INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES, ACTIVE PUBLIC PARTICIPATION AND THE DEMOCRATIC DIGITAL DIVIDE

PAULO ROSA
UNIVERSIDADE NOVA DE LISBOA
DOUTORANDO DO PROGRAMA UT AUSTIN/PORTUGAL

Abstract

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are increasingly becoming more pervasive of people's lives, leading to changes in the way individuals interact within the society. Indeed, ICTs can be seen as a means through which the publics' are extending their rights to intervene in public issues and therefore, as tools that can enhance and encourage active public participation in societal debates of public policies. The possibility of a digital divide continues clearly to be one of the major concerns of governments when implementing online engagement tools. This paper explores the conditions to deploy online ICTs based participatory processes within public policy processes, focusing on the challenges of bridging the democratic digital divide.

Keywords

Digital Divide; ICTs, Internet; Public Participation; e-Democracy; Deliberative Democracy; Public Decision Making.

Introduction

The democratic turn occurred in the last two decades in Western Europe raised new concerns about the authenticity of democracy, challenging existing institutions and models of democracy (see for instance Dryzek, 1990; 2000; Bohman, 1998). The participation of citizens in formal democratic processes such as voting or joining parties decreased, while factors like globalization and individualization increased even more the distance of citizens to the state and its institutions. It became evident that the mechanisms of representative democracy were no longer appropriate to accommodate all sorts of concern of citizenry.

Modern politics needed to renew public trust, and a new shared framework of believes and interactive links between state institutions and cívil society was required. Democratic legitimacy came to be seen in terms of the ability or opportunity for cívil society to participate in effective deliberation on the issues requiring collective decisions (Dryzek, 2000, p. 1).

In order to wider the democratic process, making it more transparent, inclusive and accessible, Governments started searching for new ways to interact and relate with citizens. Indeed, we have witnessed a growing concern to create the conditions for citizens to get involved in policy and decision-making processes (see for instance, De Marchi et al., 2001b; CEC, 2001). The perspectives and knowledge of the publics' gain higher relevance and, the involvement of those being affected or affecting such policies becomes a fundamental condition for legitimacy, trust and overall better quality for policy formulation processes (De Marchi et al., 2001a). Public participation becomes an attractive strategy

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for policy improvements, as for bringing back discontented citizens to the political mainstream.

Central to this ideal is the notion that individuals can come together to evaluate reflectively their preferences, and possibly modify them when faced with the arguments and position of others. Decisions are, therefore achieved through public reasoning and consensus, requiring citizens to go beyond their self-interests and orient themselves towards the common good (Bohman, 1998, p. 402). As individuals are susceptible to change their preferences and views during the deliberation process, the reflective aspect is vital. Any "claims on behalf of or against such decisions have to be justified to these people in terms that, on reflection, they are capable of accepting" (Dryzek, 2000, p. 1). "*[D]*omination via the exercise of power, manipulation, indoctrination, propaganda, deception, expressions of mere self-interest, threats, and the imposition of ideological conformity are all absent" (Dryzek, 2000, p. 8).

In addition to the social and institutional momentum behind wider public participation in decision and policy making, there has been also a growing effort to explore the conditions for effective public participation to take place. Clearly, as Noveck (2004) points out, the mere right to participate does not ensure successful democratic practice, whatever the means to achieve this are. High stakes issues require extended decision making processes and it is almost unavoidable that the concepts of the "information society" and "electronic governance" together with the practical deployment of new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) become the driving forces of these processes (Guimarães Pereira et al., 2005, p. 113). Hence, promoting and enabling citizen participation in policy making activities through ICTs seems to be a "natural" alternative that can also be seen as an essential element of democracy in general.

As ICTs become more pervasive in peoples' lives, both for individual and collective usage, they increasingly turn into the means by which the publics extend their rights to intervene in public life. Just as ICTs had profound effects upon the ways people work, shop, bank, or even communicate with friends and families, so they will establish new channels to connect citizens to previously remote institutions of governance (Coleman and Gøtze, 2004, p. 5).

The Internet is presented as the main ICTs mechanism, accessible through an increasing number of channels where computers, both at home and at public locations, smart phones and palmtops have a central role. Nowadays, the Internet is already a powerful medium for searching, selecting and integrating the vast amounts of information held by governments, as well as presenting results in forms that can be immediately used by citizens.

Nonetheless, the Internet has the potential for more. It can also be a medium for involving the publics more widely, going beyond the just witnessing of the process (Blumler and Coleman, 2001, p. 13). As a new channel of two-way communication, the Internet can strengthen and deepen the connections between citizens and intermediary organizations such as political parties, social movements, interest groups, and news media, as well as with public officials and agencies of local, national and global governance. It can broaden involvement in public life by eroding some of the barriers to political participation and civic engagement, especially for many groups currently marginalized from the political mainstream, by facilitating the ability of citizens to gather information about campaign issues, to mobilize community networks, to associate diverse coalitions around policy problems, and to lobby elected representatives (Norris, 2001, p. 97).

Furthermore, web developments such as web forums, weblogs or online chats can be used under the context of deliberative public participation, giving citizens new opportunities to be engaged in structured dialogues, actively exchanging opinions and concerns, and subsequently influencing the outcomes of decision-making processes.

"In all these ways, the Internet offers to reconnect people to the political process and revive flagging civic energies" (Norris, 2001, p.98).

ICTs and Active Public Participation

The rise of ICTs offers a new variety of possibilities for public participation. From the access of information to its discussion, passing through e-voting and e-petitioning, ICTs is emerging as a mean for institutions to experiment innovative and enhanced forms of engaging and involving the citizens (Macintosh, 2004; Lukensmeyer and Torres, 2006; Ferguson et al., 2007).

ICTs appear as both a mechanism for "top-down" and "bottom-up" interactive format of public comment and discussion. They promote alternative channels of civic engagement, wider public participation in decision making, and offer new opportunities for interaction and mobilization of communities, reviving the levels of mass participation in public affairs. By giving individuals and groups a relatively inexpensive and fast way of communicating, ICTs can add new voices and reinforce existing points of view in the democratic debate (Gualtieri, 1998, p. 14). ICTs become the means to ensure that those that affect or are affected directly or indirectly by the issues are involved in the debate and, more importantly, possibly sharing responsibilities in the solution (De Marchi et al., 2001a, p. 6).

However, as Ferguson et al. (2007, p. 15) points out, effective citizen participation "is not as simple as putting up a website and sending out an email inviting people to 'have a say'". Technology is only an enabler, facilitating existing, or in some cases, new methods of engagement. We cannot expect that technology by itself will solve the problems of active citizenship and participation, as well as government accountability and authenticity.

Gualtieri (1998, p. 9) argues that "there is a temptation to believe that the information revolution is by its nature profoundly democratic" because of other social and technological revolutions in the past from printing to television; yet as the author points out, these innovations have "contributed somewhat to the evolution of democracy over the centuries, *[but]* none, in and of itself, was a driving or determining force for positive change". The "significant progress depends less on technology and more on social and cultural development, government priorities, political will and the structure of institutions" (Gualtieri, 1998, p. 10).

Hence, the introduction of online public engagement into policy deliberation has little to do with technological innovation and more with a new thinking on how to improve the democratic process. As Gualtieri (1998, p. 9) acknowledges, "the democratizing potential of the ICTs will only be realised if accompanied by other important changes, some of which are really achievable, while others will require profound changes in the way we govern ourselves". These include:

- The advent of a new technically literacy generation of positions of power;
- Higher priority and greater political will on the part of decision makers to better link the public to the decision making process in a substantive way;

- Greater desire on the part of the public to participate actively in the policy process.

In sum, technological issues can have an important role in the success of an online public engagement however, social, cultural, political and organizational issues encompass a greater weight. As so, ICTs have to be tailored to the political, economic and organizational contexts where their application is sought.

The Democratic Digital Divide

Engaging with citizens in policy making, as seen before, is a sound investment in the promotion of better governance and stronger democracy. While new ICTs offer new and innovative opportunities for promoting and improving citizen engagement in policy making, they also raise numerous challenges for governments. A common concern among scholars is the development of a widening digital divide within societies.

As Norris (2001, p. 10) points out, technological opportunities are often unevenly distributed within the different social groups of a society. Poorer and ethnic neighborhoods, working-class households, and peripheral rural communities are often limited or excluded from the access and use of these resources, whether directly or indirectly. In addition, when access is in reality available to these populations, often they do not have the necessary skills or the interest to take the advantage of them. Hence, there is a constant fear that the use of ICTs, and the Internet in particular, as an mechanism for civic engagement and public participation might "unleash new inequalities of power and wealth, reinforcing deeper divisions between the information rich and poor, the tuned-in and out, the activists and the disengaged" (Norris, 2001, p. 13).

Positive scenarios (see Norris, 2001, p. 11) suggest that the inequalities in adopting and using the Internet might prove to be a short-term phenomenon, gradually fading over time. It is argued that the problem of access to new ICTs is in all similar to the disparity of access verified in early communication and information technologies, such as the radio or the television when first introduced. As so, access to the Internet will eventually become as pervasive as the availability of these common devices. However, considering the significant inequalities still verified in the adoption of these mediums in poorer households, it cannot be expected that the Internet would transcend information poverty overnight (Norris, 2001, p. 12) and moreover, that all the inequalities will completely disappear. Besides, it is not necessarily true that the digital divide will automatically close as Internet access becomes widespread.

Originally characterized by policy makers and the media as the gap between the "haves" and "have-nots" regarding the access to computers and the Internet (see for instance, Compaine, 2001; Servon, 2002), the digital divide is in reality rather more than just a technological binary divide. It embeds a complex set of factors. As Warschauer (2003) notes, meaningful access to ICTs comprises more than merely providing computers and Internet connections. Factors such as content, language, literacy, education and institutional structures should also be taken into consideration. In this sense, the "digital divide is marked not only by physical access to computers and connectivity but also by access to the additional resources that allow people to use technology well" (Warschauer, 2003, p. 6).

In fact, physical resources such as computers and connectivity, despite being fundamental, mean little without the availability of relevant digital content and in the appropriate lan-

guage of the individuals (Warschauer, 2003, p. 108). Moreover, if individuals do not have the required literacy, i.e. the required knowledge and skills to use a computer and the Internet, they might end up using them ineffectively and with little, or even without any benefit.

Servon (2002) presents the interaction of the following factors as the reason why certain groups still remain unable to fully participate in the information society:

- Market forces: Although computer prices have dropped steadily in the last years, the price of maintaining them, to purchase software, to buy peripherals and to pay for monthly Internet access still makes them a luxury for many low income families.
- Unequal investment in infrastructure: Private companies' investments in infrastructures are done essentially in the areas that most likely will yield high returns. Hence, the investment in high-end telecommunications infrastructures is much lower in poor urban areas and rural regions than it is in wealthier areas.
- Discrimination: Those who are already marginalized have fewer opportunities to access and use computers and the Internet. For instance, schools in low income areas are less likely to provide quality access, training and content than schools in wealthier districts.
- Insufficient policy efforts: Existing public sector attempts to address the technology gap demonstrate a failure to understand the complexity of the issue. Policy makers' efforts where focused essentially on access, addressing the problem narrowly and incompletely.
- Culture and Content: The shape of ICTs' tools and the Internet's landscape must reflect the needs and interests of diverse populations in order to attract a diverse group of users.

Furthermore, socio-personal factors such as levels of interest, awareness, understanding and acceptance of ICTs are also important barriers to the adoption of ICTs by socially excluded groups (Foley et al., 2002). The bottom line, as Warschauer (2003, p. 8) clearly points out, is that "there is no binary divide and no single overriding factor for determining such divide".

Hence, in order for digital opportunities to become more socially inclusive, it is necessary to operate in all these factors. The price of technologies and the cost of services must drop drastically; technology must become even more simplified and more user oriented; and governments must further develop policy initiatives to widen public access, to promote digital skills and to encourage content that will empower underserved communities. Moreover, the success of such measures is also largely dependent on the mobilization of communities to request that technology be available and be used in the ways that serve their purposes.

Throughout this paper it has been argued that ICTs, and the Internet in particular have the potential to revitalize public interest and participation in political life by promoting alternative mechanisms of civic engagement and active public participation in decision making processes. However, with the widening of a social digital divide, this might also

mean a new form of inequality in the influence of the political system and in the impact of the distribution of power. Online politics might thereby serve only to amplify the voice of the affluent and well educated, further marginalizing the underprivileged.

Furthermore, the rise of virtual political systems seems most likely to facilitate further knowledge, interest and activism of those who are already predisposed towards civic engagement and most likely to participate via conventional channels, serving only to reinforce existing patterns of political participation. It seems improbable that digital politics will reach the disengaged, the apathetic, and the uninterested as they would rather spend their time and energies on the various alternative sites dedicated to everything from entertainment to shopping. Hence, far from mobilizing the general public, the Internet may thereby function to increase the divisions between the actives and the apathetic within societies (Norris, 2001, p. 231).

It is evident that not everyone has the means, the skills or the motivations to use digital technology and, if care is not taken when employing ICTs in public participation initiatives, rather than helping bridging citizens and strengthen the democratic process, the effect might actually be the opposite and widen even more the existing gap. However, the solution to the problem of digital exclusion does not lie in abandoning the Internet as a tool for democratic engagement and deliberation but encompasses the creation of new opportunities for reaching those excluded from the information society. As Jarboe mentions (cited in Warschauer, 2003, p. 8), in order to promote the inclusion of marginalized groups it is necessary to "focus on the transformation, not the technology".

It is unquestionable that in order to shrink the digital gap it is necessary to provide alternative means of access. However, it must also be unquestionable that activities as raising awareness and providing training and the development of basic ICTs skills also present an important role in widen the use of digital technologies.

Thus, as Warschauer (2003, p. 211) points out, the overall policy challenge is not to overcome a digital divide but rather to expand access and the use of ICTs for promoting social inclusion. The policy's implications of this will vary according to the circumstances. If interventions are designed to address social problems, they must be planned by focusing on the overall structures and relationships that give rise to those problems. An accounting of equipment is part of the overall analysis, but a fairly small part.

Final Remarks

The new challenges raised by a technical, economic and social changing society created the need for a revised relationship between governments and citizens. This is entrenched in political rhetoric, normative and legislative initiatives. The social and institutional momentum behind wider public participation, not only increased the opportunities for citizens' involvement in decision making processes but also created a growing concern to explore effective ways of engaging cívil society in those processes.

The "right to be heard" can be pointed as one of the main motivations for citizens to be involved in decision making processes, although it is also argued that the involvement of citizens:

- can help reduce conflict and provide the basis for better, long lasting and wiser policy formulation;

- addresses problems such as lack of trust among the citizens in government institutions and perceptions of weak legitimacy;
- strengthens the relationships between citizens and governments;
- fosters the skills of argumentative dialogue, active listening and problem solving in citizens, changing their behaviors, political attitudes and skills of citizenship.

With the advent of the Internet, online technologies emerged as an innovative way for institutions to extend and enhance the involvement and engagement of citizens in public participation. As Norris (2001, p. 107) points out, new technologies allow greater transparency in policy making process, wider public participation in decision making, and offer new opportunities for interaction and mobilization.

However, technology is only a medium and it cannot be expected to solve the problems of active citizenship and participation, as well as government legitimacy and liability. In reality, the introduction of online public engagement into policy deliberation has little to do with technological innovation and more with a new thinking on ways to improve the democratic process. This primarily encompasses political will as well as strong meaning and motivations on the citizens side to actively participate in decision making processes. This requests the creation of support structures for both, a new politics of civic engagement and, under the public participation context, a new media literacy. Although technological issues can influence the success of an online public engagement, social, cultural, political and organizational issues pose a greater challenge.

The possibility of a digital divide is one of the major concerns of governments when implementing online engagement tools. It is commonly argued that ICTs, and in particular online based tools, are exclusionary, leaving out those who do not have Internet access or lack of technological skills required to participate. This deprives certain social groups from the online deliberation and creates unbalances within the decision process. If care is not taken when employing ICTs in engagement activities, rather than helping bridging citizens and strengthen the democratic process, the effect might actually be the opposite and widen even more the existing gap between those with access and skills to technology, and the motivation to use these technologies, and those without them.

However, digital exclusion is not solved by rejecting online public participation as a form of democratic engagement. Those without Internet access or that do not have the required technological skills could in the long run, be provided with support and training. In addition, awareness campaigns should be implemented. Public participation is indeed about creating new opportunities for connecting citizens to the institutions and, therefore the Internet must be seen as an alternative space where deliberative discussions can take place and where citizens can extend their voices. Furthermore, ICT should not be addressed as if they intend to replace "real" public deliberation but, instead, these "virtual" opportunities should be regarded as possible complements. After all, these spaces provide new possibilities for civic interaction, not only by offering new opportunities for individuals to speak but also by giving voice to new publics.

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