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DEMOCRATIC DECISION-MAKING IN THE INFORMATION SOCIETY: EXPLORING STAKEHOLDERS' VIEWS

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Abstract

Exploiting the relationship between democratic decision-making and the underlying technical infrastructure of the Information Society raises important issues of how various stakeholders perceive potential innovations and the role of technology in political activities. The connection between people, technology and politics is a concept usually referred to as eDemocracy. Its practices span from systems developed within the sphere of eGovernment to non-institutional initiatives which emerge through experience and mobilize political expression using ad hoc online means, such as blogs and social networking groups. This paper identifies this diversity and discusses explanatory findings on different perceptions of key stakeholders, examining how the concept of democracy as an online activity is compatible with their experiences and interests. At the next step, it suggests that research should compare and evaluate these diverse practices by importing concepts of stakeholder thinking. The outcome of this research would provide important added value into exploring and balancing different opinions and objectives towards sustainable development of the eDemocracy agenda within Information Society's policies. We present our ideas by examining the case of a system which has drawn much attention during the last years: the UK Prime Minister's ePetitions.

Keywords: *eDemocracy, eParticipation, Democratic Decision-Making, Stakeholder Thinking*

1 INTRODUCTION

Electronic Democracy has emerged during the last decade as a multidisciplinary topic, stimulating a controversial debate over the relationship between modern politics and the underlying technical infrastructure of the Information Society. A perfect exploitation of this relationship still remains to a large extent unknown territory. Forecasting how the eDemocracy venture will be developed and sustained during the next years is not a simple task. In fact, technological initiatives tend to become more and more integrated into the political life, as indicated by the example of the 2008 USA presidential elections, where the role of online political activity was more important than ever before.

The use of the term eDemocracy can be usually found in the Media and Communications, Political Science and Information Systems literature and is generally defined as the use of ICTs to support democratic decision-making processes (Chee, 2008; Macintosh, 2006). Furthermore, eDemocracy is conceptualized as part of eGovernment, consisting of two areas: eVoting and eParticipation (Macintosh, 2004). The eParticipation term was mainly established by the European Commission as an approach to the eDemocracy research within the institutional settings of eGovernment and the associated funded projects under the eParticipation Preparatory Action (European Commission, 2008). The term should not be confused with the concept of Participatory Design and its relevant approach and literature.

Sæbø et al. (2008) identify eParticipation and eVoting as means of eDemocracy practices and elaborate that the term includes normative accounts of how democracy should or ought to develop. Coleman (2004) addresses eDemocracy within this context, as an instrument of changing democratic culture and processes. In practice, versions of eDemocracy span from public sector Information Systems, such as petitions, consultations, deliberations or panels (Demo Net, 2006) to non-institutional forms of new media for political expression such as blogs (Coleman, 2005a), online political groups (Pickard, 2008), individual campaigns and common software applications such as social networks (Boyd, 2008).

In this paper, we approach eDemocracy as a broad concept that refers to any intersection between people, technology and politics. First, we discuss the role of technology in modern politics and then we attempt to analyze how key stakeholders perceive this role by taking into account findings from the UK project VIEGO, the Oxford Internet Survey and other studies. A stakeholder thinking approach is then discussed concerning the necessity to converge stakeholders' views on eDemocracy under sustainable Information Society policies. In order to demonstrate our ideas, we present the example of the UK Prime Minister's ePetitioning system which despite attracting controversial opinions is generally considered successful and provides an example on how initiatives can balance the objectives of the stakeholders they involve.

2 TECHNOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON POLITICS

Representation is a vital feature of modern democracy but unfortunately, according to some, has led to a gradual depreciation of political life, resulting in the phenomenon known as the "democratic deficit" (Bekkers et al., 2007). Due to this deficit, the political system struggles to effectively capture public sentiment and innovation through technology potentially constitutes an important opportunity to strengthen democracy. Certain vision statements have even been expressed about technology succeeding in closing the historical cycle between modern democracy and the direct democracy of the ancient Athenian agora. However, this idea is perhaps based on an oversimplified approach on how the relationship between technology and democracy could be exploited.

The interactive capabilities of Web 2.0 have created new dimensions in terms of the participatory potentials of technology (Cammaerts, 2008; Lilleker & Jackson, 2008) which has in turn influenced the political landscape. This is not only true of public information systems, but also common software, like social networking platforms which have been embraced by the public as ad hoc means to mobilize political expression. Coleman (2005b) emphasizes that technology should primarily aim to democratize and mediate the representative relationship, thus make the public feel integrated into the political system. Furthermore, although eDemocracy will not solve all historical mistakes of politics it could be a source of authentic legitimacy, account-giving and account-taking representation as an on-going deliberative process, providing an opportunity to create more user-friendly practices for dialectical political discourse (Coleman, 2004). Dutton (2009) characterizes the Internet as the central part of a "fifth Estate", which constitutes an independent source of social accountability and increases the accountability of the others estates, by allowing its users to seek information, analysis and professional opinions.

These policy objectives form a basis upon which the eDemocracy agenda could be developed in order to inspire efforts of modernization of the democratic process without challenging fundamental institutional power. In the literature, there is an on-going discussion about the relation between technology, democracy and representation, for example Bentivegna (2006), Best & Krueger (2005) and Kubicek & Westholm (2005). Two significant initiatives aiming at strengthening relevant research and practice focusing on the European eParticipation policy (European Commission, 2008) are the Demo Net and the PEP-NET⁵⁹.

⁵⁹ <http://www.demo-net.org/> and <http://pep-net.eu/>

But how has eDemocracy been perceived in practice during the last decade? On the one hand, there have been considerable efforts to develop public sector Information Systems to support electronic participation as an eGovernment activity. On the other hand, the public in many cases feels more comfortable with and tends to trust and use less formal, less complex and non-institutionalized forms of new media for political expression with which is usually familiar from its everyday Internet use experience. This dual nature of online democracy indicates that coordinating efforts of exploiting the potential benefits of technology in democratic decision-making probably needs to reconsider how stakeholders perceive the whole venture and the ways in which “informal” practices should be integrated into political processes. Initiatives emerging through experience in many cases sustain significant content and interaction providing a potential bridge between public, institutions and politicians on what Coleman (2005a) describes as the “new politics of listening” in his study of blogs. Based on the above discussion, figure 1 attempts to summarize and position concepts and diverse practices within the Networked Sphere:

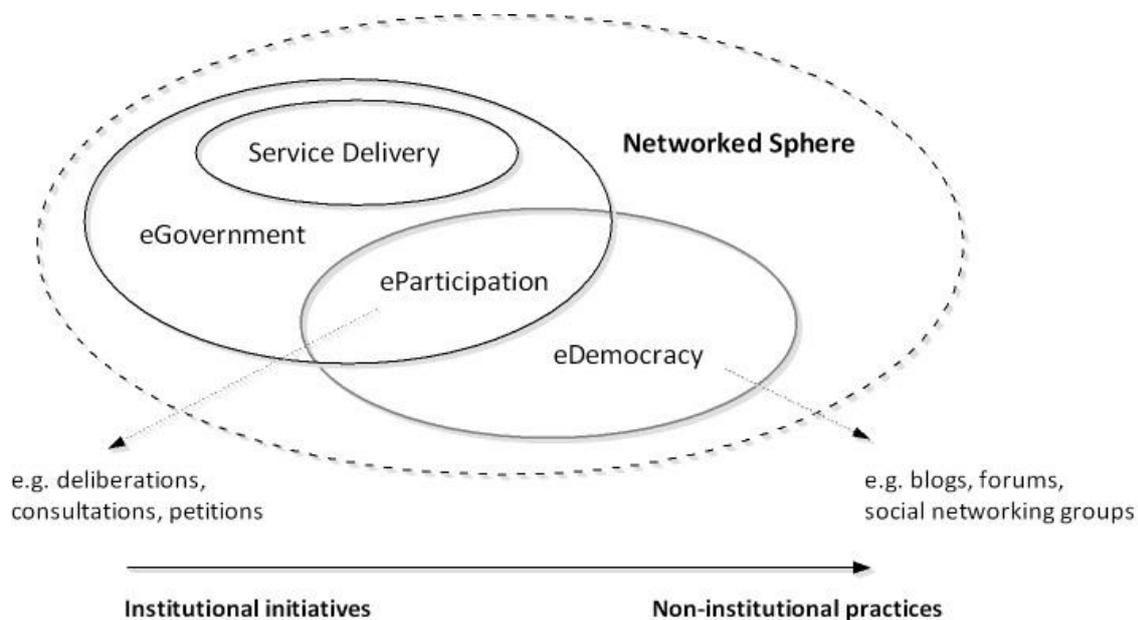


Figure 1. From institutional initiatives to non-institutional practices.

3 TOWARDS A STAKEHOLDER APPROACH

3.1 Explanatory Discussion

Attempting to analyze the behaviour of key stakeholders with regards to the eDemocracy concept interprets to a large extent the existence of diverse practices. As mentioned above, citizens tend not to be very eager to engage in complex participatory processes leading to more direct versions of modern democracy. The reasons of this behaviour may lie in issues of trust, low digital literacy or other societal divides that pose barriers. It reveals low intention to circumvent traditional representation and take over political action, despite an on-growing wish to participate. Additionally, it incorporates a difference of opinions on how and to what extent technology should be used and how it might deliver online well established traditional activities, such as democratic decision-making.

The public rather prefers to engage in focused involvement, because their actions and decisions are not usually driven by visions of democracy or technological innovation, but just reflect the ways in which they maximize their social utility. This means that ideally, citizens seek optimal decisions without facing the complexities, dilemmas and trade-offs of policy making. They are not even certain how more legitimate, transparent and interactive decision-making might work, compared to the main activity in modern politics

which is to accept or refuse their representatives (Coleman, 2005b). According to the Oxford Internet Survey (Dutton & Helsper, 2007) online participation is still less common among Internet users in the UK compared to e-commerce, although it is more popular than relevant offline activities, e.g. petition signing.

Politicians and political parties view eDemocracy as a rather “awkward” situation (Mahrer, 2005). Although they are concerned about their new role with regards to changes, they need to appear compatible with new technologies and not yield advantage to other parties. During the last decades, the whole political system has been adjusted more for television consumption with politicians and political parties tending to adopt an e-commerce attitude towards the new media as instruments of political marketing, particularly in terms of advertising and campaigning (Ward & Lusoli, 2005). In many cases, politicians question the appropriateness and potentials of experimenting with the use of ICTs under the scope of their activities (Miller, 2009; Ward et al., 2007).

Obama’s successful online campaign in the USA 2008 presidential elections mobilized extensive political support though everyday web initiatives such as social networking groups and mobile promotion on what is believed to have contributed to his winning, especially in comparison with McCain’s more classic online approach (Anderson, 2009). The successful outcome was mainly related to increasing voter turnout and raising financial support but did not incorporate an equally important policy discussion aspect. However, it did indicate that technology cannot be ignored anymore or treated as marginal in relation to political decision-making.

Governments and institutions prioritize public sector reform, efficient service delivery and financial gains (Chadwick & May, 2003). When it comes to citizen engagement they develop applications that in many cases communicate an undefined message of how participation is achieved and sustained. Coleman (2004) comments that applications which demonstrate a “have a say” message to the public “only discredit the relationship between the Internet and democracy”. Parvez and Pervaiz (2006) believe that improvements in democratic participation from ICT projects driven by managerialist agendas should not be expected. The final report of the Digital Dialogues review conducted by the UK Hansard Society (2008), analyzed and evaluated how ICTs can promote public engagement in democratic processes, and one of its main conclusions was that successful initiatives require the combination of careful planning, clear objectives and appropriate marketing with the development of reflexive engagement strategies. The institutional cases reported examine various applications, such as the panel developed by the Sustainable Development Commission, the social networking site developed by the Office of the Children’s Commissioner and several blogging applications across the UK government.

The Virtual Institute for Electronic Government Research (VIEGO) project held a series of workshops around the UK to consult key stakeholders about their experiences and the future challenges in developing e-Government (Elliman et al., 2007; Irani et al., 2007). Through these workshops in which participant stakeholders typically included local government officials and elected representatives, the issue of broader political dimensions of eGovernment was discussed. An important conclusion was that apart from financial benefits, there is a need to understand and evaluate the social value behind eGovernment initiatives and in particular how applications and concepts of eGovernment impact on the structures of good governance in the form of eParticipation.

In an attempt to transfer and compare these findings from the UK, apart from technology diffusion or eGovernment readiness indicators (UNPAN, 2008), there are certain issues to be considered with regards to key stakeholders and the broad social context. One of them is the role and relationship of civil servants within the political system, whose key role in developing eDemocracy infrastructures has been demonstrated in a series of case studies (Gronlund, 2003). The UK civil service has a strong tradition of detachment from political affiliation as servants, whichever party comes to power. This stability has been able to support and sustain projects over a lengthy period of development and public acceptance. However, it can also lead to anodyne non-political style that may decrease effectiveness. In contrast,

Greece for example, illustrates an alternative socio-political structure of public administration where changes in the civil service have in some cases created organisational dysfunctionality in the development of ICT projects (Avgerou & McGrath, 2007).

These observations describe the broad socio-technical dimensions of the eDemocracy concept, in terms of how political participatory technologies are influenced by the context in which various stakeholders form their views and interests on technology and democratic decision-making itself. In particular, when it comes to well established institutional processes such as representative democratic decision-making, it seems that potentially successful innovative initiatives probably need to be approached centered within their broad environment. The fact that trust and usage of internet technologies in general is strongly affected by experience has been demonstrated by the Oxford Internet Survey (Dutton & Shepherd, 2006). Relevant questions were also addressed by the empirical study presented in (van de Graft & Svensson, 2006), in which eDemocracy development by governments was connected with the political colour of the dominant party, voter turnouts and other social factors. Based on this explanatory discussion, we believe that future research should aim in acquiring a better understanding of how stakeholders' views could converge in exploiting the relation between technology and democratic decision-making through mutual gains.

3.2 Stakeholder Thinking

Stakeholder thinking originates from Freeman's classic book (1984) which introduced Stakeholder Theory as an innovative multi-participatory approach to strategic corporate management. Stakeholder Theory has been widely explored especially in the management and business ethics literature. Its full description and review includes normative, descriptive and instrumental elements (Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Laplume et al., 2008). Stakeholder thinking or analysis could be defined as the process of examining various stakeholders' views, perspectives, actions and objectives when developing a policy or a project. Under this scope, a stakeholder could be defined as someone who is influencing or being influenced by that particular policy or project. Pouloudi (1999) reviews in detail the definition and use of the stakeholder concept in Information Systems research.

Stakeholder thinking has been previously introduced in eGovernment and Information Society's policy development. Flak and Rose (2005) reviewed Stakeholder Theory and proposed its introduction in eGovernment research with the purpose of acquiring scientific rigour and a better understanding of who is affected by eGovernment initiatives and how. They explained the appropriateness of this introduction and presented a research agenda for Stakeholder Governance. Scholl (2001) had previously discussed the possible benefits by emphasizing that citizens do not need to be "managed" by governments, but effectively understood. Kolsaker and Lee-Kelley (2009) examine in practice the impact of internal stakeholders in a UK local government authority during the development of an e-government portal as a vehicle for e-democracy, revealing a lack of shared purpose and motivation among them. Further attempts to apply the explanatory power of stakeholder thinking in eGovernment include Axelsson et al. (2009), Chan et al. (2003) and Murray et al. (2004).

In a more general context, the social benefits in designing stakeholder-centred public policies have been discussed in relevance to the electronic commerce (Papazafeiropoulou et al., 2001) and the digital divide (Papazafeiropoulou & Pouloudi, 2003). In Information Systems' development, the stakeholder concept has been proposed (Pouloudi, 1999) as ethical and appropriate in terms of providing a holistic view for capturing requirements and modelling human activity. It has also been connected with Checkland's (1981) Soft Systems Methodology (Vidgen, 1997), which examines different world views on not well structured problems which require a better understanding. Stakeholders and the integration of their multiple perspectives are considered a vital element in various Information Systems development methodologies such as the Multiview (Avison & Fitzgerald, 2006).

Even if it is debatable for corporate ethics and profitability to consider multiple stakeholder perspectives, when it comes to democratic decision-making all stakeholders' views indisputably need to be captured and balanced as efficiently as possible. Exclusion can be considered a failure by definition, as in the case of the modern democratic deficit, which reveals the rationale behind exploiting the role of technology in strengthening democracy. Stakeholder thinking, as a human activity understanding set of concepts and tools, constitutes a natural way of developing and examining initiatives under the presence of the democratic dimension and its omni-participatory implications. In the next section, we present the case of the UK Prime Minister's ePetitions as an example of a system balancing the views of the stakeholders it involves.

4 THE UK PRIME MINISTER'S E-PETITIONING SYSTEM: A CASE EXAMPLE

E-Petitioning is considered a typical practice of eParticipation. Its overview in terms of tools, characteristics and application examples can be found in (Demo Net, 2006, p. 34). E-Petitioning demonstrates a case in which technology can facilitate and add transparency to an existing bureaucratic structure considered inefficient. Apart from an eParticipation activity, it is one of the first practices that emerged from Internet users mainly through mailing lists or relevant campaigning websites which act as petitions hosting portals. Before the launch of the Prime Minister's petitioning system, this idea had been previously implemented in institutional systems and is travelling around the world as one of the top eParticipation priorities. A well known pioneer in experimenting with ePetitioning has been the Scottish Parliament (Macintosh et al., 2002).

The UK Prime Minister's ePetitioning system operates on simple rules and mediates the relationship between the public and the executive power. All British citizens or residents are allowed to create or sign a petition. Creating a petition requires a topic, a brief description, a duration in which the petition will remain open to new signatures, a short name and a category. Extra care is taken in order to avoid the replication of identical or similar petitions. A detailed, but not extensive or too legally sounding terms and conditions page explains the rules of petitioning and the conditions under which a new petition may or may not be approved. For example, apart from similarity with existing ones, reasons to refuse a petition include asking for actions outside the authority of the Prime Minister or the government. If a new petition reaches at least 200 signatures, a commitment for response is generated and the petition is passed to the relevant government officials. Figure 2 shows a screenshot from the system's initial page. An important aspect of this system was the potential of signing against a petition instead of creating a counter-petition in case of disagreement. The officials decided not to include such functionality on the basis that it is out of the scope of digitizing the traditional petitioning system. The official website response (FAQ page) explains that the system is designed as the equivalent of traditional petitions and "is not intended to be a form of quasi-referendum or unrepresentative opinion poll".



Figure 2. The UK Prime Minister's ePetitioning system initial page.

The ePetitioning system has drawn much attention, expressed by high usage and an on-going debate around its current and potential role in democratic decision-making. In an attempt to assess its impact and discuss its innovation, controversial opinions can be found, also taking into account the general perceptions on ePetitioning. Critics of ePetitioning express their concerns that it constitutes a politically anodyne activity which does not meet the expectations concerning the powerful technical means being able to innovate drastically upon democratic decision-making. Supporters see ePetitioning as an indicative example of how technology will abolish complex bureaucratic structures, strengthen public participation (Macintosh et al., 2002) and make authorities more responsive to the public without challenging their well established fundamental institutional power.

Miller (2009) discusses the momentum towards developing an ePetitions system at the Westminster Parliament by presenting cases, statistics and official views from the Prime Minister's ePetitioning system, as well as the relevant examples of the Scottish and the Welsh Parliaments. She examines the difficulties and concerns expressed in attempting to align ePetitions with the traditional decision-making processes of these institutions and high public expectations. The facts indicate that petitioning is by far the most common online political activity among Internet users in Britain and does make a difference in comparison with offline channels (Dutton & Helsper, 2007). The volume of ePetitioning users speaks for itself: "8m signatures from over 5m unique email addresses, representing something like 10% of the entire UK population".

In response to a petition supported by millions concerning road pricing, Tony Blair himself published his official response (Blair, 2007), stating that the ePetition stimulated the necessity to frame a long-term informed debate as a clear case of the web being healthy for democracy. Even in this case, ePetitioning did not manage to determine policy making, but provided an important outlet for its supporters. However, there are some cases of ePetitions shaping policy (Miller, 2009). Within our context of examining stakeholders' views, this particular system and the activity of ePetitioning in general allows for some important observations:

- From the citizens' point of view, ePetitioning provides a channel for participation without involving a process of devoting significant time or having to assess the complex dilemmas of actual political decision-making. It is simple to use and does communicate a clear message on its role as an eDemocracy practice. The public knows in general terms what to expect as an outcome of its use: when a petition reaches the minimum signature limit, officials will examine the case and generate a response. Although

the exact response process is not known, responses are not always satisfactory and many see it as a case of the officials not actually listening to the voice of the public, the high volume of users, the transferability and the whole discussion around its potential has made it popular among the public.

- From the Prime Minister's and government's point of view, ePetitioning is a mean of increasing transparency and accountability without imposing particular actions or threaten their institutional power. Additionally, it allows them to capture public sentiment and since in most cases answers to petitions link to existing policies, it could also be argued that it assists in disseminating the government's work. For example, the road pricing petition provided a case of the Prime Minister listening and responding to the public as a result of massive public input. The relatively low minimum of signatures (200) required to generate a response shows that even minority voices are taken into account. In addition, it clearly indicates a governmental effort to take advantage of the benefits of technology in order to enhance to democratic decision-making.

Therefore, despite controversial opinions stated, we can conclude that the ePetitioning system has been considered successful in the sense that it more or less balances the objectives and interests of the stakeholders it involves. It doesn't imply an intention to deliver public decision-making online, also given the fact that it digitizes and facilitates a traditional institutional process. In any case, its short term existence does not allow for clear judgments regarding its impact and the ways it will manage to bond with public decision-making. In the years to come and as barriers such as the digital divide reduce, it is possible that more informed conclusions may be established.

5 CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

In this paper, we approached eDemocracy as the connection between people, technology and politics. We discussed the role of technology in political activities and explored how key stakeholders seem to approach it. Our exploration demonstrated diversity in practices, views and objectives within the broad socio-technical dimensions of eDemocracy, as for example in the role of the civil service in the UK. Within this context, we suggested that a stakeholder thinking approach provides a better understanding of eDemocracy initiatives. As an example, we presented the case of the UK Prime Minister's ePetitioning system.

In practice, empirical research is needed to perform a comparative analysis between institutional and non-institutional practices of political expression through the use of new media. To date these two paradigms for eDemocracy have developed to a large extent independently within distinct groups of stakeholders and need to converge in the policy agenda of the Information Society. In particular, there is a need to understand how individual initiatives have emerged and the ways in which stakeholder engagement was achieved and sustained. This research should aim to integrate them into formal policy making mechanisms not by transforming them into formal engagement tools, but by approaching them as means of understanding, listening and assessing the public opinion.

For example, the UK Prime Minister's ePetitioning system was developed by mySociety which is a non-profit organization based on charity. MySociety has also developed other important initiatives, such as the TheyWorkForYou and the HearFromYourMP. The first allows users to monitor the activities of their representatives in terms of their public speeches, voting records or official expenses. The second coordinates efforts of communicating with them. They are both important examples of how non-institutional initiatives emerge from Internet users and developers through experience.

Further research should elaborate on this investigation, include a roadmapping aspect towards future factors and various socio-economic scenarios (Kubicek & Westholm, 2005) and compare perceptions and behaviors in different cultures and organizational contexts. This research will also address one of the most important open issues in current practices, sourcing from the lack of fundamental understanding of the eDemocracy complex stakeholder environment; the coherent and systematic evaluation of initiatives

(Demo Net, 2008). Its outcome will hopefully assist in developing more efficient next generation eDemocracy initiatives in terms of their integration into the societal sphere and compatibility with the dynamics of human activity.

It is widely believed that delivering democratic values of the state as an online activity goes beyond the agenda of public administrative reform and efficient service delivery through the intervention of technology. This opinion does not underestimate their importance or positive relationship towards eDemocracy. In fact, it stretches our beliefs that under the institutional umbrella of eGovernment, a stakeholder-oriented policy for eParticipation has high potentials of achieving sustainability, raises public trust by demonstrating good will and applies the natural mission of the democratic state.

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