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E-democracy and e-government – state of the art

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Introduction

Today there is much talk about "e-democracy", but what is that? Where does the term come from, and what does it mean? This paper will give a brief account of the background, of current e-democratic activities and - more importantly – of user attitudes, use patterns, new service models and new roles for organizations and civil servants.

Where does e-democracy come from?

The term e-democracy is deceptive. It comes as one of many names (teledemocracy, IT-democracy, etc.), by which is usually, and vaguely, meant information and communication technology (ICT) applied to enhance public participation in democratic processes. The focus is often on ICT use and projects rather than on democratic processes and institutional innovation. In my view, "e-democracy" should be assessed in terms of its defining processes, not to which extent ICT artefacts are used. This definition means that the term e-democracy is only convenient shorthand for ICT use in democratic processes.

This does not mean that there is nothing new about it. ICT use in democratic processes will no doubt lead to changes in information infrastructures – the institutionalised ways in which people communicate. Indeed, we can already see such changes, but we cannot tell the exact directions the development will

take. There is no technological determination but many possible directions, and which initiatives will be successful depends on future actions by many actors.

The immediate background to e-democracy can be traced to three roots:

- The Internet culture, manifested in "Virtual communitarians" (Castells, 2001), people who use ICT for social organisation.
- Government rationalisation efforts manifested in programmes such as eEurope.
- A critical mass of Internet users in many countries.

All these factors individually mean not only more Internet use, but also requirements for democracy in different respects. Together they make all the difference.

Starting with the government initiatives motivations are typically threefold, and stemming from pressing realities:

1. Increased costs for public services require more *efficiency* in service delivery.
2. Increased demands require better *quality* of services.
3. Decreasing turnout in elections and declining membership in political parties require means to increase the *legitimacy* of the political systems.

 The political "e"-initiatives express ambitions to employ IT to restructure operations and institutions so as to remedy all these three diseases. But both the degree and the nature of change vary. The following are two typical official definitions (from New Zealand and United Kingdom respectively):

"E-government is a way for governments to use the new technologies to provide people with more convenient access to government information and services, to improve the quality of the services and to provide greater opportunities to participate in our democratic institutions and processes." (NZ, 2000)

"[….] harness ICT to:

- improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the 'executive functions' of government including the delivery of public services;

- enable governments to be more transparent to citizens and businesses giving access to more of the information generated by government;

- facilitate fundamental changes in the relationships between the citizen and the state, and between nation states, with implications for the democratic process and structures of government." (Hirst & Norton, 1998)

e-government - expectations for democracy

As e-government is still in its early days and e-democracy is a marginal occurrence, investigations on use and attitudes should be interpreted with caution. There have been some investigations, though, which I believe can be interpreted as follows:

- Use of e-government applications will continue to increase.
- Users expect those applications to bring not only more efficient services but also some democratic benefits.

There is some support for this view. In an investigation by the Center for Technology in Government, University at Albany respondents ranked alternatives as follows when asked what they wanted from e-government (my italization):

Renewing a driver's license
Voter registration
State park information and reservations

> *Voting on the Internet*
> Access to one-stop shopping
> Ordering birth, death, and marriage certificates
> Filing state taxes

My italizations are made to emphasize that democracy-related items score high. The same is true in another investigation by Hart-Teeter for Council for Excellence in Government, when the same question yielded the following answers:

> Access to medical information (80%),
> Access to a *candidate's voting record* (77%).
> Cost savings for government (71%)
> A *legislation comment* site (71%)

Perhaps most interestingly, when (in the Hart-Teeter investigation) respondents were asked what the overall use of e-government would be, the answer was:

> Increased government *accountability* to citizens (36%),
> Greater public access to information (23%), and
> More efficient/cost-effective government (21%).

That is, democracy was in fact seen as more important than service.

A new service model

Extensive use of electronic services will lead organizations to adopt a new service model, driven both by technical possibilities, economic incentives and user preferences. A short case will illustrate this new model.

AMV (Swedish National Labour Market Agency) has during the latter part of the 1990s left a system where the execution of services centred on the civil servants to one driven by self-service. Many factors have contributed to this change. One is that the number of unemployed more than doubled in the early 1990s, which led to the workload on the job agencies increasing beyond capabilities. Other reasons for change include competition from private companies, who in different ways – very much including use of the Internet – started activities very similar to those of the Government Job Offices. This includes a wide variety of organizations, including workforce leasing companies and newspapers, but also individual large companies who set up Web job offices for their own staff recruitment.

During the 1980s, the encounter between the job seeker and the prospective employer was mediated by the Job Office and the Job Journal, a printed weekly journal that was the main information source. All available positions had to be registered with the Job Office, which was then the active link between jobs and job seekers.

During the early 1990s, the Job Offices focused on matching the characteristics of the job seekers with the criteria of the available jobs. The role of the Job Office was to help the job seeker seeing what jobs that would suit her. IT was the tool for doing this matching, and it much guided the process, as both the job seeker and the Job Officer were dependent on what information was in the system and what matching criteria could be applied.

Today this has changed. The role of the Job Officer is now to point to different media by which the job seeker can help herself, to register job seekers and to control the activities. There are special information centres, where computers, a wide range of educational and supportive software, and Internet access are provided to the job seekers. These centres are now a link between the job seeker and the job officers. The client-organization encounter is structured by means of a great number of software applications to be used by the job seeker for various tasks.

This means that today all the work associated with finding jobs and education options are conducted by the job seeker herself, with considerable IT support. AMV has developed software for a number of activities related to this, such as how to approach an employer, testing of ones interests and qualifications, etc. There is also access to online catalogues of educations, free jobs, and CV-databases where the job seeker can file a presentation of herself for any employer out looking for labour to read.

This has led to dramatic changes not only for the job seekers but also for the Job Officers, who are now only concerned with registration and control, and with helping companies finding a workforce. There are also self-service facilities offered to companies looking for staff, such as the Register of Applicants and the Recruiting Assistant.

The change at AMV is the change from one service model to another. Before the restructuring, the client-organization encounter was organized like this:

Citizen ⟶ Civil servant
Civil servant ↕ Topic
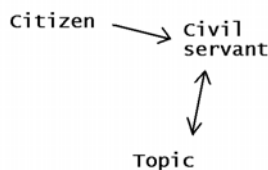
This service model was centred on the civil servant, who was an expert, and advisor, and the government-citizen interface. The new service model looks like this:

This model is user centred. The service user does the job, whereas the civil servant monitors and assists.

Civil servant
Citizen ← Tools
Citizen
Tools
Topic
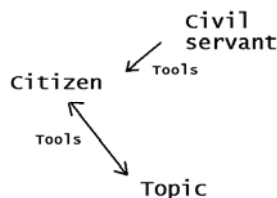
This is the service model of electronic services in general, not only for economic reasons but also for reasons of efficient media use, and user's preferred mode of operation. Hence, also democratic processes will have to be designed to fit this model. Of course, this very general description leaves a lot of discussion to the actors, such as just what the role of the civil servant should be. What is clear is that client-organization interaction processes have to be designed to start with self-service activities and, in some cases, lead on to interactions with civil servants.

Another aspect of this is networking: Typical of the "e-business" business model is that organizations try to engage in networks so as to make best use of what others do, and thus benefit from network capacities. One illustration of this way of working is an investigation by Taylor & Burt (2001) comparing (UK) Parliament web sites with those of voluntary organizations. They found the Parliament sites to contain shallow information, be disengaging, lecturing and self-sufficient with no external links. Contrary, the sites of the voluntary organizations contained comprehensive and detailed information, were engaging in encouraging user exploration, and positioned themselves as hubs in a network with comprehensive links to external sites where the user could go on to find her way to more information. The authors conclude that "it […] is more likely that those cyber-oriented citizens will feel more stimulated by the organizations in the voluntary sector than by the honourable institution of the Parliament. Therefore these citizens will contribute to a decline in democratic importance for the Parliament and an increase in importance for the voluntary sector" (Taylor & Burt, 2001:62).

Democratic interaction alternatives

E-democracy projects are usually found at local levels of government, but there are also efforts at national level (e g Macintosh et al, 2001; Hansard, 2002). It is possible to discern a few methods for citizen-government interaction that have been tried out to some extent over the past few years. Those methods can be summarized as follows:

1. Citizen panels (representative, approached by different methods ranging from questionnaires to deliberative discussions)
2. Consultation (participants selected by different methods and approached by in-depth discussions)
3. Community network-style electronic discussions (self-selected discussion groups usually using unstructured discussions)
4. "Management democracy"/"Consumer democracy" (questionnaires, discussions, use pattern studies etc. to get feedback on services)
5. Electronic voting

There are indeed more complex methods used, such as the Delfi method, but the above five are the most common, if that is an appropriate word to describe what is a very tiny stream of pilot projects. This means that, apart from electronic voting, e-democracy is most often about various ways to arrange discussions with the public, and the challenge is to make them constructive, effective, and truly participatory.

The table below illustrates some aspects of the above-mentioned e-democracy methods as used as direct tools in political processes.

	Pros	Cons	Requires	Underdeveloped
Citizen panel	Representativity. "Deliberative" panels may give well considered views	Deliberation requires much work, both for participants and organizers	Panel maintenance, e g replacements and motivation	More deliberative interaction with the panel, i.e. not just opinion polling but also e.g. introduction of expertise and structured discussion
Community network style interaction	May lead to individual engagement and a feeling of community Technically simple as long as only views are sought, not discussions leading to decisions	Self-selection, not representativity - may lead to biased views Complex discussions are hard to arrange Hard to reach decisions Requires champion(s) to keep interest at a high level	Participation of decision makers. Good order, moderation. Advanced technology if the ambition is to make the forums more formally a part of decision making, e g technology for meetings, polling and decision making	The role of the moderator in a City context. The role of discussion forums in the democratic decision making processes
Consultation	May give high attention to specific issues and thus attract a high level of participation	High costs. May lead to overemphasis on a few issues and less attention to those	Several skills for arranging events that are not typically within the professionalism of a	Methodological issues pertaining to popular votes that go back to basic views of democracy have

		who are not part of the consultation agenda	city Thus, either a consultant or internal development is needed	not been clearly discussed
Management democracy	Many resources available by integration with the administration Implementation in administrative routines may increase sustainability	The focus on interest groups rather than inhabitants is problematic from a democratic perspective. May implement policy without political decisions	Political consensus on methods, which is not the way political decisions are made in Sweden	The relation politics – administration

As the table indicates, e-democracy is not to be seen as a quick fix to some democratic problems, but involves the task of arranging democratic procedures in partly new and innovative ways. It requires use of advanced technology, and it involves new roles for individuals and organizations taking part. There is also a need for methods to evaluate the e-democratic processes, which requires a discussion of just what the purpose of them are (Whyte & Macintosh, 2002).

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