

E-democracy – a response to the democratic deficit?

The democratic potential of ICTs has long been recognised and much of the early enthusiasm for and experimentation with online communities reflected this. The Council itself has been publishing material on this debate for at least the last five years and, as mentioned above, is currently engaged in a major initiative in this area with a three-year integrated project “Making democratic institutions work”, which will partly concern itself with the use of ICTs in promoting democracy.

Many policymakers have joined the debate in recent years and national debates on e-democracy are currently taking place in many member states. The question is: Why do we think democracy is in trouble in Europe and what role can ICTs play, if any, in addressing this?

The growing democratic deficit in western democracies is much discussed. Turnout at elections is falling. We are constantly told by opinion polls that politicians are not held in high esteem. Across the European Union, the political classes are working to define the ultimate constitutional shape of the Union – *the finalité politique*. But the citizens of Europe, in opinion poll after opinion poll and in turnout at European elections, repeatedly demonstrate that they find such institutions and such discussions arcane and remote.

But does all this mean that people are less interested in politics or the issues that govern their lives? This seems unlikely. The growth of the anti-globalisation movement, the ability of petrol strikers or farmers to bring the roads to a standstill, even participation in radio talk shows, suggest that people remain interested in politics. Election turnout is variable across Europe and the last elections in France brought out many voters mobilised by the campaign to stop Le Pen from the presidency, suggesting profound attachments to democracy when it is seen to be under pressure. However, politics, with its supposed culture of spin, the sound bites for the media and the sense felt by many of a political class talking to one another rather than to the public, is in trouble, if not in terminal decline. As one commentator put it, “this has led to the sense that it’s all a game with no great relevance to the average person”.¹

Greater individualism, the erosion of traditional class and regional ties and rising levels of education means that most people no longer vote straight party tickets, because their parents or grandparents did. Voter behaviour is more volatile and single-issue politics rather than grand ideologies seem to be the order of the day. Narrow political agendas, particularly those on the xenophobic or extreme right, have been gaining attention and votes in some European elections, leading to understandable concern on the part of political elites.

Thus the idea that there is something wrong with our democracy persists, and with good reason. This issue for this paper is to determine what role, if any, do ICTs have in addressing this?

In the chapter on “Electronic democracy” in *A virtual new world?*, the author, J.-P. Masseret, suggests that demassification is a function of the information

1. *New media and social exclusion*, Hansard Society, July 2000 (<http://www.hansard-society.org.uk>).

society and the move from a mass, industrial society to the information society is at the root of our current democratic crisis. Individualism, changes in the workplace and a more casualised workforce, the development of personalised information and e-commerce are all examples of this.

This leads, says the author, to a series of conflicts which are heightened, though not created, by the presence of new ICTs. These include the conflict between:

- the principles of social and political democracy and the demands of the communications market;
- a universal tool (the Internet) and the dangers of exclusion from it;
- the facilities offered by communications technology and the fear of Big Brother;
- the authoritarianism inherent in vertical, one-way communications and the prospects for providing open, democratic networks;
- the immense mass of information available and the possibility of finding the time to reflect on or see things in their proper perspective.

In the way these challenges are presented, we can see elements of the familiar pattern of writing about technology – utopia or dystopia. The writer argues that electronic democracy could be the culmination of the democratic process, or it could lead to the disintegration of opinion. Most likely, neither extreme will be the case. ICTs have democratic potential, but their successful deployment will depend on the health of the underlying system. As the writer Randy Connolly once pointed out,¹ technological advances from the canal via the telegraph to the Internet have been hailed as, “online cures for a sickly social world”.

We can see a little of this techno-determinism in some of the e-democracy experiments going on around the world. This is particularly true of online voting, where greater access to technology is being promoted as the solution

1. “The rise and persistence of the technological community ideal”, in Werry and Mowbray (eds) *Online Communities*, Prentice-Hall, New Jersey, 2001.

to the problem, particularly of low voter turnout. We will discuss this issue in more depth below; the point here is simply that low voter turnout is more likely to be a symptom of dissatisfaction with what is on offer and only in a few cases is it a result of being difficult to vote by traditional means. A focus on the technology as the solution often obscures this argument.

Without relying on techno-determinism therefore, or seeing ICTs as the cure-all for democracy, what can the increased use of these technologies do to enhance and develop our democracy?