wide development towards systematic trials using IT for making local democracy more deliberative. The paper presents case studies from four Swedish municipalities representing the most ambitious local democracy projects. The paper considers the projects from the point of view of their success in establishing a new information infrastructure. The study finds that the different projects inscribe different democratic behavior, and that there thus is no determination in e-democracy - many developments are possible.

Tools for Consumer Democracy: Agneta Ranerup investigates the role of "cybermediaries" in quasi markets. The article focuses on the framing of citizens as consumers in quasi markets and the role of cybermediaries in this process. Through their choice of, e.g., education, citizens are in a position to influence the production of public services, thus exercising what Bellamy & Taylor call "consumer democracy." The paper examines four cybermediaries in the quasi-market for education in Sweden asking to what extent the processes of framing have resulted in cybermediaries that provide citizens with facilities to act as informed and calculative consumers? Ranerup finds that all cybermediaries contained information about educational and careers issues but few had facilities for calculating agents' preferences as well as facilities for ranking alternative choices, and there were no facilities at all for describing

actions to produce a preferred result. Several controversies were found, e.g., how the information should be provided, how to provide facilities for ranking, as well as what aspects should be allowed to affect the design of facilities to calculate agents' preferences.

Discourse: Peter Gustafsson examines the order of e-democracy in Swedish local government. The expectation is that IT will restructure, or even overthrow some of society's power structures and once again make democracy an imperative ingredient. However, the democratic potential of IT is indecisive. Although the technology has a core that does not directly depend on social factors, its application does not restrain the usage of it to extents that exclude different democracy models or ideals. Consequently, the future of e-democracy does not depend on the technology itself, but rather on the structures of power that the technology produces and maintains. The article uncovers some of the concealed structures that the IT discourse contains. Based on studies of a number of local Swedish governments and their work with IT and democracy, the paper focuses on what constitutes the actions within these IT and democracy projects in a three-stage analysis: first, the characteristics for politics surrounding IT and democracy are questioned using Habermas' conception of a "technocratic consciousness;" second, the technology relationship within the discourse and how the actors understand and relate themselves to the technology is discussed; and finally the discourse is analyzed in terms of democratic models.

Clearly the papers do not cover all aspects of the emerging infrastructures for e-democracy, but some issues for future research can be discerned:

Recognizing democratic components: Democracy is an important part of not just the democratic decision-making procedures, but also of electronic services. This means it is important to study how the democratic components of services (access for all, responsiveness, service dialogues, etc.) are developed, especially since independent intermediaries are parts of the new electronic services infrastructures. As Ranerup's article shows, the incentives for the players do not always speak for the best of the citizen. For example, several controversies were found concerning how the information should be provided, how to provide facilities for ranking, as well as what aspects should be allowed to affect the design of facilities to calculate agents' preferences. This means there are controversial dimension of the electronic tools that are set up to support citizens as consumers in their choice of (public) services. Consequently, "cybermediaries" do not inherently provide positive democratic values; these values are a matter of design and hence should be on the agenda of IS professionals and researchers.

Consultation evaluation methods: The Whyte & Macintosh and Grönlund papers discuss various ways of evaluating consultations. So far evaluations are rare, and there is no consensus on appropriate evaluation methodologies. Evaluation has to deal with interdependencies between systems design, policy implementation, and the everyday politics and practice of communications between citizens, in all their variety, and public administrations in all their complexity. E-consultation combines political aims and values with the need for technical efficacy and administrative efficiency, but lacks examples that clearly demonstrate the conditions for success on either score. There is also a need for policy-makers to understand the contexts that underpin successful e-consultation, and the needs for further innovation.

Concerning electronic voting, the problem is much the same. Suppose we have technically safe systems, what should we use them for? What is the role of electronic voting in the democratic system – again, an issue where social, political and technical aspects are intertwined and where neither can be overemphasized at the expense of the others?

Systems development: Finally, as the Gustafsson and Ranerup articles show, the relation between user organizations and software developers is important. This is no surprise to the IS professional, but as we in this context speak of societal relations rather than pure business ones there is another dimension to it: the role of the citizen. Or should we replace citizen by customer and run the electronic government as an electronic commerce system? It seems that currently e-commerce methods and tools are quite straightforwardly being employed also in the public sector. In the cases examined by Gustafsson, there was little understanding and no discussion at the political level of the social choices related to technology use. In Habermasian terms there was a non-value-depending policy, non-problematic consensus, and expert-dependency. The papers in this special issue have provided some arguments that this is not the best way of building the democratic electronic government.

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