

# E-democracy: ICT for a better relation between the State and their citizens

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**Abstract:** The “e-“prefix to mean the usage of ICT in fields such as medicine, commerce, banking and government has become a usual practice worldwide. Is it appropriate to extend this usage to government systems?

This paper discusses the usage of ICT for governmental procedures that are based on the democratic principles that rule in a vast majority of countries. We consider that although ICT have to be considered as mere tools, and thus, may not be linked to any particular government system, their importance to improve the democratic systems, cannot be denied.

The conclusion of the paper is that the usage of ICT is a key strategy to improve the way democratic governments can benefit their citizens, and that the term “E-democracy” should not only be limited or identified to “traditional” democratic mechanisms such as the election of authorities (e-voting), but with a complete set of practices (even if they are new) to ensure a better relationship between the citizens and the State.

## Introduction

*“ (...) 15. Recognizing the principles of universal and non-discriminatory access to ICTs for all nations, the need to take into account the level of social and economic development of each country, and respecting the development-oriented aspects of the Information Society, we underscore that ICTs are effective tools to promote peace, security and stability, to enhance E-democracy, social cohesion, good governance and the rule of law, at national, regional and international levels.”*

**TUNIS COMMITMENT. World Summit on the Information Society.<sup>1</sup>**

The role and importance of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) is expanding in today's society. These technologies have been used mainly in the private sector as a way to make business: a tool to reduce costs and to accelerate the speed of commercial exchange. However, governments are increasingly making use of ICT to interact with their citizens, to provide them with services that will benefit them. It is precisely because of this new phenomenon that the word “E-democracy” was coined, to express the relation and role of ICT

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.itu.int/ws/is/docs2/tunis/off/7.pdf> (Last accessed: June 3rd, 2006)

when applied as a tool to enhance and strengthen the democratic form of governance. The first part of this paper analyses the relation between democracy and ICT, after that we will focus on the threats and challenges that E-democracy faces. The third part of this paper shows some implementation experiences of E-democracy. We conclude pointing the importance of ICT in this field, as a way to increase the participation of citizens in the procedures inherent to a democratic society

## 1. Democracy + ICT = E-democracy?

It may be an almost impossible task to define completely and exhaustively the word “democracy”. After all, we have been so much exposed to this word, to the point that we may consider it as a part of our somehow common understanding of the world. We are so used to talk about “democratic governments”, “democratic parties”, “democratic processes” that we may not be able to have a clear idea of this concept, and still, we can define it by its characteristics. We must not forget that the concept and idea of democracy is constantly changing, since its introduction in the Classic Greece.

An attempt to define it as (...) “that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote.(...)”<sup>2</sup> will give us an approximate working concept on democracy.

What is the origin of the term “E-democracy”? Coined in 1994 by E-democracy.com, an American, Minnesota based project, as a contraction of “electronic democracy”<sup>3</sup>, many definitions<sup>4</sup> focus on the usage of ICT into the political processes of a country.

<sup>2</sup> **COLEMAN** Stephen and Donald F. **NORRIS**. A New Agenda for E-democracy. Forum Discussion Paper No. 4. Oxford Internet Institute. 2005. p. 21.

<http://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/resources/publications/FD4.pdf> (Last accessed: June 2nd, 2006)

<sup>3</sup> E-democracy (Wikipedia) <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/E-democracy> (Last accessed: June 1st, 2006)

<sup>4</sup> The definitions gathered by **COLEMAN** Stephen and Donald F. **NORRIS**, op. cit. p. 6 include:

- “E-democracy is a means for disseminating more political information and for enhancing communication and participation, as well as hopefully in the long run for the transformation of the political debate and the political culture. Participants in the field of E-democracy include civil society (organized and non organized), the administration, politicians and—to a lesser extent—the economy.”
- E-democracy should be defined broadly since computers and telecommunications, particularly tied to the Internet and web, are connected to nearly all aspects of politics and governance. From paving roads to electing politicians, electronic media are reshaping access to what people know, who they communicate with, and what they need to know to get things done. In all of these ways, technical change can enable more or less democratic patterns of communicative power.
- E-democracy (...) covers those arrangements by which electronic communications are used by those with power and the citizens they serve to interact with each other in order to inform and modify the way that power is used. E-democracy is NOT about paying speeding fines over the Internet (that is e-government); it IS about consulting on whether the speed limit on a particular stretch of road should be raised, lowered or left as it is. It may, one day, be used as a way of empowering citizens in the process of making major national decisions.
- E-democracy is anything that governments do to facilitate greater participation in government using digital or electronic means. These initiatives can include e-forums, e-town hall meetings, e-consultations, e-referenda, e-voting, e-rule making, and other forms of e-participation. I believe we

The Italian Government gives the following approach to E-democracy: “The focus to the satisfaction of the needs of citizens is the base of the process of transformation and modernization in the action of the Public Administration. Such objective can be realized in the first place by favoring a relationship of collaboration and constant involvement of the citizens in the public decisions, exceeding one vision of participation limited to the sole collection of the preferences and placing greater emphasis on the proposing role of the citizens.”<sup>5</sup>

However, it is important to make clear from the beginning that ICT are tools: They can be used to support any political system. This fact will ensure us not to forget that the focus must be stressed on democracy and its development rather than the technology used. In the end, technology will constantly change, but the political system (democracy, in this case) is what must be improved thru the usage of ICT. As the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development states “(...) after all technology is only an enabler, facilitating, existing, or in some cases, new methods of engagement. As argued by Wilhelm (2000), social and political problems cannot easily be solved by merely introducing technology into the process (...)”<sup>6</sup>

As democracy involves many parties (the established government, the citizens, the politicians) these technologies would serve them on an equal basis. In the case of the established government, an example can be given by the services it gives to its citizens, in the form of governmental portals. Citizens can obtain information not only from the government itself but from third parties. This will help them to make choices taking in account relevant information. From the side of politicians or those who aspire to form part of the government, it is also possible to find a usage for these technologies in order to obtain support, raise campaign funds and let citizens know about them<sup>7</sup>.

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can also term it as any form of ‘digital engagement’.

- Democracy is defined by Webster’s as ‘a government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation.’ Electronic democracy is simply the use of technology tools to facilitate democratic activities.
- The Internet and E-democracy present one way to positively redefine democratic processes and reinvigorate the relationship between citizens and their elected representatives.

<sup>5</sup> “L’attenzione alla soddisfazione dei bisogni dei cittadini è alla base del processo di trasformazione e modernizzazione in atto nelle Pubbliche Amministrazioni.

Tale obiettivo può essere realizzato favorendo innanzitutto un rapporto di collaborazione e di costante coinvolgimento dei cittadini alle decisioni pubbliche, superando una visione della partecipazione limitata alla sola raccolta delle preferenze e ponendo maggiore enfasi sul ruolo propositivo dei cittadini.” Free translation from the website of the Department for the Innovation and Technology (“Dipartimento per l’innovazione e le tecnologie”)

[http://www.innovazione.gov.it/ita/egovernment/entilocaliE-democracy\\_avviso.shtml](http://www.innovazione.gov.it/ita/egovernment/entilocaliE-democracy_avviso.shtml) (Last accessed: June 1st 2006)

<sup>6</sup> Promise and problems of E-democracy. Challenges of online citizen engagement. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) p.25

<http://www1.oecd.org/publications/e-book/4204011E.PDF> (Last accessed: June 1st 2006)

<sup>7</sup> As an example, see the case of John Mc Cain in Minnesota, who raised funds for his campaign using his personal web page. The case is detailed in the Survey “Government and the Internet” – Digital democracy. Economist.com, June 22<sup>nd</sup> 2000

[http://www.economist.com/surveys/displayStory.cfm?Story\\_id=80851](http://www.economist.com/surveys/displayStory.cfm?Story_id=80851) (Last accessed, June 1<sup>st</sup> 2006)

## 2. The threats and challenges faced by E-democracy

We consider that the main threads and challenges that E-democracy has to face include:

**Introduction of the required technology:** As E-democracy is based on the usage of ICT, those countries that are still introducing these technologies, may be left behind. Despite the efforts made by governments worldwide, the investment on technology will depend on the welfare of the given country. To put it clearly, for example, the introduction and usage of ICT is not the same in the United States than in Latin America. Even in the case of this region, the income level varies from country to country (for example, Chile and Bolivia). This “technological side” of the problem is much related to what is known as “digital divide”.

**Security:** Another challenge related to technology. From the side of the government – citizen relation, the protection of privacy and the security of transactions must be assured. One main issue is the one related to proper authentication methods to ensure that the user of a service, such as an information request to the government, e-voting, or e-payment is not being supplanted. Finally, the implementation of security systems to prevent the leakage of private information must also be a priority.

**Engagement from the citizens:** A government can provide a set of useful services to their citizens, a candidate to the Congress upload all the information he or she considers relevant for their supporters, but if the citizens are not interested in participating in the political processes of their countries, or if they do not know how to participate in them, the efforts are going to be useless. It is not a matter on how much information is available (because having too much information is the same as not having any information at all), but a matter of meet the citizens needs. That is why world leading countries that provide services to their citizens are working on the base of “customer oriented services”, the same way as the private sector is doing it.<sup>8</sup>

The Japanese case is illustrative to put an example on this situation: “As we look back, the e-Japan initiative has operated too much from the viewpoint of the supply-side, and therefore, it was not always in sync with the needs and requirements of the Japanese citizens” says Takuya Hirai, Japan’s Parliamentary Secretary of the Cabinet Office. “Honestly speaking, it is very difficult to force people to use the Internet—and if we abolish the paper bases, it would force people. That means that what we have is a very steady and continuous stream of public relations and publicity in order to educate the people. I think that the way to have very convenient and easy-to-understand services for the citizen is by reducing the costs or fees they have to pay.”<sup>9</sup>

### Governmental Policies

Delays for implementing E-democracy initiatives, including the general framework for them

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<sup>8</sup> A citizen-centered perspective. A citizens-first” point of view, in which all the necessary information is organized around the citizen. Government frontline agents providing the service have access to all this information, and use it to tailor interactions to each citizen’s needs and circumstances.

Accenture. Leadership in Customer Service: Building the Trust p. 7

[http://www.accenture.com/xdoc/en/industries/government/acn\\_2006\\_govt\\_report\\_FINAL2.pdf](http://www.accenture.com/xdoc/en/industries/government/acn_2006_govt_report_FINAL2.pdf) (Last accessed: June 2nd 2006)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 39

(usually in the form of Information Society Development Plans) can occur when there is no real commitment with the usage of ICT for governance. It can occur that governments are not convinced of the real usefulness of ICT, or that government officials do not want to change the way things are done in their agencies. Also it is possible to have conflicts on the scope of E-democracy projects, if they are going to be developed within a region or within the whole country.

### **3. E-democracy experiences**

E-democracy projects and initiatives are increasing. They can be national scope projects or local ones, still valuable lessons can be obtained from them.

#### **The Government**

Perhaps one of the most known experiences of E-democracy is the one related to E-voting. These experiences are part of E-democracy, but not the whole of it. Some major experiences include the Greek case and the Brazilian case.<sup>10</sup>

Also, governmental portals are focusing on supplying their citizens with services to their citizens, adding applications such as e-procurement, e-payment, in an attempt to facilitate the relation government – citizen.<sup>11</sup> The projects for E-democracy may have a national scope and a local scope. The advantage for a local scope is that small projects can be used as pilot projects to evaluate the convenience for major ones. One disadvantage is the possibility of lack of coordination with broader governmental initiatives.<sup>12</sup>

#### **The citizens**

From the side of citizens, examples of E-democracy practices include petitions for the government, discussion forums and politicians web pages. Coleman and Norris<sup>13</sup> give the example of the BBC's iCan Project: "(...) an interactive service designed to help people participate in democracy and civic life. It operates as a website with support from radio and television programmes and BBC News Online."<sup>14</sup>

### **Conclusion**

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<sup>10</sup> For an analysis on the Greek experience see e-VOTE. AN EXPERIMENT IN E-DEMOCRACY FOR THE EUROPEAN UNION. International Journal of Communications Law and Policy. Issue 8, Winter 2003/2004 [http://www.ijclp.org/8\\_2004/pdf/howard-patelis-paper-ijclp.pdf](http://www.ijclp.org/8_2004/pdf/howard-patelis-paper-ijclp.pdf) (Last accessed: June 2nd 2006). For the Brazilian case, see the web page of the Brazilian Electoral Court (Tribunal Superior Eleitoral) <http://www.tse.gov.br/> (Last accessed: June 2nd 2006).

<sup>11</sup> An analysis of governmental portals has been carried out by Waseda University, for the Ranking of E-government. [http://www.obl.giti.waseda.ac.jp/e\\_gov/2nd\\_rankings\\_en.pdf](http://www.obl.giti.waseda.ac.jp/e_gov/2nd_rankings_en.pdf) (Last accessed: June 4th 2006).

<sup>12</sup> A detailed study is the one made by VIRAPATIRIN, Marie and Tiago PEIXOTO (eds.) e-agora: The white book of local e-democracy. Reflections and perspectives. [http://www.eagora.org/IMG/pdf/livre\\_Blanc\\_Anglais.pdf](http://www.eagora.org/IMG/pdf/livre_Blanc_Anglais.pdf) (Last accessed: June 4th 2006)

<sup>13</sup> Op. cit. p. 9.

<sup>14</sup> The webpage for the project was [www.bbc.co.uk/ican/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/ican/). The name now is BBC Action Network and the webpage is [www.bbc.co.uk/dna/actionnetwork/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/actionnetwork/) (Last accessed: June 4<sup>th</sup>, 2006)

We have made an approach to e-democracy as a phenomenon resulting from the usage of ICT as a tool to enhance democracy and the democratic system of governance. As the idea of democracy is constantly changing, according to the particular circumstances a society faces, the usage of ICT in this case is part of that evolution. Technology is important but the focus must be the governance system (democracy). Some of the major challenges that e-democracy faces include the availability of ICT, especially in low income countries, security policies for ensuring an appropriate handling of the personal information from the users, the political commitment with E-democracy as well as engagement from the citizens. The analysis of implementation experiences will give a view on the next steps to take in order to strengthen e-Democracy.

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Coleman, S. and Norris, D.F. (2005)

### A new agenda for E-democracy

Forum Discussion Paper No. 4 (Oxford Internet Institute).

<http://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/research/publications.cfm>

- World E-Gov Forum

<http://www.forum-edemo.org/?lang=en>

- e-Agora

<http://www.eagora.org/>

- The White Book of local E-democracy

[http://www.eagora.org/IMG/pdf/livre\\_Blanc\\_Anglais.pdf](http://www.eagora.org/IMG/pdf/livre_Blanc_Anglais.pdf)

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<http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/actionnetwork/>

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