

Local democracy in telecommunications age

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Will equipment that collects data from homes of ordinary people, and transmits the data to more central computers, become the future form of local democracy? A democracy where everybody directly will be able to express opinions to the authorities? So far, such "home terminals" are too expensive, and it may be too strong to state that terminal systems of this type will arrive whether we want it or not, but technologically it is already quite possible. A wisely configured system could function as an important support for a better democracy.

What can be seen as necessary for giving a realistic content to concepts like local democracy, grassroot democracy, political multiway communications etc. are improved possibilities for everybody to express opinions. The discussion so far seems, however, hardly to have noted that means of assistance exist that may become of major importance for these possibilities. They can be simply defined: A system of more or less centrally placed computers, directly connected to information collecting equipment *in every home*. Let us call these information collectors "home terminals". They will probably hardly be given a terrifying design. A press-button telephone, and - later - a keyboard connected to the TV set. And they do not need to be more difficult to manage than a color TV.

Is it realistic to count on that these terminals will reach such circulation that they may be meaningfully used for expression of political opinions? First, let us make clear that such terminal systems are not technological utopias. They already exist. Banks, airlines, travel agencies etc are intensely developing systems where computers are directly connected to increasing amounts of terminals, resembling TV sets. (In Sweden these are so far counted in hundreds). These terminals are being used in local offices, thus making it possible with direct contact between the terminals themselves, and with the main offices. This makes it possible to share and update information from common databases very fast.

Secondly, home terminals may be so useful that they probably after some time will become a central investment for those who are buying an apartment or a house. These terminal systems may be used for financial transactions, travel planning, library services, computer aided education, contacts with public authorities, information services of many types. The number of application areas is virtually unlimited.

So far, these terminals are too expensive for widespread dissemination. However, rationalized large scale production plus an increasing demand will lower prices. Specialists hold it for likely that home terminals of TV type will be part of every family's home in 15 years in the industrialized countries. And push-button telephone sets, that may be used for the same purposes, will arrive earlier. Clearly, it is now time to start discussing how we could make use of the wide capabilities of these systems.

With these systems available, we are likely to smile at our present democratic system. Central political elections every third or fourth year with a highly indirect character, political parties with - for the average voter - often fuzzy ideological borders, congressmen that seldom have time enough to contact their voters, bureaucratic unions who struggle against reality, local groups who frenetically try to find fora where they can show their programs, at most a few general referendums per decade - with result that often is neglected (i e the Swedish right hand traffic referendum) How could our democracy function in such an environment? The answer probably simply is that it could not, but that this was what was available.

We don't know for sure at what point of time the new technological systems will arrive, systems that will make it possible to improve the present democratic situation. That they will arrive, however, is utterly likely. These systems then will bring to the fore a number of principal problems, problems that there is reason to pay attention to in time. The risks of injustices and manipulation from those who govern, and possibly from the big commercial actors, are otherwise large.

Possibly the most difficult problem concerns making knowledge available, background information concerning the alternatives about which we will have the chance to express opinions. Clearly, for many non-expert citizens there is needed fairly detailed information about alternatives, in order to make it possible to form opinions about living conditions, education, culture etc. Also information about consequences must be made available. How can we guarantee that these alternatives will be neutral and balanced? The risks are large that we may become exposed to misleading information. If so, we would be even worse off than we are today.

Let us consider the following terminal message: "We regret that the background information concerning the elm tree disease that was made distributed yesterday morning, proposing the cutting down of all elms in the Western Park of Stockholm, has in our checking procedure shown to be misleading. However, the decision was taken yesterday afternoon, and carried through last night. Specialists are now investigating the possibilities to re-establish the collection of trees in 50 years' time".

In knowledge areas where the existing political parties represent distinct different opinions, plurality of background information and alternative formulations may perhaps reasonably easily be achieved. But in many areas of

concern it is hardly the political parties that should act. We seek a wider spectrum of opinions.

How can we then make certain that the background information will be based on plurality, and the questions not misleading? Here, the terminal systems may be of help by making it possible to collect experiences from a number of "trial referendums". This problem needs thorough analysis, and luckily there is some time available.

A functioning democracy makes it possible for every citizen to express her or his opinion on own will. But is everybody interested in the elms of the Western Park? Does everybody want to take part in discussions and decision making about everything? It may become necessary to limit the number of questions, and - in some cases - to refer to statistically defined time limited samples of citizens, samples that are presumed to be representative of certain citizen groups. Who guarantees this sampling representativity? A statisticians' Highest Court?

Even the most technically reliable equipment may fail. Sabotage against the telecommunications system, or - more likely - against the software in use, could manipulate the results. Here, a possible Computing Ombudsman may find things to do.

Will the politicians give up essential parts of their present duties, namely to take the heavy relevant decisions, in favour of the citizens' voice? Will they be satisfied with the role as officers inside the Opinion Authority?

No doubt there are many decision areas that are badly suited for terminal decision making. Taxing decision making is one of them. The choice of areas that should be left outside of the terminal decision making system probably will have to be decided on by Parliament. But there will be thousands of questions left.

It is not only the form of the terminal system questions that is interesting. Obviously also frequencies are important. Let us for the moment suppose that a limited system is defined where requests for citizen participation are put a few times per week. Will the citizens find this too demanding, with low participating rates as a consequence?

A compromise between our present system and the example given above would be that the citizens once every three months in an election procedure define a group of ten thousand representatives that for this three-month period will function as the voice of the people. This would be an often renewed "contact platform" between the people itself and the Parliament. Obviously, such a system would not hinder complementing more complete referendums in well defined areas of interest.

It may be too strong to state that terminal systems of this type will turn up wether we want it or not. Naturally we have the power to reject or

postpone their arrival. But enticement to put such systems to the test will be strong in many quarters, even if they during the first years will be given assignments of less political nature.

A wisely configured system could support the creation of a better democracy, i.e. better citizen influence on living and working conditions. The costs for early testing of a local system would be reasonable. Evidently there are problems and risks. However, these ought not to be reasons enough for neglecting to discuss and analyze a real possibility for improved citizen powered democracy.