

The Support for Different Democracy Models by the Use of a Web-Based Discussion Board

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Abstract. Different initiatives are initiated to utilize ICT to maintain and develop democracy. Democracy models are developed to explain differences between different democracies. This paper reports from a case study where a web-based discussion board is developed and implemented. The findings indicate that politicians and citizens add support to different democracy models by their contributions to the web-based discussion board. Contributions from the citizens add stronger support for the neo-republican model where as politicians mainly support the demo-elitist model. These differences might become obstacles to the utilization of the technology. Identifying potential differences early on in a project may increase the opportunity to develop services capable of handling requests from different stakeholders.

1 Introduction

The importance of changes in democracy towards more focus on citizens arose in western democracies at the end of the 1980's [1]. ICT became seen as an opportunity to renew democracy in the face of decreased voter participation and falling interest in political issues. There is a challenge for democracies to engage people in important community issues and to try to involve citizens in political and democratic processes [2]. New technology has changed the conditions for communication and coordination between individuals and businesses [3]. This has led to an increased interest in how to utilize new technology to increase participation and involvement in democratic processes.

Increased focus on E-Democracy projects implies a need for a better understanding of how IT can relate to different democracy models [3]. Different ICT-artefacts may support different democracy models, but the relationships need to be investigated [4].

Bellamy [5] presents four different democracy models; consumer-, demo-elitist-, neo-republican- and Cyber-Democracy. The models have different characteristics related to democratic value, role of the citizens, form of political participation, political intermediary, objectives for the use of ICT and dominant political issues. The models are summarized in table 1 and will be used to investigate the fit between different democracy models and the use of a web-based discussion forum.

Table 1. Emerging models of democracy for the information age [4].

Characteristics	Consumer	Demo-Elitist	Neo-republican	Cyber Democracy
Dominant democratic value	Freedom of choice	Effectiveness	Deliberation and participation	Communitarian/radical democratic
Citizen's role	Choose their electives, less active between elections	Choose their electives, less active between elections	Active citizen, also between elections.	Active citizens are decision makers
Central form of political participation	Choice of public services	Consensus, creation, lobbying	Public debate, associations	Virtual debate, virtual and real actions
Political nexus	Producer/consumer relation	Expert discourse	Public sphere, media	Electronic discussion (Internet)
Main political intermediary	Service declarations, consumption data	Negotiation and campaign institutions	Public debate, associations	Electronic networks and communities
Typical ICT application	Voter compasses, websites, citizen cards, databases	Websites, mail, information systems, voter compasses	Geographically located and moderated discussion groups	Self-organised discussion groups
Main objectives for the use of ICT	High quality on the information to the citizens	Support relations, transparency	Quality on discussion and bi-directional information	Strengthen the essential network
Dominant political issues	Data security, privacy, service delivery	Relegitimating and reorientation of governance.	Increasing participation, improving the quality of discussions	Increasing political reflexivity, competences and autonomy

2 Case Results and Discussion

The project was initiated by one city and two regional municipalities in southern Norway early spring 2003. The motivation was to increase the availability to information, increase openness and contact between citizens and politicians and the citizen's involvement in political processes by using ICT and web-technology. The forthcoming local election was an important milestone in the project.

The target groups of the project were citizens, especially young people, and politicians. None of these groups were represented in the development of the discussion board. The goals were determined without any investigation of the requests from these stakeholders.

The discussion board was pre-organized with different sub-categories. The debates focusing on local and specific themes were most popular, followed by debates on how web-technology can add value to democracy.

Discussions focusing on the use of technology and the influence on the democracy have been investigated to illuminate what kind of democracy the use of the discussion board supports. The contributions are evaluated by the use of content analysis which is a much applied method for textual investigation [6]. The contributions are categorized (based on the democracy models) and counted.

Classifications into the categories are not possible without some self-judgement made by the researchers. The data-material is available for everyone at the discussion board (www.Demokratitorget.no) and the conclusions made in this paper can be evaluated towards the discussions made by the end of January 2004.

In table 2 the contributions are sorted based on Bellamy's [5] models of democracy. Out of the 70 contributions, we were able to categorize 66 by democracy models. The remaining four were rejected due to their unserious character.

Table 2. Contributions at the discussion board classified by models of democracy.

Democracy models → Characteristics ↓	Consumer		Demo-Elitist		Neo-republican		Cyber-Democracy	
	P	C	P	C	P	C	P	C
P= Politicians, C= Citizens								
Dominant democratic value								
Citizen's role			1	2				
Form political participation			2	2		1		
Political nexus						3		
Main political intermediary	1		4		1	1		
Typical ICT application	3	2						
Main objectives use of ICT			4	1	3	8		
Dominant political issues					3	22		2
Sum contributions	4	2	11	5	7	35	0	2

The support for a Demo-Elitist democracy is strongest among the politicians. The model emphasizes the growth of influence by experts and networks. The model also considers citizens to be less active and focused on their need for service. In light of this, it is interesting to see that the politicians add stronger support to this model than the citizens. The specialists (politicians) support a democracy which implies a strengthening of their power.

Neo-Republican democracies aim to change the public spheres where the experts, bureaucrats and politicians, loose power in advantage of the citizens. The citizens should be active, interested and share social consciousness [5]. New technology can reactivate the citizens. This model has strong support in the contributions from citizens.

Consumer Democracy, which implies that more or less passive citizens consume services by the public, is not strongly supported. Participation on a discussion board requires some kind of engagement which is not the main objective in the consumer democracy model.

The use of this discussion board did not support the model of Cyber-Democracy. The contributions do not focus on a radical shift in the power balance and shape of democracy. Cyber-Democracy may be seen as the last step in an alteration and consecutive steps following minor changes in the past [5]. Further investigations may reveal to what extent the use of discussion boards may result in a stronger support for Cyber-Democracy when the users increase their experiences and the services become more mature.

3 Conclusion and Future Research

The use of the discussion board show stronger support to some models of democracy than others. There are dissimilarities in which democracy models the citizens versus

the politicians contributes to. These two groups have different expectations to the influence participation in the discussions may cause. The project did not investigate in advance different stakeholder's interest in the project.

The results indicate a connection between the choice of ICT-artefact and different support to the models of democracy. By investigating the overall objective in an initial phase of the projects, the choice of technology can be founded on the objectives. The possibility to achieve the objectives by using ICT-artefact will increase if the artefacts are chosen for their ability to support the objectives.

The results are collected from one case study using one ICT-artefact. The indicated connection between models of democracy and choice of technology raises several questions for future research. What are the connections between other ICT-artefacts and different democracy models? To what degree does the design and implementation of technology influence the support for different democracy models? Does the pre-organizing of the discussion-threads act as an enabler or inhibitor to the discussions going on? An investigation should be conducted concerning what the major arguments for the choice of technology really are.

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