

FOCUSED ISSUE ON ELECTRONIC DEMOCRACY

The Coming of E-Democracy

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The idea that information and communication technologies (ICTs) have the capacity to greatly enhance democracy is hardly new. As long ago as the 1970s, there was interest in the potential of cable networks to facilitate democratic engagement (see, for example, Laudon, 1977), while experiments with different forms of electronic voting, online discussions and so on began in the 1980s. Yet it is only now, half way through the first decade of the 21st century, that real attempts are being made to harness technology in the explicit service of democracy.

Outside of government, electronically mediated forms of participation are commonplace. The best example of this engagement is the plethora of interactive television programmes that have merged in recent years, where viewers actively decide the fate of contestants in game shows, contribute to debates and so on. From a TV producer's perspective, the public's appetite for participation in the non-political world seems almost unlimited.

The transfer of these technologies to the political world, however, has been slow and cautious. Despite some high profile experiments in e-voting in both the USA and Europe, most countries still appear to be a long way from allowing large scale electronic voting in national elections (*cf.* Trechsel & Mendez, 2005; Kersting & Baldersheim, 2004). The putative electronic public sphere

that the Internet supposedly offered has failed to materialise in many instances, although there are some examples of healthy debates. Political parties have only tentatively experimented with new technologies and then only out of competitive fear (see, for example, Gibson, Nixon & Ward, 2004). Governments at both national and local levels (and, indeed, at the international level) have been keen to pursue e-government where it has led to administrative efficiency but have seen e-democracy as a lower or secondary priority (Eiffert & Puschel, 2004).

It is only now, therefore, that e-democracy initiatives are starting to appear. For the first time, governments are taking a real interest in the potential for e-democracy with a range of programmes that are actively seeking to enhance citizen engagement. At the same time, citizens themselves are beginning to make more effective use of the internet and associated technologies to self-organise and to hold their governments (and other influential bodies in some instances) to account. In this respect, e-democracy is beginning to come of age.

This special issue on e-democracy comes at an important point. As e-democracy begins to become a real, tangible feature of the political landscape so it is important to begin the process of research. This journal is dedicated to the publication of leading research on aspects of e-government.

Until now, one of the problems with research into e-democracy has been that it is almost entirely speculative, reflecting upon what is possible with the technology. As governments and other bodies start to use the technologies, research in 'real time' can be conducted, analysing the process of implementation and the opportunities and constraints that are presenting themselves. This 'real time' research is the challenge that the academic community must face up to if it is to make sense of e-democracy. It is starting this process of research that is the rationale behind this special issue.

The four articles that follow address the challenge in very different ways. We start with Donald F. Norris' detailed analysis of e-democracy at the American grass-roots. His work presents the first evidence of how local government in the USA is using technologies to support aspects of democracy. As well providing an important historical record of the development of e-democracy at one point in time, he also engages with the wider debate about how e-democracy fits with wider aspects of public service. His analysis, therefore, helps to define the way in which researchers should conceptualise e-democracy.

Zlatko Kovačić's contribution is very different. His article is concerned with the relationship between e-government and democracy more generally. He presents a set of sophisticated models that examine e-government readiness across 191 countries and concludes that e-government is most likely to be advanced where democracy is strongest and corruption least likely to be condoned or accepted. The implication of his conclusion is that e-government is an important tool in making governments more transparent and it is this openness that is the essential feature of e-democracy.

Herbert Kubicek and Hilmar Westholm, in their article, offer a future driven model

but based upon contemporary attitudes and perceptions. It offers a scenario based framework for reflecting upon how e-democracy might be developed over a ten year period. Its value is not only in its predictive qualities but in what it tells us now about the way people are thinking about e-democracy and the types of tools they are trying to build. As such, their work has immense heuristic value for the study of e-democracy.

Harald Mahrer's contribution seeks to explain some of the phenomena we outlined above. He elaborates the concept of the 'middleman paradox' which explains why parliamentarians support administratively focused e-government initiatives but are resistant to e-democracy, especially where it may have a direct impact upon their activities. Using research on all 25 EU countries, he is able to analyse this paradox in action. His conclusions offer some sobering thoughts for e-democracy champions.

Finally, serendipity has afforded IJEGR the opportunity to publish a summarized version of a report by Stephen Coleman and Donald F. Norris from a forum on e-democracy that they hosted in Oxford in May of 2004. The observations, perceptions, conclusions and suggestions of the 31 participants in the forum are sobering, indeed, about the current state of e-democracy in Europe and North America.

In presenting these articles we have not sought to be comprehensive in our treatment of e-democracy. It is too soon in the evolution of the topic to offer real research that can cover the full range of issues. Instead, we offer four pieces that offer particular methodological and conceptual insights and which are grounded in real research. These articles form the start of a research agenda, not the end. We expect this journal to return regularly to the topic of e-democracy and to develop from the initial themes we offer here.

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Mag. Robert Krimmer studied business administration at the Vienna University of Economics and Business Administration. In 2001 he joined the e-Voting.at project with the Department of Production Management, Vienna University of Economics and Business Administration. Here, he organized the first two e-voting elections in Austria. In 2005 he joined the Institute of Informations in Business and Government at the University of Linz and focuses on research, teaching and project in e-democracy, especially e-participation and e-voting. He has also organized the e-Voting TED Workshop on Electronic Voting in Europe and is a member of GI, OCG and IFIP (WG 8.5) as well as the Austrian Forum e-Government where he chairs the workgroup "e-Democracy".