

NEW ICTs POLICIES

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Abstract: First, we briefly explore issues of infrastructures of information polity, informatisation of public administration, civic networking, regulation, information inequalities and ‘digital divide.’ Next, we sketch the perspectives of a socially accountable policy for the new ICTs and we conclude with the value of ‘democratic rationalisation.’

It is generally accepted (Dutton, 1996) that the development of infrastructures of information and communication technologies (ICTs) is linked to national and regional economic development. Therefore, policies for infrastructure provision and management might enable the best policy actions to contribute to urban/regional and civic/national developments. An important role is played by an increasing number of intermediaries as, for instance, public services brokers, who act as gateways to public service and provide citizen identity validation, resources authentication, etc., together with storing and sharing of data in a secure environment for eGovernance services.

According to Paul Frissen (1997), examples of political-administrative developments enacted by uses of new ICTs can be seen in transformations of internal organisation, operations, transactions, policies, monitoring, surveillance, regulation and deregulation, provision of information to politicians, citizens and societal groups and organisations and creation of independent intermediary agencies for development and implementation of public policies.

Concerning the spectrum of public processes that can be mediated by the new ICTs, Bellamy and Taylor (1997) distinguish in general the following five sets of relationships lying at the heart of the information polity: (i) internal relationships in the machinery of government; (ii) the relationships of government organizations to the consumers of their services; (iii) the relationship of government to citizens of a state; (iv) the relationships between governments and the providers of ICT infrastructure, equipment and services; (v) the relationship between existing information systems, patterns of communication and technical infrastructures to the

polity's 'appreciative system.' All the above relationships pose questions corresponding to legal presumptions and constitutional and official status of online deliberations.

As modern cities are transformed into hubs (Bryan *et al.*, 1998) for ICTs networks, the number of civic networking projects increases. However, beyond the common hype about virtual/tele/digital/cyber/electronic/etc. democracy, empirically based investigations are needed for a critical assessment of public debates in cyberspace. The work of Nicholas Jankowski and Martine van Selm (2000) can provide an example of empirical critical scrutiny of considerations of public debates in cyberspace as baselines for political engagement.

According to William Dutton (1999), the areas of application of electronic citizen access in public administration are the following: voting and polling, digital government, political dialogue among the public, public service delivery and decision support in the public arena. However, online surveys, voting and polling have met with mixed success as the findings of a recent Pew Research Center analysis suggest.¹

The question of whether and how new media is transforming politics is explored in the volume edited by Barrie Axford and Richard Huggins (2001). In particular, it is important to understand how citizenship and political participation change qualities under the impact of new media and to assess the democratic or undemocratic import of such changes. As a matter of fact, uses of new ICTs in public administration raise serious questions about possible transgressions of privacy (Raab, 1997 – cf., the question of the old 'big brother' – Lyon, 1994) and the risk of establishing undemocratic modes of social control (van de Donk & Tops, 1992). Furthermore, here we should mention that one has to be cautious not to minimize the influence of possible constraints by the existing organisational forces (Taylor *et al.*, 1996). However, understanding the relationship between ICTs and democracy implies that the "protection of privacy is the price necessary to secure the individual's ability to communicate and participate" (Simitis, 1987, p. 746). Moreover, similar thorny issues are connected to copyright and intellectual property laws, as Puay Tang has examined in a study of multimedia products and services (1997).

Thus, one of the hottest issues in debates on the information society is the digital divide between the 'information haves' and 'have-nots' (the so-called 'information underclass'). According to Jan van Dijk (2000), there are four main hurdles of access to the information society producing these inequalities: (i) lack of basic skills and 'computer fear'; (ii) no access to computers and networks; (iii) insufficient user-friendliness; (iv) insufficient and unevenly distributed usage opportunities. However, for policy makers in the Information Society, the important issue is how to mitigate information inequalities and possibly to prevent them. This becomes a very crucial task when there is some evidence that the prevailing tendency in the European Information Society is ('pleonastically') exclusive (Sarikakis & Terzis, 2000). Therefore, it is very important to understand the role of ICTs in relation to people's ability to participate in society (Haddon, 1998 & 2000; Haddon & Silverstone, 1996). The observed phenomena of social exclusion in the Information Society are pretty

¹ The Pew Research Center, For the People & the Press (January 27, 1999). A survey methods comparison: Online polling offers mixed results. <<http://www.people-press.org/onlinertpt.htm>>.

close to the conjecture that richer media might imply poorer democracy made by the media critic Robert McChesney (1999) in the sense that the corporate media explosion could result in a corresponding implosion of public life. Furthermore, socio-political differentiation might be generated by either intended or non-intended processes of integration. The latter (unintended consequence) is known as 'informational Balkanisation' (van Alstyne & Brynjolfsson, 1996). The former is related to the two contradictory trends of globalisation simultaneously producing both fragmentation and integration.

Therefore, the impact of new ICTs on civil society, participatory democracy and citizenship is of immense contemporary concern. This impact is usually associated with the demand of universal access (Kennard, 2000). But universal access/service alone does not suffice. The way Stephen Coleman puts it, "if citizenship requires universal access, democracy needs trustworthy channels of information and deliberation if it is to prosper" (2001, p. 124). In other words, modern European citizenship needs the demand for and provision of information (Steele, 1998) in order to develop the proper rights and responsibilities in the conditions and complexities of the Information Society of eEurope.

From all the above, it is seen that a meaningful discussion on the politics of the new ICTs should be framed by the following three axes:

1. *Distinction between eGovernance and Digital Democracy*: It is important to understand differences/relations between eGovernance and digital democracy in terms of whether they are 'top-down' (e.g., service provision) or 'bottom-up' (e.g., socio-political interaction) initiatives. Furthermore, one has to examine the institutional administrative structures under which initiatives of eGovernance may flourish and the constitutional, institutional and technological barriers to the viability of digital democracy projects.
2. *Empirical Grounding of Public Policies*: Public policies on ICTs should be based on a mapping, comparison and evaluation of uses in policy consultation and public involvement at local, national, transnational and global levels and an assessment of developments and risks in political and public technology-mediated applications. Apparently, this depends on developing indicators in order to measure and benchmark political and public e-processes, through an audit of citizen use and take-up of ICTs. These indicators would facilitate a qualitative assessment that will help reveal the quality of the political e-processes.
3. *Best Practices of Information Polity*: Exploring best practices of eGovernance and digital democracy could improve the processes for informing citizens about their rights and responsibilities. In addition, these best practices are expected to assist public administration bodies in promoting social inclusion and preventing the development of a 'digital divide' for the protection of traditionally excluded strata (such as remote regions, disabled people, women, 'migrant' and other ethnic groups etc.). In fact, what is needed is a 'gap analysis' of the measures to regulate cyberspace effectively and to highlight whether current e-regulation is indeed responding to Commissioner Erkki Liikanen's call for "responsivity, sensitivity and accountability of fair regulation" (Liikanen, 2000). In this way, socially accountable best practices of information polity may be demonstrated in order to increase the stability and sustainability of the European Information Society and the New Economy.

It is important to understand that in a sustainable development of the Information Society, the adoption and diffusion of new media should not accentuate existing inequalities nor should it further 'balkanise' the global social field with respect to the possession and access of informational or other resources. People should preserve the social conquests and 'established rights' (what the French call *les acquis sociaux*) in communication processes corresponding to the use of older media. New and older media should not force the 'not-haves' to be further dispossessed from their fundamental rights, deprived from their communicative and informative social/political needs and increasingly pushed to social exclusion. Policies of social cohesion and inclusion built around uses of new media can not be effective unless they support the interests of the weak, the deprived and the disabled, that is unless they sustain the fundamental principles of social justice.

Furthermore, a crucial question is whether and under what conditions electronic participation or even activism 'at a distance' can be effective? The experience of networked activism shows that online networked participation cannot be sustained or flourish without face-to-face agency in physical space, i.e., an involvement in what Arturo Escobar calls 'place-based' political practice (Escobar, 1999). In the words of Escobar, "we might give each woman of the world or each ecology group a computer and an Internet account, and the world might remain the same. This means that the relationship between cyberculture and political change - and between cyberactivism and place-based practice - is to be politically constructed" (*ibid.*, pp. 46-7). So, electronic participation at a distance has to balance the two contradictory trends of globalisation simultaneously producing fragmentation and integration. As Ribiero puts it: "in another paradoxical operation of cyberspace, it enlarges the public sphere and political action through the virtual world and reduces them in the real one" (Ribiero, 1998, p. 345).

Therefore, ICTs policies may become more effective only if next to the "consumption model" there is a "community model" (Feenberg & Bakardjieva, 2001), i.e., a regulatory frame based on the 'community principle.' This shift in the ICTs policies is what Andrew Feenberg calls "democratic rationalization" (1999) echoing Max Weber's (1958) reflection on the future of modernity. Thus, it appears that, while modern societies are entering into the "iron cave" of technological rationality by following the policies of the older or new individualistic liberalism, the only way to escape from such a confinement is by collective and democratic actions. In other words, as Martin Heidegger (1977) has pointed out, while technology is "framing" (Gestell) humanity by isolating individuals, if there is a hope to reverse this gloomy perspective is only as long as humanity manages to act collectively and democratically.

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