REPORT FROM THE FIELD

A New Agenda for E-Democracy

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On May 7, 2004, the Oxford Internet Institute (OII), Oxford University, UK, hosted a day long forum on electronic democracy. The forum was co-sponsored by the Maryland Institute for Policy Analysis and Research (MIPAR), University of Maryland, Baltimore County, USA. Professors Stephen Coleman of OII and Donald F. Norris of MIPAR were the principal leaders of the forum. They were assisted by Professor William Dutton, OII Director, and Ms. Victoria Nash, OII Policy and Research Officer. The forum was supported by funds from British Telecom, Cisco and the U.S. National Science Foundation (Award No. IIS-0425766).

The purpose of the forum was to bring together leading practitioners and academics in the field of electronic democracy for a focused discussion on this important subject. Forum participants included 25 practitioners (16 from the UK and Europe; eight from the U.S.) and six academics (four from the UK and Europe; two from the U.S. — not including the program leaders). Professors Coleman and Norris selected the practitioner participants based on the e-democracy programs, projects or initiatives that they or their organizations and governments had developed and/or operated. The academic participants were invited based on their theoretical insights or empirical knowledge about e-democracy. All participants are considered to be on the leading edge of e-democracy practice or theory. In addition to their participation in the forum, the practitioners also provided written policy or project briefs describing their e-democracy initiatives. The following is a summary of a report written by Professors Coleman and Norris that presents the results of the forum. The full report is available at the following urls: www.oii.ox.ac.uk and www.umbc.edu/mipar.

Forum Participants

Richard Allan, MP, Secretary, UK Parliament e-Democracy Group
Joanne Caddy, Directorate for Public Governance and Territorial Development, OECD
Stephen Coleman, Oxford Internet Institute, UK
Pierre de la Coste, author of L’Hyper-République, Paris
Chrisoph Dowe, Politik Digital, Germany
William Dutton, Oxford Internet Institute, UK
Paul Herrnson, University of Maryland, College Park, USA
Norman J. Jacknis, Westchester County, New York, USA
Peter Kellner, YouGov, UK

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THE CONTEXT

In less than a decade, e-democracy has transitioned from speculative futurology to piecemeal experimentation and embryonic policy. The earliest speculations about the Internet and democracy emphasized the potential for direct, unmediated democracy. Becker argued that, “When the powerful truly feel that they are losing control, that the people are truly upset with them and their decisions, and that there is too much dissatisfaction (and perhaps public protests), then the time will be ripe for them to yield to teledemocracy” (Anttiroiko, 2005) Although such a plebiscitary vision still persist, it has been supplemented in recent years by two other trends. First, there have been a number of experiments in using the Internet to make representative democracy more effective. Second, there has been an emergence of policies for e-democracy, most notably in the UK where Parliament and the Government has outlined a set of policy principles for e-democracy and several e-democracy projects have been publicly funded.

The debate about the relationship between the Internet and democracy continues in both the academic literature and broader policy arenas. In May 2004, practitioners, policy-makers and commentators from 13 countries gathered in Oxford to consider three questions on e-democracy:

- What has worked so far?
What are the obstacles to more e-democracy projects working?
What policies, methods and tools need to be developed?

These were intentionally simple questions, the answers to which contribute to a complex picture that forum participants hope will help to move forward thinking about e-democracy. The participants also prepared position papers or project briefs describing the e-democracy initiatives by their organizations or governments. This paper is a summary of the full report prepared from the forum. The full report can be found at www.oii.ox.ac.uk and www.umbc.edu/mipar.

DEFINING E-DEMOCRACY

Beyond a common assumption by forum participants that e-democracy has something to do with the use of information and communication technology (ICT) to enhance democratic structures and processes, presenters offered a range of definitions for what e-democracy is and is not:

• ...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.
• ...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.
• ...is anything that governments do to facilitate greater participation in government using digital or electronic means.
• ...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.
• ...is simply the use of technology tools to facilitate democratic activities.
• ...may, one day, be used as a way of empowering citizens in the process of making major national decisions.
• ...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.
• ... [with the Internet] presents one way to positively redefine democratic processes and reinvigorate the relationship between citizens and their elected representatives.

WHAT’S BEEN TRIED? WHAT HAS WORKED?

The record of e-democracy initiatives and experimentation is patchy and disparate. There is no obvious logic to where e-democracy has been taken up. The U.S., with a high level of broadband access to the Internet and a strong record in e-governance, has done relatively little. Canada and Scandinavian countries, with similarly high broadband access, have done more. The UK, where broadband access has been low, has also done more. New democracies of central and Eastern Europe that came into being at the same time as the spread of the Internet, have adopted elements of e-democracy as part of their policies to modernize governance (Coleman & Kaposi, forthcoming).

In most countries there has been a long-term decline in formal political participation. This does not reflect public disaf-
fection with democracy — the vast majority of citizens in democratic states support the idea of democracy — but there is a growing sense that old institutions, methods of communication and repertoires of political culture are failing to connect with most citizens.

Forum participants presented a variety of e-democracy projects, several of which are described here. The BBC’s iCan project (www.bbc.co.uk/ican/) grew out of a review of BBC’s political coverage following the last UK General Election when turnout fell to a record low. It is aimed at people who are dissatisfied with mainstream politics but who nonetheless care about issues affecting their lives.

iCan is an interactive service designed to help people participate in democracy and civic life. It operates as a Web site with support from radio and television program and BBC News Online. It offers guides to civic life, a database of organizations classified by issue, and information on all elected representatives; articles, guides and advice contributed by iCan users; and Campaign tools to help users jointly address issues of concern and to gain support.

iCan launched in pilot form in November 2003. In the four months, the iCan audience grew to 100,000 unique users per month, with 6,500 registered users — i.e., users who contribute to the site. More than 500 campaigns were created. iCan is being used for the purpose for which it was designed — as a forum for addressing issues in civic life (Vogel, n.d.).

While iCan originated outside of government, government-initiated e-democracy projects appear more common than grassroots initiatives. There were several examples of governments using ICT to involve the public in various levels of policy formation and decision-making. For example, in 2002 the Tuscan city of Grosseto launched a project for gathering citizens’ opinions and ideas. Citizens were asked to express written views to help in identifying and analyzing problems. Next, they were asked to participate in meetings on specific topics. Online discussion for were also set up. The project, which was carefully monitored throughout its stages, was rated positively by the city; participation from associations and informal groups was high but individual participation was low. The use of ICT throughout the exercise ensured timeliness and transparency (Battisti, n.d.).

A distinction should be made between government projects initiated at the executive level and those established by parliaments/legislatures to encourage public participation in the process of legislative scrutiny and policy deliberation. The Canadian Parliament has experimented with running online policy consultations. As part of its work, the Canadian Parliament’s Sub-Committee on the Status of Persons with Disabilities developed “The Canadian Pension Plan Online Consultation with Canadians” (www.parl.gc.ca/disability). This initiative represented the first interactive Web site for a parliamentary committee in Canada and was regarded as a success.

The project, which sought specifically to inform citizens and obtain their views on the Canadian Pension Plan Disability Program, was designed with the intent to engage society as active members of the Committee’s work. The content-driven Web site provided, among other things, a list of upcoming events, transcripts of meetings, and committee reports to Parliament.

As a consultation mechanism, the Web site had three specific interactive tools for citizens. Issue polls were used to seek input on specific themes. The site also al-
allowed citizens to share their own stories and experiences in dealing with government processes and provided them with an opportunity to share solutions. To ensure the consultations were transparent, the committee created a feedback loop to citizens by posting results of the issue polls as well as some individual stories and experiences shared by Canadians who visited the site.

The results were significant. During the consultation period there were almost 170,000 page requests on the Web site, almost 1,500 people participated in the issue poll, 135 stories were submitted and almost 30 people offered solutions. When asked about their experience in post-consultation follow up, more than 90% of participants said they would participate again.

The committee’s strategy blended the traditional forms of committee consultation (hearings) with an integral e-consultation component. In addition, consultation participants were asked to attend a national roundtable with officials to vet the draft report. This added increased legitimacy to the report’s outcomes and recommendations (Stewart, n.d.).

The German Bundestag’s e-democracy project (www.elektronische-demokratie.de), designed to enable citizens the opportunity to discuss selected legislative initiatives online, was deemed to have “failed completely”. The story of its failure is instructive, as described by Christoph Dowe:

“The failure had two main causes. Firstly, technical problems developed when the sponsor, IBM, insisted on using inappropriate technologies that were applicable for business rather than for e-democracy tools. Secondly, the initiators failed to point out the effect which the suggestions of users would have on the initiative. Thus the project was not widely enough accepted by the internet community.

In addition, the political institutions did not take the ideas from online discussions seriously, nor did they see the need to implement these ideas and proposals into the political process. Such online projects will only be taken seriously when the input of users has a legally-binding effect on actual agreements, law initiatives and discussions. Users are quite able to differentiate between real and fake calls for participation. Government administrations and politicians are not interested in using the new ideas put forth as it supposedly means more work and less power.”

Examples of local e-democracy initiatives included Seattle (Washington) and the UK London borough of Camden.

Some e-democracy projects have been aimed at transnational populations. One of the most ambitious was the e-vote project (www.evote.eu2003.gr) initiated by the Greek government during its Presidency of the European Union.

The initiative was anchored around a Web site which received 177,000 respondents. This e-Vote Web site made a dual contribution: it offered informative content on current European issues and the opportunity to participate in and voice opinion on policy decisions related to these issues. In order to accommodate cultural diversity, the e-Votes and content were available in all 11 official languages of the European Union as well as of the 10 future member states. The privacy of users was guaranteed throughout the e-Vote experience. Through e-Vote, citizens were invited to respond to multiple choice questions on topical issues such as enlargement, immigration, the environment, and the European Union’s role in the world — issues that reflect the political and social priorities of the Greek Presidency’s agenda. In addition, e-Vote offered users the opportunity to voice their opinion in a free fashion by sending com-
ments and suggestions to European leaders through the e-Voice feature, a service offered through an automated feedback form. Of the 60,000 e-Voices submitted, the seven most frequently asked questions were selected via word-usage ranking. Danish Foreign Minister Per Stig Moller, Belgian Foreign Minister Louis Michel, and Greek Foreign Minister George Papandreou responded online directly to these questions. The Greek Presidency contributed further to the e-vote process by sharing the results with top-level decision-makers (extracted from paper by Howard & Pateli, www.ijclp.org/8_2004/ijclp_webdoc_12_8_2004.htm).

Summarizing the discussion about these — and many other — examples of e-democracy projects is best undertaken thematically. First, it was clear from the discussion that the debate about the potential for e-democracy was closely linked to more long-standing debates about the nature of democracy itself. In recent years there have been powerful theoretical challenges to the traditional Schumpeterian notion of democracy 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” (Schumpeter, 1976).

Second, few participants in the discussion regarded the technologies that enable e-democracy as being paramount. The prevailing view was that technology exists, will continue to develop and will continue to be adopted by governments and citizens. The participants understood that technology is not neutral: it can be put to good or bad use depending on who is in control and how it is used. There was general agreement that the very important factors in e-democracy are people, institutions and processes.

Third, there was concern that e-democracy projects needed to be independently and systematically evaluated. Joanne Caddy suggested that determining the success of a project is “not a question of technology; it is a question of how we assess the efficacy.”

WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS?

Four kinds of obstacles to the success of e-democracy were identified in the forum discussion: political, participatory, organizational and technological.

Political Barriers

A first political barrier concerns definition. Matthew Taylor, Advisor to the UK Prime Minister, who addressed the participants the evening before the forum, argued that e-participation should be connected to the online provision of government services. But Christoph Dowe was troubled by the “confusion … between the two fields of e-democracy and e-administration … The difference between e-democracy and e-administration is that e-administration is service-based and to some extent it is very close to government, whereas e-democracy has to do with making democracy work better with communication.” Bridie Nathanson expressed concern that “the objective of obtaining real citizen engagement is unlikely the further down the road we go with governments taking the initiative and deciding what information they want to put online and what issues they want to consult about, with whom, and within what framework.”

A second political barrier is institutional: politicians and bureaucracies find e-democracy disruptive, at least initially. Janet Seaton pointed to “internal” institutional barriers to e-democracy. Politicians
do not want to engage with untried methods. The other risk was the danger of e-participation working too well, so that “we cannot cope with what we open ourselves up to.” Peter Kellner expressed concerns about the regulatory framework for e-consultations. Who should run them and analyze them? Neither government nor private companies would be fully trusted. He felt “this should be used to help and inform representative democracy and not replace it. There is a role for structured conversations of a citizens’ jury type, or if you a like, some kind of public commission involving the public and not simply experts, and maybe the Oxford Internet Institute.”

Third, there is the problem of locating e-democratic practices within the complexity of governance. Yuri Misnikov pointed to a disconnect between national and local/regional policies for e-democracy. There was also a problem of whether e-democracy policies had adequate political backing: “Normally these issues are handled by mid-level government officials, advisers, or heads of department, but when it comes to ministerial and cabinet levels it is more difficult. There could be declarations but these are not translated into real political backing. It is a major problem how to get political commitment and support at the highest level so it can help to roll out implementation.” Joanne Caddy expressed concern about “globalized decision-making, whereby many of the policy decisions are taken out of the reach of national decision-makers.”

Fourth, there is the question of the public itself. The Schumpeterian conception of the democratic public is much more passive and undemanding than that conceived by some e-democratic theorists. Don Norris expressed scepticism about public demand for e-democracy, pointing out that his research “does not support the existence of a [citizen] demand for either e-government or e-democracy.” Richard Allan responded by suggesting that there was a common tendency “to confuse the fact that people do not like party politics and the traditional institution with a dislike for politics.” Allan argued: “In the old days, the politicians were the barristers and only the rich and powerful had access to barristers. If you wanted to go to the court of political decision-making you had to go through a barrister, and for most people that meant no access. Nowadays they all want their ‘day in court’, and that is happening because they now have the tools and the confidence to do it, plus a range of other cooperative factors. It reflects the DYI (Do It Yourself) culture of the Internet. Every Internet application, every business that goes online, offers you a much more DIY option than the old option. The rhetoric is for doing it yourself and empowering yourself and this also seems to be happening in politics.” Marty Wagner’s response to this was that “we are making it easier and easier to stop things than to do things” and ICT “are just new tools for slowing things down.” Wagner was concerned about trying to reflect the views of a volatile citizenry.

Arthur Lupia raised three potential obstacles to e-participation. First, what he calls “the bottleneck of attention”: “The fact is there are so many web pages but you can only view a few at a time. You have to win the battle for people’s attention.” Second, “the rules of credibility” whereby people decide what to trust. And third, the need for people to form coalitions and make compromises in the process of decision-making. Tracy Westen saw the public’s lack of basic knowledge about the political system, such as who their representatives are, as a non-technical obstacle: “Until we give citizens the basic information about who works for them and what they do, it is very
difficult to see how that electronic democracy can function.”

**Barriers to Participation**

There is extensive literature about barriers to offline participation. It would be surprising if these kinds of barriers were not replicated in the online context. Rebecca Vigil-Giron expressed concern about the new participatory barrier of reaching digitally excluded groups, such as Native Americans in her own state of New Mexico. Don Norris expressed concern about differential use patterns of ICT — not just access — and also expressed a worry about the possibility of e-participation exercises being dominated by special interests. Thomas Ohlin also addressed the problem of differential participation in e-democracy: “We want to know what types of groups have access to the public files that are the basis for much democratic participation.” He referred to work in Sweden which has been looking at “the changes over the last three years in terms of access to public information and the possibility to participate for a certain number of groups. We looked at the factors of age, language problem, gender, education and income. We have seen that the differences are not very large, but among these groups we still have large problems with age, language and ethnicity.” Joanne Caddy referred to “the increasing individualism of individual participation in the public sphere’ whereby ‘people have a ‘menu’ approach to the issues they want to be involved with.”

Christoph Dowe expressed concern about “pseudo-participation”: “We are all aware of how many forums there are, but nobody really cares about them once they are closed.” Peter Kellner asked, “What happens to the output of the conversation?” Janet Seaton suggested that, “People will want to participate if they understand how they can contribute to the political process, and believe that their contribution will be taken seriously. Elected representatives and democratic institutions can contribute by employing e-democracy initiatives only where participation is meaningful, and can be shown to be so.” Cheryl Stewart spoke about the need “to look at e-democracy in the context of the larger citizen engagement agenda.” E-democracy should not stand alone.

**Organizational Barriers**

The success of any democratic exercise is as much a matter of process as values and aspirations. E-democracy projects involve more than set-up costs; it has often proved difficult to maintain them as permanent democratic features. Some of the barriers to e-democracy reflect immature or under-resourced organizational approaches. Andreas Papandreou raised the problem of publicizing/marketing online democratic experiments. His message was that, “We should try to avoid designing projects that will ultimately fail and thus disenchant people with the whole process. You do not want to have a deliberative process where people ultimately feel it is just a gimmick by a politician to get you involved, but in essence I am not being involved. You need to be very clear about the limitations of what you are providing.” Vasilisis Koulolias expressed a concern about a lack of coordination across e-democracy initiatives and called for “a central point where people can find out what e-democracy projects are running.” Andreas Papandreou was also concerned about appropriate techniques for aggregating mass public input, as in the EU e-vote. “This raises the issue of AI (Artificial Intelligence) and how you can use filters effectively to look at mass levels of participation and employ complex search engines
to try to find frequencies of questions posed to politicians and use these to get the issues raised.” Joseph Veress argued for the need for trusted intermediaries to help people have confidence to participate.

**Technological Barriers**

Finally, there is the “E” element: we are used to the rhetorical depiction of ICT as a democratic enabler (Negroponte, Becker), but the reality is rather more complex. Technologies are socially constructed to perform assumed purposes. Marty Wagner warned that the technology is not neutral, but transformative: “it changes the game.” Andreas Papandreou expressed concern about the gap between wanting to use e-democracy techniques and understanding the technology. Too often e-democrats are dependent upon experts and commercial interests, which have their own wish to promote specific tools.

Vasilis Koulolias pointed to a problem in thinking about e-democracy in terms of a single technological platform. He favored being “more innovative in deploying projects that use different platforms, and not only the Internet or mobile communications.” Tracy Westen proposed that: “Attention should not be confined to just one technology (e.g., the Internet). In the digital age, all political communications will be reduced to a digital bit-stream, and the bits will be distributed by Internet, television, cable television, satellite television, cell phone, microwave, optical fiber and wireless networks. Users will ultimately not care how they receive this data, only how useful it is and how quickly they can access what they need. E-democracy projects should therefore consider integration of technologies through multiple platforms.”

Norman Jacknis suggested that “the Internet could still be made easier to interact with” by utilizing “more conversational (artificial intelligence-based) interfaces, support for multiple languages in a diverse society, and even nonvisual delivery mechanisms, such as speech recognition and computer speech.”

**WHAT’S NEEDED FROM POLICY AND RESEARCH?**

The practitioners, academics and policy-makers at the forum suggested a number of areas of research and policy that would help overcome existing barriers to e-democracy.

**What Do We Need to Know?**

In this digital age, citizens are required to make their own sense of the world around them, searching for information and constructing knowledge as part of their reflexive civic status. Thierry Vedel proposed that we look more closely at how citizens use information and what they demand from e-democracy projects. Vedel also pointed to the necessity of gaining better understanding of how organizations adapt to new flows of information and communication: “The impact of the Internet on communication between elected officials and citizens, or communication within political organizations means that people can have very quick interactions. However, the communication between elected officials and citizens still has to adhere to established rules of law which have not changed. Consequently, in many French administrations you can raise questions via e-mail but you will get a written reply, because by law if an elected official’s response is not in writing it has no legal basis. It will be a slow process, but we have to change the rules and the institutions around people.”

Tracy Westen wanted to see tools developed which could help create civic networks: “How do we identify other like-
minded individuals with shared concerns about particular issues? How do we combine with other like-minded individuals, so that our collective lobbying clout can be more effective?"

Pierre de la Coste expressed the view that “there is not enough work being done to discover what people want from e-democracy, e-administration and e-services.” In a similar vein, Peter Kellner suggested: “Why not conduct a consultation exercise with the public about democracy and consultation? I would see the exercise in various forms, including open platform, closed YouGov-type surveys, some moderated discussions, some sequential questionnaires, and some having more information than others. We could possibly kill two birds with one stone. Firstly, we would be finding out what people felt about democracy in terms of things like the drawbacks and whether they felt they were left out. We could find out what they are most concerned to get involved in and in what form and in what way. Secondly, one could test how far one could create with a random set of citizens, people who are willing to engage at some depth with new information and ideas.”

Arthur Lupia suggested that more, and better, studies of Web site usability were needed. These should “try to replicate the user’s environment” and should be tested by independent users within comparative settings. Paul Timmers was concerned about the accessibility and neutrality of online consultations and polls: “If you invite the public into the deliberative process you have to ensure the questions are framed in a way they can understand them.” Richard Allan called for “quite straightforward qualitative research ... over time” to “assess the amount and nature of communications that representatives receive.” This ‘would give us the ability to understand how people are communicating with us, and perhaps provide a knowledge base for selling it to other elected representatives. Allan also suggested that we need better knowledge of who uses the internet. Alasdair Mangham called for research on how to build tools that are specifically designed for democratic purposes: “So far, smart people have been taking tools that were built for something completely and repurposing them so that they can start engaging people in the democratic debate. For instance, they have taken ideas like a chat-room and attempted to re-engineer it so it can work in the context of democracy, without really looking at how democracy works. To extend the analogy, it would be like saying a specific parliament building cannot be built, but instead you can use the space in the little-used multi-storey car park.”

Chris Lee argued for the need to research low-cost technologies that could facilitate e-democracy. Mangham also called for research on e-tools to coordinate work within government institutions. Thomas Ohlin called for more research on the potential of the internet as a channel for public deliberation: “As we all know, one of the most important properties of any democracy, whether representative or direct or some hybrid or degree of both, is the importance of informed deliberation before voting on any kind of issue, problem or plan. Legislative assemblies routinely engage in debate. Political campaigns are premised on the assumption that voters will cast ballots on what they learned during the campaign. City planners hold hearings where evidence is presented and weighed before plans are made and implemented, and so on. There have been a smattering of innovative citizen deliberation projects that have had (or are in the process of having) direct impact on the public decision making processes of some polities. But by
far the clearest examples of this phenomenon are face to face (F2F), not electronic in whole or in part and when, perchance, this does occur via some electronic input, it is frequently accidental or serendipitous and difficult to measure since there was no way to construct measurement instruments for something that is unexpected.”

Bill Dutton argued for the need to “get away from a mass media paradigm”: “Too many people … continue to look at this as ‘television thinking’ applied to the Internet. The Internet is a different medium; it is not TV. We do not want lowest common denominator e-democracy. TV is ‘one to millions’, ‘one to billions’; the Internet is not the best technology for that because it is ‘one to one, many to many, one to many, many to one’. All the discussion about e-democracy will not be confined to the Internet, it is multimedia. You cannot assess the Internet as if it is TV, and in terms of a mass audience and mass use — there is a very diverse group of citizens. TV news is only watched by a small, diminishing proportion of the public.”

Several participants wanted to establish more rigorous methods of evaluating e-democracy projects.

**What Policies Are Needed?**

In its most ambitious sense, proponents argue that e-democracy entails a new conception of citizenship, where the e-citizen is empowered in ways that have hitherto been unavailable to most people. Tracy Westen proposed a Digital Bill of Rights, giving citizens access to government information through a “digital freedom of information act”; opportunities for citizens to identify their elected officials and find out what they do and when they do it via e-mail notification of all upcoming decisions on issues on which one registers an interest; retrievable videos of city council and the legislative body meetings; software to help citizens organize, lobby and combine around issues of importance; free email accounts; publicly funded information during elections in a digital format that is online and searchable about candidates’ positions; electronic voting systems that are both private and secure; and an evolving form of direct democracy which might not involve the initiative process for binding the votes, but could involve non-binding annual public opinion polls on important issues. Not all participants subscribed to these proposals.

In relation to the rights of the e-citizen, Richard Allan referred to the UK House of Commons’ Information Committee’s adopted principles for digital interaction between the public and Parliament, and Andreas Papandreou argued that e-tools were needed to help representatives find citizens. On another aspect of citizens’ rights, Norman Jacknis wanted policies to protect minority rights in the electronic democracy era. Alasdair Mangham argued for sustainable rather than experimental or pilot e-democracy projects. Cheryl Stewart observed that “we are in a holding pattern around trying to develop standards around e-democracy and getting ‘pilotisis’.”

A key policy question concerned whose responsibility it is to promote and administer e-democracy. Don Norris was firmly of the view that “we do not want government to hijack e-democracy. We want government to be part of the equation, but to echo what many people have said, government is not democracy.” Joanne Caddy favoured the use of trusted intermediaries: “Brand names mean something. For instance, you feel you can trust the Smithsonian site for reliable information, or the BBC site. These mediators are often outside of government, or at arm’s...
length to government, but they will become increasingly important and citizens will look to them for packaging and facilitating the access to information. Then we have to consider the regulatory environment for those and how we can build credibility into information mediators.”

Richard Allan wanted to see policies developed to facilitate global democratic debates: “I get hundreds of letters every year about the WTO, or the EU. People want me, as their known local representative, to engage with those institutions, even though, constitutionally, I have no locus at all. Again, for me to turn around and conspire in powerlessness with them would be extremely unhelpful. ‘I cannot do anything either’, is not an appropriate response.”

In contrast, Chris Philipsborn favored “the micro approach,” arguing that “there is a citizen demand for e-democracy but it is on a local scale.” Nick Penston argued that e-democracy must be integrated into “mainstream policy developments” and we should “avoid creating an “e-democracy ghetto.” Joszef Veress pointed to the need to assess “the productivity goals of e-democracy,” by which he meant “the capacity of civil society for self-organization and self-regulation and for creating networks which can work together to allow civil society to be connected regularly to governments, the political elite and the business elite.”

CONCLUSION:
WHAT NEXT FOR E-DEMOCRACY?

Democracy has always been a social experiment. It has worked best not as a constitutional and institutional edifice, but as an aspirational set of guiding values, constantly being refined, updated and morally interrogated. E-democracy is, in one sense, a stage in the historical evolution of the democratic experiment. Itself an experiment, e-democracy seeks to use new, interactive technologies to give greater reality to the democratic claim that government is in some sense both by and for the people. E-democracy is not an experiment in replacing what has evolved so far (in the sense that communist or fascist ideologies sought to recreate governance from the roots), but a supplement or complement to the existing models.

The idea of e-democracy as a hybrid solution to the old theoretical debate between representative and direct democracy is suggestive. If the problem with direct democracy is populism and the frustration experienced with representative democracy is disconnection between representatives and the represented, the notion of direct representation, as a politically appealing and constitutionally responsible synthesis of both, could turn out to be a way of reinvigorating democracy’s legitimacy in an age of interactive services and relationships. There is not a single, accepted definition of e-democracy. The meaning of this term will differ between political cultures and will depend upon whether it is being applied locally, nationally or globally. Countries are likely to learn from one another as they take further steps down this road; there is a place for international comparisons and standardized evaluation methods.

It is very clear from the forum discussion that the debate about e-democracy is essentially a debate about what kind of democratic governance people want and think feasible in the digital age. The e-democracy debate has given people permission to question basis elements of the democratic experiment. Some critics of e-democracy are in fact sceptical about the very notion of popular rule; some defenders of e-democracy would question whether
democratic governance has ever really been given a chance. But the most forceful message from the forum was that e-democratic trends are emerging whether particular actors (politicians, bureaucrats, citizens) want them or not. The choice is not between governing in the age of the internet or not, but how contemporary governance can utilize and be in step with the digital opportunities that surround them and the digital expectations of an increasingly online generation. The debate is about adaptation rather than ideals.

The problem of endless experimentation is that wheels tend to be recreated and sustainable projects are scarce. It was clear from the case studies that more coherent evaluations of experiments are needed and should be shared internationally. A distinction needs to be made between short-term pilots and ongoing experimentation, designed to learn appropriate lessons as they develop. Democratic projects will only have an impact within a sustainable context; one-off exercises will always run the risk of being seen as tokenistic or politically marginal. Sustainable e-democracy requires strong buy-in from political and administrative actors.

Forum participants raised the relationship between e-democracy and the broader e-government agenda several times. On the face of it, there are three quite obvious propositions to be made about this relationship: first, e-democracy cannot be separate from e-government because how governments make policies, pass laws and deliver services — locally, nationally and globally — is the most important democratic agenda facing us; second, e-democracy is bigger than government, involving the more autonomous political spheres of communities, workplaces, culture and even the family; and third, as well as government-to-citizen and citizen-to-government interactions, there is an important sphere of citizen-to-citizen interaction through which social capital is generated and democracy strengthened. These propositions are in tension with one another, but are not contradictory. E-democracy is both top-down and bottom-up; it is both about the institutional processes of hierarchies and the more fluid arrangements of networks.

Another problematic relationship of e-democracy is with technology itself. Participants agreed that technology was merely a facilitator, whereas democracy is the problematic deliverable. Much of the debate about e-democracy operates with an under-theorized conception of technology as reified collections of hardware, software and wires. A more sophisticated conception of technology includes consideration of the production and relation between knowledge, practices, roles and cultural devices. Forum participants were hesitant about confronting questions of technology; they tended to either ignore the technologies or call for a catholic approach to the use of multimedia. More thought needs to be given to how and why ICTs are produced, purchased and used in specific ways. For example, as Dutton suggested in the forum discussion, one could argue that ID cards are more central to the future of e-democracy than e-voting, but “most academics and practitioners seek to define e-democracy more narrowly, such as linking it with e-consultation or e-voting.” It is certainly true that any serious attempt to assess the impacts of digital technologies upon democracy must first examine technologies that are not intended to have democratic effects as well those that are, and second recognize the politically negative as well as the benign effects of ICT.

For several, though clearly not all of the forum participants, e-democracy had a
potentially transformative role to play. In Kellner’s view: “Modern technology allows those citizens with an interest or expertise in a particular subject to delve into it as never before. There is no technical reason why ministers and parliamentarians should retain their privileged access to information. It can be truly democratized.” Stuart McKee’s sense of the historical significance of the trend towards e-democracy is stated in equally powerful terms: “We’ve arrived at a critical crossroads during this time of change, poised on the edge of a global metamorphosis that affects us all. Humans have faced these historical moments before in the form of the printing press, photography, the telephone, the radio, the television and the Internet. As these new technologies continue to erase boundaries, remove limitations and blur borders, the world feels “smaller.” Ideally, this connectedness will lead to the emergence of a global citizenry—a population that may still only vote locally, but which will think, act and organize globally. The question we should be asking is whether we will participate in this development or whether we will simply watch it happen. Have we positioned our organizations to be instrumental in this time of change?”

Regardless of whether e-democracy will or will not be transformative, we are convinced that future research on e-democracy needs to focus both on the dynamic nature of contemporary democratic structures and processes and on the impacts of e-democracy experiments and initiatives.

REFERENCES


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