E-Democracy from the Perspective of Local Elected Members

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ABSTRACT

Although efforts for developing e-democracy have been underway for over a decade, recent literature indicates that its uptake by citizens and Elected Members (EMs) is still very low. This paper explores the underlying reasons for why this is so from the perspective of local EMs in the context of UK local authorities. It draws on findings reported in earlier works supplemented with primary case study data. Findings are interpreted through the lens of Giddens structuration theory, which assists in drawing out issues related to three dimensions of human agency: communication of meaning, exercising power and sanctioning behaviour. The paper abstracts categories of agency from the findings and uses these to formulate eight propositions for creating an e-friendly democratic culture and enhancing EMs uptake of e-democracy. These propositions provide an indication for future e-democracy research direction.

Keywords: agency; e-democracy; elected members; social structures; structuration theory

INTRODUCTION

Efforts for developing e-democracy (or electronic democracy) have been underway in many developed countries across the world, particularly since the early 1990’s (ever since the Internet based technologies became widely available to people). Over this period, literature in the field notes many innovations in e-democracy tools (e.g. Abrahamson, Arterton & Orren, 1988; Van de Donk, Snellen & Tops, 1995; Tsagarousianou, Tambini & Byran, 1998; Bellamy & Taylor, 1998; Hague & Loader, 1999; Hacker & Van Dijk, 2000; Hoff, Horrocks & Tops, 2000; Kearns, Bend & Stern, 2002; Clift 2003; Macintosh, Coleman & Lalljee, 2005; Mahrer & Krimmer, 2005; Coleman & Norris, 2005; Robinson 2005; Norris, 2005; Maria and Micelli, 2005; Pratchett, Wingfield & Polat, 2005, 2006; Mackintosh and Whyte, 2006). These innovations include: e-discussion forums, e-consultations, e-petitioning, e-voting, weblogs, webcasts, e-panels, e-groups, and websites providing information on Elected Members and for accessing remote democratic political information. However, despite many years of efforts in this direction, very few local Elected Members (EMs) and citizens are actually choosing to engage in the democratic
process through e-democracy (e.g. Coleman & Gøtze, 2001; Pratchett, Wingfield & Polat, 2005; Robinson 2005; Cross 2006; Evans 2006; Parvez 2006b). This article explores the underlying reasons for why this is so from the perspective of local EMs.

Recent literature explains this low uptake by drawing attention to structural factors and barriers surrounding e-democracy. The agency of actors (i.e. the purposive actions, why and how actors engage through e-democracy) has not received the same attention and, thus, been insufficiently researched. Pratchett, Wingfield and Polat (2005), for example, highlight four barriers that affect the design and implementation of e-democracy tools: the particular democratic understanding held by e-democracy designers and implementers, organizational constraints (resources and conceptual), structural limitations (i.e. external factors that shape or constrain opportunities for developing e-democracy), and citizen restraint (demand for e-democracy). Coleman and Norris (2005) identify four similar barriers: political, participatory, organizational and technological. Others have pointed to the digital divide (e.g. Norris 2001; Chadwick 2006) as another key barrier in the low uptake of ICT enabled practices. Likewise, Parvez (2006b) highlights two structural factors that shape e-democracy tools as well as facilitate and constrain actors in e-democracy engagement: institutional mediation structures and ICT mediation structures.

These insights into the barriers and social structures are useful in that they throw light on how e-democracy tools become shaped and how their use is framed within institutions. However, they do not aid in understanding how actors’ perceptions about e-democracy are shaped, why they choose to engage or not engage through e-democracy tools, and what problems they encounter in their engagement. Structural factors are, therefore, only useful to the extent that they aid in understanding how actors are facilitated and constrained in their actual/possible engagement in democratic practices through ICT. They do not illuminate actors’ agency; their propensity to engage or what encourages or deters their uptake of e-democracy tools. This article is an attempt towards filling this gap in the extant literature in the field.

The article applies Giddens (1984) Structuration Theory as a framework to build understanding of EMs’ agency in local e-democracy. The theory focuses attention on social processes into which ICT are embedded. Its application brings to attention the agency of EMs and social structures that facilitate and constrain their actions in e-democracy. Agency is about action and the underlying intentions and motivations of actors. It includes an understanding of how actors make sense of and conceptualise e-democracy, the reasons for appropriating e-democracy tools, how they actually make use of e-democracy tools, what problems they encounter in their use of these tools, and whether engagement through e-democracy achieves the intended outcomes. The article argues that insights into these dimensions of EMs agency could assist in uncovering the underlying reasons for the low uptake of e-democracy.

This article draws upon recent works as well as on primary case study data to develop a deeper understanding on EMs agency. In particular, it makes the following three key contributions:

1. Drawing on recent works and supplementing them with primary data, it abstracts agency categories that influence EMs conceptualisation of e-democracy and their actual engagement through e-democracy tools.
2. In light of these agency categories, it advances eight propositions for enhancing EMs engagement through e-democracy tools for further inquiry and assessment.
3. It demonstrates the usefulness of Giddens structuration theory in explicating agency of actors in e-democracy and provides a new direction for future e-democracy research.

The next section of the article provides an overview of the theoretical perspective.
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