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Digital Democracy: Vision and Reality

Jan A.G.M. van Dijk,
University of Twente,
Department of Media, Communication and Organization

Abstract. Digital media have made a strong appeal to people wanting to improve democracy right from the start. Four waves of utopian visions of the last 25 years are described. The concept of digital democracy is defined. Subsequently, six views of both representative and direct democracy are distinguished that favor particular applications of digital media in politics and government. The next paragraph makes an inventory of the claims and achievements of 25 years of attempts to realize digital democracy in the field of information provision, online discussion and decision making. It appears that information provision is the best realized claim. The final part of this chapter is about *e*Participation in politics and policy. It discusses both government- and citizen-centric applications. Citizen-centric applications appear to be the most successful. Generally speaking, *e*participation has not been successfully incorporated in institutional politics and government.

Keywords. Digital democracy, views of democracy, representative democracy, direct democracy, political websites, online forums, online referenda *e*voting, *e*participation

Introduction

With the arrival of personal computers and the Internet on a massive scale in the 1980s and 1990s these media immediately appealed to the imagination of future watchers, scientists and the early adopters of these media. They launched more or less utopian visions of the future, among them in the field of politics and policy. The following characteristics of computers connected to the Internet were thought to have revolutionary or at least transformative implications for the democratization of politics and society at large. The Internet was seen as a:

- *interactive* medium that departs from the one-sided communication of existing mass media;
- *active and creative* medium enabling users to transform from viewers, listeners and readers to participants;
- *direct* medium in which individual users are able to determine at a distance what happens in the centre of among others politics and the mass media;
- *platform* on which everybody is equal in principle as assumed expertise has to prove itself before being accepted;
- *network* medium enabling the collective creation of products online, not primarily by individual authors or businesses.

The effects of digital democracy were often framed in the perspective of a *total revolution*, which means a democratic revolution in politics and public governance, or of a *technological fix* for basic problems of political activity and the trust of citizens in government. They were also seen as instruments

that only by using them would overturn institutional politics and modes of policy making. This is the assumption that a medium such as the Internet is democratic *in itself*. In this volume Bannister shows that the technology may not be value free but does not in itself predetermine directions, structures and modes for governance.

In the last 25 years we have witnessed four waves of these expectations all based upon the list of characteristics just mentioned.

1. In the 1980s the *teledemocracy* perspective came forwards (e.g. Arterton, 1987, Becker 1981 and Barber, 1984). The Athenean agora was the most important source of inspiration for the idea that in networks citizens can perform politics and determine what happens in the centre of society working from their cable TV terminals (first) and Internet connections (later) . The expectation was that the removal of space barriers by ICTs and their central storage capacity would enable forms of direct democracy without intermediaries such as parties and representatives.

2. In the early 1990s *a virtual community* perspective appeared (e.g. Rheingold, 1993). In this perspective the rise of usenet groups and other online communities would stimulate both online communities (communities of interest) and communities online (supporting existing physical communities). Main expectation was that these virtual communities could make up for 'lost community' in modern society which means the crisis of traditional village and neighbourhood sociability.

3. The turn of the century was the time of the Internet hype after a massive spread of the Internet in society. Here visions of a *'new democracy'* came forward that were equivalent to the vision of a 'new economy' (e.g. Shapiro, 2000). The basic idea was the prospect of mass participation in politics and policy making via the Internet. In some visions citizens could even bypass institutional politics and the state to create their own political and policy reality. From the perspective of governments first experiments were waged in online consultation and debate of citizens considering government plans. The main expectation was that this would broaden participation.

4. Three years after the burst of the 'Internet bubble' the currently popular *Web 2.0 perspective* appeared (O'Reilly,2004). Observing the sharp rise of social and participatory use of the Internet by (co-)creative Internet users producing user-generated content it was expected that citizens would increasingly contribute to policy making in all kinds of ways: with online petitions, weblogs, civic journalism, wiki's (collective intelligence) etcetera. Some observers even spoke about 'a user-generated state' (Leadbeater and Cottam, 2008, Frisssen, 2008, Paparachissi, 2009).

Opposed to these utopian visions of digital democracy some political scientists and politicians defended *dys*topian views considering these visions to be a threat to democracy as we know it (e.g. Guéhenno, 1993, Norris , 2001, Sunstein, 2001, Bimber, 2003). Generally, they claimed that a political system based on direct democracy was impossible in a modern complex society.

Further they argued that the digital media would drive up the speed of deliberation and consideration in political representation, that they would support populism, increase information inequality and be no solution for a basic lack for political motivation among many citizens.

Some have also attacked the democratizing potential of the technological characteristics mentioned above. Hindman (2008) observes that the Internet is even more concentrated than traditional media because the audience of big sites on the Internet only gets bigger (among others by the effect of search engines) and that it may be easy to speak on the Internet but difficult to be heard. Others have defended '*syn*topian' views of digital democracy highlighting both opportunities and risks (e.g. Hacker and van Dijk, 2000, Katz and Rice, 2002).

Who is right in highlighting the opportunities or threats of digital media for democracy? To answer this question I will list the main claims and achievements of digital media use in politics and government that have been made so far. However, before doing this I have to define digital democracy and summarize some very different views of democracy that are behind the expectations people attach to the use of digital media for this purpose.

1. Views of Democracy and their Favorite Digital Applications

Digital democracy can be defined as the *pursuit and the practice of democracy in whatever view using digital media in online and offline political communication.* The online-offline distinction should be added because political activities are not only happening on the Internet but also in physical meetings where mobile digital media are used for assistance. See Snellen and Thaens on mobile government in his volume.

A closer analysis of the calls for digital democracy in the last 25 years reveals that in fact very different views of democracy are behind these calls and behind the conspicuous preferences for particular applications of digital media (van Dijk, 1996, 2006).- In this volume Pratchett also relates applications of eDemocracy to dimensions of democracy in a particular framework. The idea of models of democracy generally is inspired by Held (1987) - In this chapter it is claimed that some views support individual contributions in a teledemocracy referendum style, others stress discussion or debate and again others community building and social inclusion. It is very important to make these views evident from the start. Six views of democracy can be distinguished in two dimensions (see van Dijk, 2000). The first dimension refers to the main goal of democracy: opinion making versus decision making. The second focuses on the means: representative versus direct democracy. Together these dimensions enable to distinguish six views of democracy in the analytical space of Table 1 (next page). .

The six views of democracy with their favourite kind of application of digital media in political communication will now be explained in the order of two classes that actually form a third dimension of democracy views. It is important to acknowledge that the six views are ideal types. In reality views of democracy often are combinations of these types.

1.1. Government-centric views

The classical Western view on democracy is *legalist democracy*: a so-called procedural view of democracy, regarding the constitution and other laws and rules as the foundations of democracy. The three basic principles are: separation of powers (legislative and executive power, the judiciary); a system of checks and balances between the government, the public administration and the judiciary; and representation. Decision making and representation are the goal and the means of democracy. In this view, the lack of information gathered and distributed by the state is the most important problem to be solved with the aid of digital media. A small and effective state working on the basis of information and communication technology is preferred. Digital media should be used for information campaigns, information retrieval by citizens and information gathering among citizens.

The second conception of democracy is called *competitive democracy*. It is mainly supported in countries with a two-party or a presidential system. According to this view, parties and leaders compete for the support of the electorate. This rather elitist view of democracy emphasizes representation and efficient decision-making by leaders. Digital media are first and foremost used for information and election campaigns.

1.2. Citizen-centric views

Four other views of democracy have a completely different strategic orientation. They are not government-centric but reason from civil society. Supporters of these views aim for a socialization of politics. This implies a more prominent role for social organizations and individual citizens. The assumption is that computer networks such as the Internet will enable them to have an influence on politics through opinion making, and even to bypass institutional politics or replace it with their own political relations. While the first two views, that intend to strengthen institutional politics are mainly supported by politicians and administrators, these alternative views are defended by many social organizations and individual citizens, first of all politically motivated and relatively high-educated people.

Here the most radical view is *plebiscitary democracy*. According to this view, political decisions have to be made through referenda or plebiscites. This implies a preference for direct democracy instead of representative democracy. The opportunities offered by computer networks to hold electronic polls and referenda and to have online discussions have had an immediate appeal to the supporters of this view. Some use this view to realize or explicitly defend populism in politics. This happens to be very fashionable at the time. Political persons and single issues are very appropriate for plebiscites and forms of direct democracy in choosing leaders and holding referenda (Reedy and Wells, 2009).

Another alternative view is *pluralist democracy*. In this view, opinion formation within and between societal organizations is emphasized. Democracy is not the will of the majority but that of a constantly changing coalition of minorities. Its most important value is pluralism in social and

political discussion and in the media. It is a combination of direct and representative democracy, since representation is exercised not only by politicians but also by societal organizations. Digital media offer numerous opportunities for pluralism in public debates, among them online discussions. So-called *deliberative democracy* also belongs to this view. It emphasizes discourse in free and open debates.

The fifth view discussed here is *participatory democracy*. Its supporters promote a socialization of politics, encouraging active citizenship. The emphasis lies on the broadest possible opinion formation about political affairs and on a particular combination of direct and representative democracy. Its most important instruments are public debates, public education and citizen participation in general. If the digital media are to play a positive role in enabling these instruments, access for all is vital.

The last view on democracy has appeared as a dominant model among the pioneers of the Internet community. The *libertarian view* is close to the pluralist and plebiscitarian views in several respects, as the opportunities for (virtual) community building, online polling and debates are proclaimed. This contributes both to opinion making and decision making. Specific to libertarianism is the emphasis on autonomous politics by citizens in their own associations using the horizontal communication capabilities of computer networks in general and the Internet in particular and in this way bypassing institutional politics. It favours so-called user-generated content and Web 2.0 tools on the Internet.

Table 1: Six models in two dimensions of political democracy
Source: Jan van Dijk (2000, p. 39)

PRIMARY GO AL / **PRIMARY MEANS**	**DECISION MAKING**	**OPINION FORMATION**
REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY	LEGALIST COMPETITIVE	PLURALIST PARTICIPTORY
	LIBERTARIAN	
DIRECT DEMOCRACY	PLEBISCITARY	

2. The Claims and Achievements of Digital Democracy

Three claims in favor of of digital democracy have been made in the last 25 years **(**Tsagarousianou (1999):

1. Digital democracy improves political *information retrieval and exchange* between governments, public administrations, representatives, political and community organizations and individual citizens.
2. Digital democracy supports *public debate, deliberation and community formation.*
3. Digital democracy enhances *participation in political decision-making* by citizens.

What balance can we strike after 25 years (van Dijk 2006, pp. 104-108)? The most certain conclusion at the time of writing (2010) is that much better political and government information provision, retrieval and exchange is the greatest achievement of digital democracy. An enormous stock of relevant information is available online. When users have the skills required, they can freely select from this body of knowledge. They are no longer dependent on traditional preprogrammed government and mass media supply. Of course, journalists and all kinds of information brokers have benefited most from these opportunities, but sufficiently educated and experienced citizens on the Web are also able to do this with tools such as search engines.

Almost every local, regional and national government and their public administrations, fairly all political parties, citizen organizations and political pressure groups in countries with high Internet penetration now offer *web sites* with political and other public information. Some of them are *portals* with extended options to search particular files or pieces of information. Others are linked to advanced *public information systems* containing databases of government and political information.

Parties and candidates in elections offer *campaign sites* that gain importance in comparison to broadcasting and the press with every new election. See Edwards' chapter on voter-information websites in this volume.

We live in a transition period between television or press democracy and Internet democracy in which the importance of the Internet for campaigning is increasing fast (Davis et al. (2009). In the Obama presidential campaign of 2007-2008 the Internet part of his campaign was considered to be the most important (Castells, 2009), though far more money was spent on television advertisement.

The mass media extend their traditional editions with *online newspapers, journals and Web-TV channels* that contain much more political news and government documents for those interested. Organizations of citizens, voters and pressure groups produce their own *independent sources of online information* and search instruments such as *voter guides* for elections.

In this way citizens and voters can be much better informed than they used to be. Additionally, they are able to react to these online sources by email and web postings and to create their own political information.

Accessible, reliable and valid information is a necessary condition of viable government and a healthy democracy. However, it is not a sufficient condition. There are a number of qualifications to this success story. There are many steps between retrieving information and opinion making, let alone having impact on decision-making. Information has to be selected and

processed from an abundance of data sources. The result is unpredictable and strongly depends on individual skills and preferences.

The crucial following step is to transform information into political action. This does not have to happen at all. This is not only a matter of individual motivation and ability to change. The effects of potential action on actual decision-making in a democracy also depend on social relationships of power in the political system and in the media.

Even when the stage of decision-making is reached, it does not follow that more information enhances democracy. According to John Street (1997, p. 31), 'decisions are not necessarily improved by the simple expedient of acquiring more data. All decisions are ultimately matters of judgment, and the art of judgment may, in fact be hampered by an excess of information'.

Perhaps the information created in the *electronic debates of newsgroups and online forums or communities*, the second main claim attached to digital democracy, offers better chances of being transformed into action and to result in well-prepared decision-making. It contributes to opinion making anyway. This claim is based upon the capacity for interactivity of the new media. Unfortunately, many observers such as Jankowski and van Selm (2000), Norris (2001) and Rojo and Ragsdale (1997) have shown that the communication of equals in Internet debates is weak in terms of interactivity. The debates they analyzed contained no extensive exchanges between contributors. Most people appeared to simply read the contributions of others and not contribute themselves. When they did, the people most often addressed were political representatives. Frequently, debate was dominated by a few persons. Finally, there was not much pressure to come to a conclusion, let alone reach consensus in electronic debates as compared to face-to-face discussions. There were only weak attempts to resolve a collectively perceived problem (van Dijk, 2006).

A related claim made more recently is that the online debates of 'wise crowds' are producing a collective intelligence that might be superior to individual professional expertise (Surowiecki, 2004). This is the basis of the Wikipedia approach. For knowledge production this might be partially true when online collective intelligence is perfectly organized, but for opinion making this is contestable. Sunstein (2008) has observed that group dynamics prevail in online debates. Minority opinions in online groups tend to remain silent, even when they have strong arguments while weak majority opinions are freely expressed.

However, this does not mean that all claims of the benefits of electronic debates are untenable. The quality and equality of these debates pose serious problems indeed (see Schneider, 1997, Sunstein, 2008). But the diversity of inputs and the (limited) reciprocity of contributors are promising. Otherwise, one could not explain their enormous popularity as there are tens of thousands of political discussion lists and news groups on the Internet. They are not simply exhaust valves. The exchange of opinions must have some influence on the consciousness of the participants and hence on their online and offline political behavior. In this way, political communities are built and maintained. Undoubtedly, electronic debates will cover large parts of all future public spheres and communities. The big problem, however, is that

there is no perceivable effect of these debates on decision-making of institutional politics at the time of writing (see Chadwick, 2006). Here we touch the third claim of digital democracy.

Contrary to popular expectations in the 1990s, the Internet is not drawing more people into the political process (Katz and Rice, 2002; Scheufele and Nisbet, 2002; Quan-Haase et al.,2002: 312; Wilhelm, 2003, Brundidge and Rice, 2009). However, it does provide a platform for additional forms of political activity that are more difficult to realize in the offline world: additional opportunities to find political information and to create political interaction. Familiar examples are sending and receiving email to and from the government and candidates, using email to support or oppose a candidate, taking part in online polls and participating in online discussions.

Another basic claim of digital democracy in the 1990s is that *electronic polls, electronic referenda* and *electronic voting* would bring an era of direct democracy resembling citizen participation in the Athenian agora with modern means. This perspective is primarily defended by the proponents of plebiscitary and libertarian democracy. However, experience so far indicates that large-scale Internet activity in online forums, polls, communities and pressure groups is able to flourish without any influence on decision-making in official politics. The representative system is barely touched. Television and the press and face-to-face political communication still are more influential. Probably this will change in the future when the era of Internet politics really makes its breakthrough. - In this volume Poupa describes current practices of e-voting and social networks as impulses to direct democracy. -Then, electronic polls, referenda and voting will be more influential. They will put the traditional representative system under growing pressure. Most likely, the future is to some kind of combination of representative and direct democracy on the basis of communication networks.

3 eParticipation

A currently very popular concept in relation to the rise of Web 2.0 and user-generated content is eParticipation. This concept is broader than digital democracy or eDemocracy. The last terms refer to political issues and the relationship of citizens with governments or political representatives. eParticipation stands for policy issues at large and the relationship of citizens with both governments and public administrations. eParticipation can be defined as *the use of digital media to mediate and transform the relations of citizens to governments and to public administrations in the direction of more participation by citizens* (van Dijk, 2010). The issues at stake are not only political issues in the broadest sense, but also public service issues that shape the day-to-day relationships between citizens and the state at large. However, participation has a distinct democratic flavour, particularly for citizen-centric views of democracy. So, many issues overlap with digital democracy.

As eParticipation deals with policy, it can be related to the well-known phases of the policy process: agenda setting, policy preparation, decision making, policy execution and policy evaluation. Currently, most

experience in *e*Participation has been made in the phases of agenda setting, policy preparation and policy evaluation. Applying eParticipation in decision making and policy execution is contested. The views of democracy that strongly emphasize representation and representative democracy, the legalist and competitive views have doubts about directly engaging citizens in decision making and policy execution. These phases are supposed to be reserved for political representatives and public administrations executing the decisions of governments and parliaments. Here the only option for them would be e-voting in systems of representation.

Following the policy process the thirteen most familiar applications of eParticipation in 2010 can be listed and divided in government-centric and citizen-centric approaches (see Table 2). See van Dijk (2010) for an extended description.

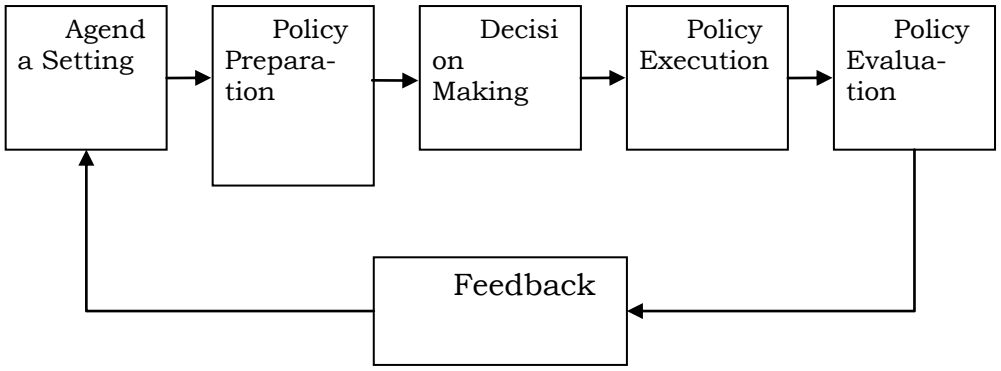

Table 2: Main applications of eParticipation in the Policy Process

Phase in the Policy Process	Application of eParticipation
Agenda setting	• Open Online Consultations (governments and public administrations) • ePetitions and eActivism (citizens)
Policy Preparation	• Online Plan Consultations (Governments) • Online Forums for Policy Making (Citizens) • Online Knowledge Communities and Social Media serving Policy Making (Citizens)
Decision Making	• eVoting (governments; election committees) • eCampaigning (citizens and politicians)
Policy Execution	• eMaintenance of the Law (by citizens invited by governments) • eGovernment services following the needs of citizens and including participation (government initiative) • eGovernment services with participatory user-design (government initiative) • eComplaints and eSurveillance (initiated by citizens)
Policy Evaluation	• Quality panels and individual evaluations of online public services (government initiative) • Citizen control sites and information services for public or government policy (citizen initiative)

3.1 Agenda setting

Governments sometimes not only inform citizens about their policies on government websites, but also invite citizens to reply or to have an input with their own ideas, suggestions or complaints. Information provision is the most frequently used application in e-Participation. Only, information

provision is not sufficient to talk about participation. At least an invitation to react to the information supplied should be added.

In many countries citizens initiate or use e-petitions to put single issues, complaints, or requests on the political or government agenda. In Scotland this has become an official initiative of parliament (citizens are invited to fill petition lists on a website). *e*Petitions are likely to become very important tools in countries with a legal right to put issues on the agenda of parliament after having collected a particular large number of signatures. The Internet is a much more powerful tool to reach this goal than traditional means of signature collection. Some time ago, such a petition had an impact on decision making in the UK. The Brown government withdrew a plan for road pricing after a first petition against it reached mass support.

3.2. Policy preparation

During the years of the Internet hype many Western governments launched official online consultations of citizens to discuss government plans that were already prepared. The intention was to engage more citizens in the process of making plans than only those citizens that were known as more or less professional lobbyists gathered on official meetings. In general the results were disappointing as the same kind of lobbyists showed up as before and because governments did not accept results as they were deemed to be not representative.

However, In the current stage of Internet diffusion and technological development the opportunities for online plan consultations increase because more citizens are able to participate and because a number of innovations in plan consultations are introduced such as the visualization and simulation of plans (Botterman et al., 2009).

Since the advent of Usenet groups more than 30 years ago Internet users have discussed all kinds of societal issues in online forums. They offer the opportunity of contributing to discussions 24 hours a day and from every location without the necessity to meet. Evidence shows that online forums do not draw more people into these discussions than in traditional meetings with the important exception of a part of the young generation (Katz and Rice, 2002; Brundidge and Rice, 2009). Rarely, they are representative for particular populations as they are dominated by well-educated middle-aged men (ter Hedde and Svensson, 2009). Therefore, governors complain about the lack of representativeness. However, as these forums are so popular with many thousands of participants in every country, they must have some effect on the consciousness and knowledge of policy issues among citizens (van Dijk, 2006).

In eParticipation applications using discussions such as online forums and social media civil servants of public administrations are seduced to discuss government affairs directly with citizens. In this way they tend to loose their role as executives and, perhaps unwillingly adopt the role of political representatives. This is a basic and often neglected problem of *e*Participation and *e*Government in general.

Increasingly, online knowledge communities, social networking sites, video exchange sites and web-logs have policy discussions as a main or side

effect. Of course, their prime focus is the exchange of knowledge, the maintenance of social relationships and entertainment. Exceptions are political weblogs and online health support groups of patients. Another exception are citizens' watchdog communities such as *Wikileaks* that publishes and comments on leaked documents. In Table 2 they are subsumed under citizen control sites.

3.3 Decision making

Computer networks offer new channels for voting both in elections and in referenda or official opinion polls. A distinction should be made between electronic machine voting and electronic distance voting. The last kind of e-voting is discussed here. It offers new opportunities for people who live far from a polling station, have a lack of time or are handicapped. However, most evidence in the few instances where online e-voting is already practiced – mainly among expats- shows that these opportunities do not, or only scarcely result in a higher voter turnout.

The Barack Obama campaign has shown how important *e*Campaigning can become for elections. With his Internet applications he gathered more than 500 million dollars of funds and organized an army of campaign volunteers as participants in his campaign. E-mail, YouTube, social networking sites and an extended own website were very frequently used.

Citizens themselves can use *e*Campaign means too in order to put pressure on governments. This also happens outside election times. On the Internet we have thousands of European pressure groups trying to influence government decision making. However, currently the most important applications of *e*Campaigning for citizens are *E-voting guides* that are very popular in several European countries. They are decision-support systems offered by more or less independent public policy and research institutes helping voters to choose the best party, candidate or referendum option on the basis of a number of positions and statements.

3.4 Policy Execution

Of course governments use the digital media extensively to control for criminal acts and the offence of rules and regulations. However, the government can use additional eyes to survey what happens in society. This certainly is a kind of participation in policy execution. We are talking about municipal and police sites on which citizens are able to report all kinds of offences, from child pornography to having seen someone driving a car using a mobile phone that is not hands-free. These snitching sites are increasingly popular among the population. They can also turn against governments as they can also be used to report offences by civil servants and to launch complaints against government acts.

The provision of e-Government services is still marked by a strong supply-side orientation. The goal is to provide as many public services online as possible and to offer them in the most advanced shapes, including full electronic transactions. However, it appears that there is scarcely any correlation between the supply of these services and the demand by citizens that lags far behind (European Commission, 2008a, 2008b). More demand-driven and user-oriented online government services certainly belong to the initiatives that can be categorized under eParticipation. In this way citizens can raise their voice to improve government cervices. Trust in government services is an important basis for trust in government generally; it has political effects.

Some electronic governments do invite citizen input in designing and improving online public services in advance. This is called user-centered service design.

Citizens themselves are also able to launch sites for eComplaints against wrong or badly executed government policy. This happens for instance in environmental, juridical, mobility and minority or immigration issues and even cases of corruption. Here it appears that these opportunities of eParticipation can be a two-edged sword as the same technology can be used to undermine government policies and regulations. For example, sites are available that warn drivers for the exact places were speed cameras along the road are installed.

3.5. Policy Evaluation

Some governments, mainly on the local level have installed online quality panels or individual feedback systems in their online public service supply. This enables citizens to rate the level of service provision and to return suggestions. For governments this gives the opportunity to improve services continually.

However, the fastest growing applications of e-Participation are all kinds of control sites and information services for citizens that enable them to evaluate official policy results on a daily basis *and to use them for their own decisions* in daily life, such as the choice of a place to live. The issues concerned are not as political as the familiar policy debates on the Internet and other mass media. However, they prove to be very attractive to average citizens, also those with no political motivation. Examples of these control

sites are sites where local residents are able to report the level of noise around airports and the pollution of particular regions or waters. Extremely popular are *social geographical cards* of quarters and neighbourhoods reporting their statistics of criminality, housing prices and living quality.

3.6. General conclusions

*e*Participation is most frequently used in the first phases of the policy process: agenda setting and policy preparation. Policy evaluation is a second area, mostly visited on the initiative of citizens (and their organizations). Governments and public administrations rarely allow entries to the core decision making and policy executing phases. They claim that this does not correspond to our representative political system and the responsibilities of the public administration. So, the background for acceptance of *e*Participation initiatives by governments certainly is a particular view of democracy.

Evaluations of e-Participation applications raise the suggestion that applications of e-Participation on the initiative of citizens or civilian organizations and new media developers are more successful than those initiated by governments (van Dijk, 2010). At the end of the 1990s many governments were experimenting with online plan consultations that were disappointing in terms of the extension of participation. Now *e*Petitions, *e*Voting guides (made by independent organizations of politically motivated citizens and software developers), *e*Complaints, *e*Surveillance and citizen control sites are far more popular than the online open and plan consultations and official online discussions of those days.

These applications of eParticipation might be more popular than the traditional ones, but this does not mean that everybody is able to use them. One of the main problems is that they require a number of digital skills added to the traditional skills of citizenship (social skills and knowledge of how the government and decision making work and what rules and regulations hold). These skills are 1. operational skills for computers, 2. browsing and navigation skills for the Internet, 3. information skills for searching information on the Web and 4. strategic skills for using Internet applications such as those of e-Participation for ones own benefit. These skills are very unequally divided among the population (van Deursen and van Dijk, 2009). When this does not change by means of better accessible and usable e-Participation tools and by means of more training of digital skills, e-Participation will not empower citizens more than old modes of participation (Wilhelm, 2003). Instead, it might raise an additional barrier.

However, the decisive touchstone of *e*Participation in terms of democracy is the influence on political decisions. On this score we have to conclude that scarcely any influence of *e*Participation on institutional policy and politics can be observed yet (van Dijk, 2010). Few decisions of government, political representatives and civil servants have changed on account of the input of citizens in *e*Participation, one of the few exceptions being the drop of road-pricing in the UK. The electronic channels of participation used are simply added to the traditional channels. Decision makers doubt the representativeness, surplus value and quality of the input of

the new channels. Few decision makers are prepared to accept the direct inroads of *e*Participation on their decisions.

Therefore, it is no surprise that governments and public administrations have problems with the incorporation of the initiatives and results of *e*Participation in their regular operations and modes of governance. So, in terms of democracy the sober conclusion is that "most administrations do not (yet) have mechanisms and capacities in place to cope with a significant increase in participation" (Millard et al. , 2008, p. 76).

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