

# Future Democracy in the Information Society

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## **ABSTRACT**

New opportunities for democracy have been created by the contemporary societal transformation period, often called the post-modern information society. The rapid diffusion and introduction of new information and telecommunications technology are increasingly providing many communities with new tools and methods which aid them in evolving old-fashioned representative, thin democracies into participatory and deliberative, strong democracies. The vision of this development emphasises empowering all members of communities to more directly govern their own lives as independent planners and decision makers. In this collection of articles, a group of researchers, experimenters and advocates of the new approaches to the future vision of stronger, more inclusive representative democracy will elaborate the way ahead on this evolutionary path, focusing on the transitional politics of electronic democracy, i.e. "teledemocracy", which encompasses the harnessing of information and communications technologies for the benefit of more open and influential citizen decision making and self-governance.

# 1. Introduction

New opportunities for democracy have been created by the contemporary societal transformation period, often called the post-modern information society. The rapid diffusion and introduction of new information and telecommunications technology are increasingly providing many communities, primarily Western but also many others, with new tools and methods which aid them in evolving old-fashioned representative, thin democracies into participatory and deliberative, strong democracies. The vision of this development emphasises empowering all members of communities to more directly govern their own lives as independent planners and decision makers. In other words, this would mean a change of today's democratic paradigm into a more open paradigm, which promotes a plurality of values, needs, methods and procedures. There are already a wide variety of methods for enhancing citizen participation at all levels of governance. These include citizen initiatives, referenda, voting-from-the-home, and citizen juries, to name just a few. However, the potential of modern information and communications technologies is still largely non-exploited, unapplied and even, misunderstood. Thus, many people are now interested in proceeding towards electronic democracy and "teledemocracy", which encompasses the harnessing of information and communications technologies for the benefit of more open and influential citizen decision making and self-governance. In this collection of articles, a group of researchers, experimenters and advocates of the new approach towards the future vision of stronger, more inclusive representative democracy will elaborate the way ahead on this evolutionary path.

Tomas Ohlin starts with a discussion on the evolution towards systems with deeper citizen participation, a major step in authentic societal change. In his view, the key to this is the development of new processes to enlarge and deepen "public dialogue" via ICT. He believes that the time needed for genuine public acceptance of deepened citizen oriented democracy may take longer than expected in general. He discusses participatory citizen experiments conducted in Sweden.

Auli Keskinen has studied the paradigm change from technology-push towards user-pull within administrations in Finland. She states that it has become evident within the past 20 years that a gradual altering of the administrative decision making paradigm is occurring from formerly closed, undemocratic and top-down type towards open, user-oriented, intersectoral, co-operative decision making. The employees being "users of ICT applications", at first inside the agencies but increasingly more encompassing of citizens as customers of the administrative services, have gained a better knowledge base and more interaction through new information technologies, especially through universal access to a wide variety of information, email, Internet and mobile network services. A practical, experience-based model of an Electronic Network for Municipal Decision Making in Finland will be presented.

The other three authors will describe, explain and justify some other useful methods in several cultural environments. Each has been used for citizen empowerment and enhanced participation in societal decision making. Christa Slaton will first elaborate the theoretical grounds of experiments,

which have used scientific principles, and modern technology to develop innovative processes to empower citizens to make informed and deliberated decisions. Many of the experiments have utilised statistical sampling methodology in order to find scientifically viable representative samples of the population under study. Such methods include Televote and the Deliberative Poll. She will describe some of the leading projects, including data and analysis of their outcomes and impact upon real political decision making. Ted Becker and Marcus Schmidt will elaborate two other methods, the Electronic Town Meeting and Minipopulus by Lot.

Becker will explain the development of the comprehensive Electronic Town Meeting process he helped pioneer. This method has been used since the late 70's in the USA, Canada and New Zealand, and it has been further developed along the way, most recently in the early 90's. He explains that now it has become a new generation of electronic town meetings - a mix of methodologies and media, which has many, levels and connects various components over a lengthy period of time. Marcus Schmidt presents the idea of electing by lot a sample of the population thus forming an "electronic second chamber" to complement the representative parliament in political decision making. He will explain the practical application of this to the Danish Parliament. Thus, this method would greatly enhance the prevailing representative democratic practice common in the Nordic countries in general. He summarises the paradigm shift of democratic practices, which we witness now on the march towards a citizen-steered direct democracy vision.

The message this group of researchers will convey can be best summarised by stating that the transformation of modern representative democracy into a new type of 21st century democracy has many features and occurs on many parallel paths. The increasing global access to data, information and knowledge through Internet and other tools by more and more citizens will seriously challenge the way democracy and its practical applications are understood today. On the other hand it will also spur the evolution from the prevailing "one-method"-base to a plurality of methods, which reflect the different needs of different cultures and different decision making environments. It is evident that although a vast selection of technologies is at our disposal, now and in the future, the necessary condition for exploiting them for the paradigm shift is the revised understanding of societal decision making as a win-win strategy. Here, alternative futures images are to be created jointly by proactive, knowledgeable citizens through interaction and dialogue instead of a "yes-no" or "good-bad" debating approach so deeply embedded in the present, obsolescent model of representative democracy.

## **2. Decision Making Challenged by Information Networks**

Life towards the end of second millennium is getting more and more interactive. An understanding is dawning that the old, hierarchical, one-dimensional and sectorally restrictive paradigms are not valid in the present day transitional societal phase. The concern of my studies has been on the possibilities of exploiting ICT for opening, networking and user-pull of the societal decision making, both among

## 4. Towards More Citizen Participation in Sweden

As a result of a general rise in level of civic consciousness, citizens in Sweden towards the end of the 1990s are demanding increased influence and participation possibilities. Citizens want greater influence over their work, their private lives and in the community at large. But the present forms for this are apparently unsatisfactory. There is questioning, emotions are being showed. Apparently there is a need for contact, some kind of more active public dialogue - but how?

Meaningful democratic dialogue is only possible if citizens are well informed and can find their way in the libraries of public domains, if they know where to turn to for information about public functions and services, and about their rights and obligations. And if they are happy with the shapes for this that are available. Also and, perhaps most important, there must be forms for expression of the public will, channels that are available to express the citizens' desires, using the people's language.

In Sweden, a general election took place in September, 1998. The result showed a move from the political center and outwards, both to left and right. Especially interesting in this discussion is that participation decreased so clearly. Earlier elections, in Sweden now each four years, had collected close to 90% of the total voting population. This time it was 80%. In an international perspective, this is high. But a decrease close to 10% is worth concern. It points at increased voting uninterest, and, in fact, interviews with voters confirm this. There is a language problem. The established political parties fail to attract voters, but - as a matter of fact - voters are NOT uninterested in political matters as such. On the contrary, new forms of spontaneous political action and participation are asked for and tried, new discussion groups, local interest organizations, new gatherings, protest and open demonstration at times.

So there is a language problem. Citizens want to speak, but there is a mismatch, the established political parties "do not focus on the interesting issues", they do not seem to listen. This is a reality not only in Sweden.

One conclusion might be that there is a need for new forms for the political dialogue, new forms for political listening to the voice of the citizens. It can also be that new political organization is asked for, organization that makes it more easy to mirror and carry the voice of the people. This is being discussed in Sweden. Certain measures are tried. Widened analysis of possible new democratic participation forms is being supported. In late 1998, there has even been appointed a new "minister for democracy" in government, Britta Lejon. One of her tasks is to find ways - and forms - to increase political participation.

Which is the organizational background for this? In Sweden, and in other Nordic countries, a number of measures have been taken lately to facilitate increased contacts between citizens and public authorities. "Citizens' bureaux" have been set up in large numbers of municipalities - a new approach to the organization of public administration at the local level.

In 1998 there are about a hundred such citizens' bureaux in Sweden. They resemble public libraries, but are aimed at provision of public service. They may organizationally be divided into three main categories:

- Coordinated information bureaux, which may include an information desk, where public officers representing the municipality, including local social insurance, or the county council or other authorities can inform the citizens on general matters of interest.
- Joint service bureaux, where both municipal departments, local social insurance and central government authorities may be represented. The staff is authorized to deal with matters within its remit at all organizational levels. The local and central government departments have a joint reception for public contact.
- Non-sectoral front offices, where various municipal institutions collaborate in the provision of integrated services, and where staff "generalists" deal with matters involving several different departments up to a certain level of responsibility.

Main activities of citizens' bureaux contain providing information and administrative services and processing routine on administratively uncomplicated matters, and matters subject to specific well-defined rules. The creation of citizens' bureaux may be regarded as a response to the problems caused by the strict division into sectors and spheres of responsibility in central and local government. Many citizens found this division artificial and hard to understand.

Therefore, by applying an intersectoral approach, citizens' bureaux may help to improve functions and make them more efficient. This could lead to an institutional renewal of public administration, offering citizens better and more accessible services, guaranteeing services in sparsely populated areas and in the suburbs of the large towns, increasing the efficiency of services in socio-economic terms. It can also be a base for strengthening of local democratic contacts.

Citizens' bureaux can be looked upon as a means for making core operations at municipal departments more effective by relieving the departments of provision of "simple" pure public information and the processing of routine matters. This makes it possible for the departments to concentrate their resources on the more qualified administrative tasks.

The practical work of developing and configuring citizens' bureaux is being done locally in the municipalities themselves. This process started in the late 1980s. At the same time analysis had been started by central government, chiefly initiated by the Ministry of the Interior (previously the Ministry of Public Administration).

In order to further investigate the issue of exercise of authority in certain public application areas, the Government appointed a special investigator in the spring of 1994 to prepare proposals relating to services by the police, social insurance, taxation, enforcement and labour market matters that could appropriately be dealt with at citizens' bureaux by staff representing several authorities. In 1997, a bill extending the scope of inter-authority collaboration at citizens' bureaux was passed by the Par-

liament. This makes it practically possible to deliver a more fullflavoured service at the citizens' bureaux, for the benefit of the citizens.

Evaluations have been made concerning the use of citizens' bureaux. These show that these bureaux so far mainly are used for public service, and only to a limited extent for political contacts.

In Sweden, like in many other countries, public information can also be accessed via citizens' terminals or information kiosks in public libraries, post offices, hospitals and other public places, including citizens' bureaux. There is a risk, however, that such systems will invite to non-public use, stressing entertainment and electronic commerce of goods and services.

A complementary form for possible democratic contact has been introduced lately in Sweden. It is recommended to build "local democracy centres" as citizen meeting-points, and for public contact. A democracy centre could be located in a citizens' bureau, in public libraries, civic halls or public premises, or it could be housed in premises of its own. As yet, it is not known to what extent these will be used for political contacts.

Like in the case of citizens' bureaux, several of the functions of democracy centers may be supported by contacts that are taking place online.

Citizens' bureaux and democracy centers are examples of organizational public forms to increase government efficiency and to support closer relations between the citizen and government, including more intense democratic contacts. However, in a geographically vast country like Sweden, access to these offices is demographically unbalanced, and for many citizens difficult.

Increasing numbers of Swedish households are connecting to the Internet. The figure of households with PC in late 1998 is on the order of 30%. This technology naturally may support more close democratic contacts, as a complement to use of today's representative democratic functions. Horizontal communication between different local actors, associations, schools, action groups etc and - naturally - the citizens themselves is now possible in new forms. Contacts "from the bottom and upwards" is on its way, contacts between citizens and their elected representatives. With relevant organization, public power may be distributed to the citizens. This may ultimately transform each citizen into a "politician". But for this to happen, both organization and technology must be further developed.

Sweden can show the highest telephone penetration in the world (earth bound and mobile), and it is natural to expect a continued fast increase of net access in this country. The technological prerequisites are positive. There is availability based on efficient producer competition on most parts of the data communication markets. Prices for personal computers and TV network devices are decreasing rapidly. Technology is available.

During the 1990s, extensive public databases with local municipality as well as central authority information have been built up in Sweden - as in many other countries. Increasingly advanced network search engines are being tried out, to facilitate citizen access to many types of public service. However, many citizens express that it still must be made easier to use these systems, and to participate. Research projects are theoretically analyzing wide-spread access to public services, with focus on online political contacts. Up til 1999, few such empirical experiments have been carried out, however.

Summing up, Swedish citizens' bureaux, democracy centers, public terminal systems, and the online PC at home, define a scale, a ladder. The steps on this participatory ladder follow a natural line of development. We are facing a social activity that may take time.

The first step on this democratic ladder concerns how to further access to public information. The second step concerns to invite the citizens to participate. How? To start with, to send citizen data, facts and questions, by e-mail, or to use online bulleting boards. It may be motivated to use the word "invite" here, it may be that the citizens will appreciate some kind of exceptionally friendly system interface, in order to accept to participate regularly. Will an economical or social public asset of some kind be needed?

Many citizens will want to participate out of personal interest, but probably not all. Especially, spontaneous participation will probably be motivated from the already socially and publicly active groups. Some public action to receive contact from other groups will probably be needed.

In Bologna in Italy, system IPERBOLE provides the citizen with free Internet access, at least free access to the publicly supported parts of the net (provided you don't use this for commercial purposes). Access to other parts of the net you receive as a bonus, as a "reward" for participating in the public part.

Principally, several types of sophisticated public "rewards" to further active online citizen participation can be thought of, to be used in the dialogue between the community and the citizen. The community may provide a certain citizen with valuable detailed public information, such information that is relevant especially for this citizen. The citizen may respond by providing the public community with data on her specific social environment, for which the community has specific interest. Give and take, a "public market" may expand. Different currencies may be used. In the end, if the state really wants full scale citizen participation, perhaps selectively used reduced tax may be thought of?

To repeat, seen in a Swedish perspective, the first step on the participatory ladder concerns provision of public information, relevant to citizen participation. The next step concerns participation as such, to invite the citizen to participate.

The third step concerns influence. This is where the discussion is aiming at present. Unless the citizen can feel that the public system listens, that what she says matters in the public decisions taken, she is probably not going to stay in contact for long. The forming and expressing of the multi-faceted public opinions thus is central in the process. This is where the elected politicians may find a new role to play. It may be necessary to give up a part of the personal decision making power, and increasingly accept to work as an implementor of citizens' desires.

In an online world, it is possible that these citizens' desires will be quite frequently presented, that they are detailed, and sharply formulated. To listen to these, to reformulate some of them in implementable form, and to implement as many as possible as soon as possible, may to some extent be a new role for the elected politician. It may take time.

An example. In Sweden there is fresh legislation that forces communal politicians to put on the "agenda for consideration" citizen suggestions that are supported by at least 5 % of the local popu-

lation. It is remarkable to note that in spite of several citizen attempts, so far extremely few communes have responded to that.

The time needed for implementation of this increased citizen participation may be substantial. We are talking about a transformation that may need numbers of years. Especially the third step may be a challenge. However, steps towards more active democracy must be allowed to take time. They touch the need for cultural change that is deeply rooted in citizens' minds. We may need "second thought" in new forms. Filters against ever faster technology may reflect the human presence in the thinking, resembling the social presence in the open political discussions around the coffee table.

To support relevant deliberation forms is fundamental, if we want to move towards implementable citizen empowerment. How can citizen deliberation be organized? Many of its parts are social. Can this process be treated formally? Are large efforts, large resource portions needed for deliberation concerning far-reaching decision making, and the contrary for "short", more shallow, decisions? Can this resource planning be formalized?

In a situation that starts from the thousand-fold local decision discussions, we are facing a quantitative situation. How can we formulate the results of the many discussions? It should be relevant to answer these questions after having tried different formal models in experiments. We are facing thousands of human meetings, mostly with limited numbers of citizens present. To communicate the results from all these meetings in a meaningful way is a challenge. Perhaps the syntactical parts of this may be supported by some formal activity. It might be of value to construct, and make generally available, simple administrative software that online documents the results of local deliberation processes. Fundamental is that these results then could be packaged in forms that show the opinions of differing groups of citizens. This provision of standardized software for expressing the results from the local deliberation processes could be defined by the community.

We face a delicate balance here. On one hand, citizens want to be heard, and probably would support a public "large citizen screen" at the electronic town meetings, a screen where their many opinions are presented. But, as soon as we start to compile opinions into integrated conclusions, we are approaching the danger of heavily centralized decision making. In the online world, we may and should be able to show citizen plurality in its full bloom. It is fundamental that this plurality is not melted down to a "single voice". The deliberation support software discussed above should present output that is not "result compatible". It should be very difficult and extensively time-consuming to integrate the different parts of the output. The voice of the people is multifaceted, many-folded, and not one-dimensional. The many minorities as well as the majority opinions must be shown.

With a generous and sensitive system for expression of the opinions of many groups of citizens, a minority feeling of dissatisfaction may be reduced by a documented knowledge that "we do have participated in the decision making". It is important to be aware of all who participated. With such citizen contact available, the political decisions taken may be much closer to the desires of the people.

With its history of public openness, Sweden can point at practical experience from providing open public databases to citizens. The next step is technological, to actively further citizen access to the

Internet. This is what public Sweden is stressing at the end of the century. The third step, organization of the deliberation process including expression of the multifaceted opinions in a system for increased citizen influence, is the challenge for the change of the century.

## **5. New Models of Citizen Deliberation**

Proponents of participatory democracy often develop a “Back to the Future” approach to invigorate democracy. They wax eloquently about the democracies of ancient Greece and the American New England town meeting. Their visions of democracy are limited to face-to-face meetings in small communities or polities. They warn of the dangers of technology as a tool to weaken democracy by promoting more individualism, isolation, and consumerism.

Advances in information and communication technology (ICT), however, combined with new and emerging political theories, present a new level of potential for democratic development. A quantum leap in access to information, the ability to vote by phone and computer, and the potential to deliberate in town meetings electronically, if not physically, support a type of pure, direct democracy impossible in earlier times. These advances also promote an enormous improvement in representative democratic systems by bringing citizens directly into planning, and policy-making, and implementation.

### **5.1. Experiments in Citizen Deliberation**

For nearly three decades, researchers have explored ways to increase citizen participation by creating new processes and reshaping old ones to better inform citizens, encourage interaction among them, and stimulate deliberation and voting. The concern was not merely to increase participation but to also improve its quality.

A feature that is common to experiments discussed here is that each uses representative samples of citizens. Some utilize stratified sampling, but most employ random sampling methods. All project designers are concerned with providing a wide array of voices, bringing the disengaged into the political arena, and creating environments in which citizens interact with each other respectfully, thoughtfully, and empathetically.