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Understanding e-democracy developments in Europe

SCOPING PAPER

prepared for the CAHDE

by

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INTRODUCTION

Amidst the hyperbole and rhetoric surrounding the internet, mobile telecommunications and other advanced technologies, there appear to be two expectations for e-democracy. First, there is the expectation that new technologies will change fundamentally the relationship between governments and their citizens, providing for more open, transparent and responsive governance and more opportunities for widespread political engagement and participation. Developing relationships are not just one way but also include an expectation that citizen to citizen relations will change and that relationships across a diverse range of public and private sector organisations can be enhanced. In short, information and communication technologies have the potential to improve democratic governance by enhancing information flows between governments and the governed (G2C) and, indeed, between citizens or groups of citizens (C2C).

Second, there is the expectation that new technologies can change behaviour, making political leaders more responsive and particular citizen groups more engaged. In particular, there is an expectation that new technologies can encourage disengaged or disaffected young people to take part in politics, whether through e-voting mechanisms or in online discussion forums. In an era of declining participation in formal politics, the new technologies may halt or even reverse current trends that threaten to undermine the legitimacy of contemporary democracy.

This scoping paper explores the reality of these hopes and expectations in the context of e-democracy developments in Europe. From the outset it rejects the view that the technologies can have any such effects on their own. New technologies, in whatever form, are socially and politically neutral devices and have no inevitable consequences for democracy, participation or political engagement. However, the way in which such technologies are used and the purposes to which they are put can have radical consequences for the practice of democracy. The design of particular tools and their association with existing democratic practices (and other aspects of governance) shapes their value and impact, as does the way in which citizens and intermediary bodies (such as the news media, political parties and so on) adopt and use the technologies. The consequences of particular devices are far from inevitable. While some outcomes can be predicted, the reality of e-democracy is that most initiatives have complex and often mixed consequences for democratic practice.

The purpose of this scoping paper is to help the Council of Europe begin a process that strives to make sense of e-democracy initiatives across the continent. The challenge for CAHDE is not only to collect information on what is happening where but, also, to develop a richer understanding of how various initiatives are contributing to democracy in their host countries. It is central to the Committee's terms of reference that it must develop a deep and nuanced understanding of the issues and effects of different technologies in their democratic context. It is only through such understanding that the Committee can measure the effectiveness and impact of initiatives and develop lessons

on how initiatives can be relevant across countries. As well as clarifying the context and definition of the subject matter, therefore, this paper develops an overview of the various issues that e-democracy gives rise to and suggests strategies for the committee to pursue in fulfilling its terms of reference. As part of this process, therefore, this paper identifies the main challenges that CAHDE faces in its opening sessions and sets out a series of issues and discussion points that are pertinent to the Committee's role.

The study of e-democracy potentially covers a wide range of issues, from the initiatives that governments are taking to promote democracy through to the activities of political parties, the news media, civil society and indeed, the actions of individuals. While all of these are potentially important to the development of democracy, this paper focuses particularly upon what governments are doing with e-democracy. Such a focus does not preclude the relevance of other activities but it does focus the attention of CAHDE on where it can have the most influence.

SECTION 1: THE CONTEXT OF e-DEMOCRACY

Defining e-democracy

Electronic democracy (e-democracy) is defined in various ways, often in contrast with the more general term e-government. However, for the purposes of this paper, the following definition is adopted:

e-Democracy consists of all electronic means of communication that enable/empower citizens in their efforts to hold rulers/politicians accountable for their actions in the public realm. Depending on the aspect of democracy being promoted, e-Democracy can employ different techniques: (1) for increasing the transparency of the political process; (2) for enhancing the direct involvement and participation of citizens; and, (3) improving the quality of opinion formation by opening new spaces of information and deliberation.¹

This definition matches closely the terms of e-democracy specified in Recommendation Rec(2004)15 of the Committee of Ministers on e-governance which focuses upon e-democracy tools which are:

- strengthening the participation, initiative and engagement of citizens in national, regional and local public life;
- improving the transparency of the democratic decision-making process and the accountability of democratic institutions;
- improving the responsiveness of public authorities;
- fostering public debate and scrutiny of the decision-making process

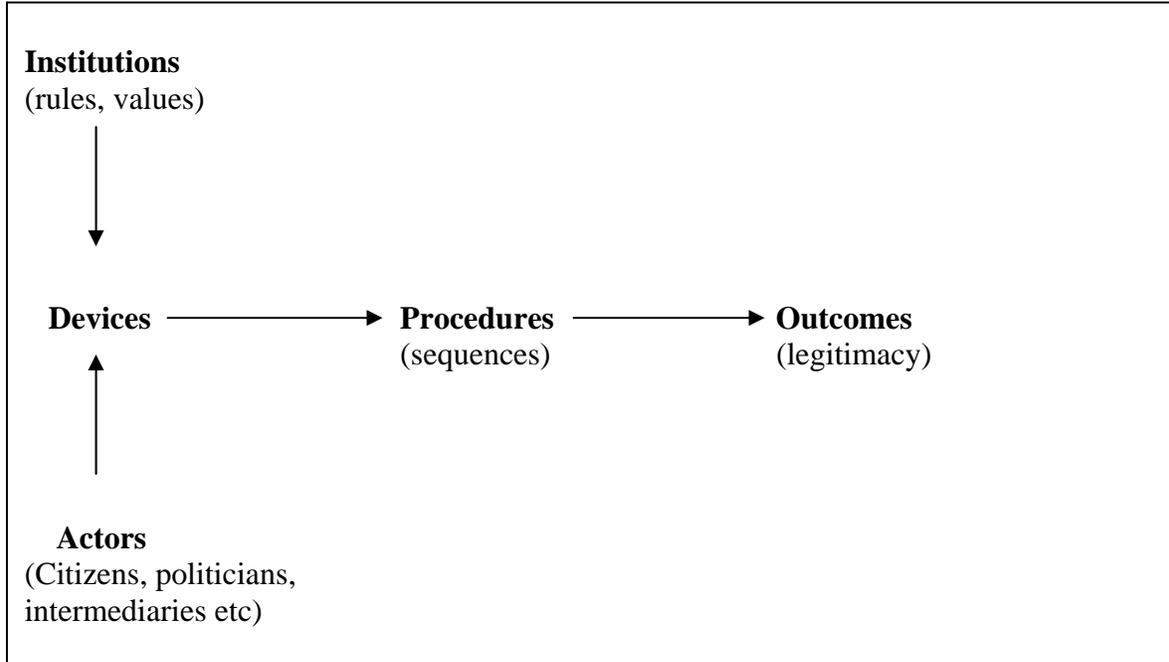
The term e-democracy captures more than simply technologically facilitated access to government. It implies new ways of doing democracy, either by enhancing traditional processes of representative democracy or by moving towards more deliberative, participatory or direct modes. In reality, it probably implies a combination of different democratic forms and practices which both build on and change existing institutions.

e-democracy and democracy offline

The term e-democracy normally refers to a set of devices that facilitate democratic processes. However, in defining e-democracy it is important to consider such devices in the context of the other features of democracy. Figure 1 summarises the component parts and their relationship to wider democracy.

¹ Trechsel, A., R. Kies, et al. (2002). Evaluation of the use of new technologies in order to facilitate democracy in Europe: European Parliament STOA Report. Brussels, European Parliament.

Figure 1: The component parts of democracy



Democracy, therefore, consists of a combination of these parts:

Institutions are norms and practices which encapsulate the values of democracy. They are the rules of the game through which democracy works: they determine who holds power, how issues come onto the agenda and so on. Institutions consist of both the formal rules (constitutional law, electoral law etc.) and more informal but nonetheless well established rules through which democracy really works (expectations around canvassing, the role of elected members etc.). Importantly, institutions reflect the historical context of democratic development in a particular place and the choices that have been made in the past. Consequently, while outcomes are independent of institutions, the same institutions shape the relationship between devices, actors and procedures. Because they reflect entrenched patterns of distributional advantage, institutions are notoriously difficult to change.

Devices are the mechanisms through which particular democratic actions are undertaken. The most obvious of these are elections which select representatives but other democratic devices such as referendums, citizen juries and so on are also relevant. The key point about devices is that they are the primary means through which various actors participate in democracy.

Actors most obviously include citizens, politicians and political leaders. However, they can also include the intermediary bodies through which politics works: political parties, the news media and the organisations of civil society, as well as business interests. Different devices may be used to bring different actors into the democratic process at

various times, depending upon the institutional rules and norms that shape the democratic process. Actors, of course, may also be excluded (either deliberately or implicitly) by particular devices (elections, for example, exclude organised interests, businesses and so on from formal participation: they aggregate the preferences of individuals).

Procedures consist of sequences of devices that lead to a legitimate democratic **outcome**. Sequences may include several devices (e.g. deliberative discussion forums, public meetings, negotiative processes and some form of voting). However, the key point is that, in following particular sequences, the outcomes of democratic processes are considered to be legitimate by all, even when some disagree with the decision.

The key point of this discussion is that e-democracy is primarily about democratic devices: most contemporary e-democracy applications focus upon particular devices for engaging citizens and largely ignore the institutional context, the impact of new devices on other actors and so on. However, devices are not neutral: they implicitly or deliberately facilitate the participation of some actors and the exclusion of others. They are also implicitly involved in seeking to reinforce or change institutions: for example, webcasting is designed explicitly to reinforce the transparency and accountability of representatives, bolstering existing institutions of representative democracy. By contrast, online discussion forums are designed to bring new actors into the political process and create more deliberative domains for democracy. Consequently, when thinking about e-democracy it is necessary to focus not only upon the device but also upon how it relates to existing institutions, various actors, and the sequences or procedures that it is being implicated in. This observation provides the first component of the CAHDE challenge.

The wider challenge of democracy in Europe

The Council of Europe has already undertaken a significant analysis of the challenges and opportunities facing European democracy, and has made a broad range of recommendations on how democracy can be enhanced for the 21st century.² It is not the intention to repeat that exercise here. However, the key points from that report are worth reiterating here in so far as the tools of e-democracy have the potential to address many of the challenges and opportunities set out in that report.

The agenda for democratic reform in Europe has gathered pace in recent years for a number of reasons:

- An awareness of a growing democratic deficit, characterised by such problems as: declining participation (especially among the young); declining trust in political

² See: Pratchett, L. and V. Lowndes (2004). Developing Democracy in Europe: An Analytical Summary of the Council of Europe's Acquis. Strasbourg, Council of Europe Publishing.

Schmitter, P., A. Trechsel, et al. (2004). The Future of Democracy in Europe: Trends, Analyses and Reforms. Strasbourg, Council of Europe Publishing.

institutions; alienation and a sense of disenfranchisement among certain groups, and the growth of extremism and racism.

- The expansion of democracy into central and eastern Europe which has created greater tensions in democratic practice due to such factors as the absence of a well developed civic infrastructure in many countries, the ongoing problem of corruption and the general difficulties associated with building democratic institutions in countries that lack the economic and political cultures to support them.
- The changing forms of governance that have been precipitated by global economic and political trends such as new public management, the growing power of trans-national capital and the limits to self-government created by such trends. In addition, the problem of individuation manifests itself, in which consumers relate to specific services as individuals with particular needs and preferences, rather than as citizens with collective responsibilities.

Many of these points have little to do directly with e-democracy but they represent both the context in which e-democracy initiatives are being developed and the problems that member states are seeking to address in experimenting with or implementing particular tools. As such, they represent the second component of the CAHDE challenge.

Issues/Discussion points for CAHDE

- 1.1 What does the committee understand e-democracy to include? In particular, how does it distinguish e-democracy initiatives from broader e-government activities (if at all)?*
- 1.2 Which institutions and actors should be the subject of e-democracy?*
- 1.3 Which contemporary democratic problems should e-democracy initiatives be most concerned with?*
- 1.4 How do recent e-democracy initiatives relate to offline developments and activities?*

SECTION 2: CURRENT PRACTICE IN EUROPEAN e-DEMOCRACY

Many countries in Europe are already experimenting with aspects of e-democracy. Some, such as Estonia and Switzerland, are developing significant reputations for their experiments with e-voting. Others, such as the UK, have attempted comprehensive programmes of e-participation, providing both experimentation and development of a range of tools. This section describes the various initiatives that are under way while the next provides a framework for understanding their relevance to wider democratic problems and opportunities.

At this stage, the paper will not provide a critical analysis of the different initiatives but will simply outline their relevance: a more critical position is adopted in the future sections. The list of initiatives that follows is intended to be indicative of the range of different applications (devices) that are being developed rather than a comprehensive taxonomy. In reality, there will be many nuanced variations on this range.

Enhancing transparency

One of the most obvious points about the Internet and other advanced digital technologies is that they offer the possibility for greatly improving the transparency of governments. Governments can use the technologies to provide citizens with more information about what they do and offer more opportunities for citizens to observe decision-making in action. Such information can be made available to citizens quickly. Moreover, the costs to citizens in accessing information, in both monetary terms and time, can also be greatly reduced.

- **Online publishing** - The Internet has provided much greater opportunity for public bodies to make all of their formal documents (annual reports, budgets, minutes of meetings and so on) available to the public at relatively little cost and very quickly. Since 1997, the British government has published all of its consultation and policy documents online, making them virtually free and available instantly to all citizens who choose to access them: in the past, each document would have cost the price of a published book (€15-€20) and would take several weeks to be available through bookshops. Such documents are no longer the preserve of specialist groups but can be accessed by all citizens.
- **Webcasting** – the advent of webcasting technologies means that public bodies can make their meetings available to all citizens without them having to be physically present. Webcasting allows citizens to watch public meetings from remote locations (including their homes, offices and so on), both as they actually happen (in real time), and after the event by accessing archives. Through hyperlinks citizens can have access to all of the relevant documentation that is shaping the decision. Perhaps most importantly, however, citizens can select those parts of a meeting that are of interest to them without having to engage other parts of a meeting for which they have no interest.

While webcasts will not always increase significantly the number of people taking part in meetings, on important topics webcasts can provide the basis for large scale participation. Devon County Council in the UK, for example, has been webcasting its meetings since November 2003 and now attracts up to 1,200 visits to each meeting (www.devon.gov.uk).

Supporting political activity

As well as making public bodies more transparent, the technologies can also enhance the transparency of elected politicians, helping them to be more accountable to their electorate. There are a number of ways that elected politicians are using the technologies to support their activities:

- ***Politicians' websites*** – There is great potential for every politician to have their own presence on the internet. Such an internet presence helps politicians to set out their own information independently of their political party (although often in collaboration with their party) and to communicate directly with their constituency. After the initial set-up costs of the website, running costs are very low. Creating interactive features or setting up email or SMS message sign-ups add to the value of such websites. However, several problems present themselves: first, many politicians are unacquainted with the technology and are uncomfortable with using it (especially older politicians); second, to be accessible politicians ideally need a domain name that indicates their political status (e.g. .gov); third, it is necessary to be able to authenticate websites to prevent malicious spoofing (as happened in the 2004 US Presidential elections).
- ***Weblogs*** – A significant development since 2004 has been the explosion in the number of people maintaining diaries of their activities and thoughts online. Blog enthusiasts claim that more than 20 per cent of Americans now have a blog. For politicians, in particular, such blogs provide the perfect opportunity to demonstrate to citizens what they have done over the past day or so to support them, and to give a clear indication of how well they understand contemporary issues that might concern constituents and how they are responding to them. More sophisticated blogs are now highly interactive, with opportunities for readers to pose their own questions and thoughts. Perhaps the best known blog is that of Etienne Chouard from France who, in writing about his own concerns with the proposed EU constitution, galvanised support for the 'non' vote. Political blogs on such systems as ReadMyDay.org are also setting the standards for this type of activity.
- ***Monitoring and accountability systems*** – The flip side of political accountability has been developments among the organisations of civil society that have tried to impose greater accountability on them. Stembijzer in the Netherlands provides a facility for voters to find out which politician best fits their own profile by filling in a questionnaire in advance of voting that is then

matched to how politicians have answered the same questions. Various countries now have systems that monitor how politicians have behaved in Parliament: their attendance, how they have voted on each issue and so on (e.g. in the UK, TheyWorkForYou.org)

- ***e-Voting*** – This section would not be complete without some reference to various countries’ attempts to enhance voting by offering remote election facilities over the internet, telephone, SMS text messaging and interactive digital TV. Estonia has held public elections (November 2005) using e-voting. Switzerland has also experimented with e-voting in local elections with significant support from its Federal government. Indeed, the town of Baluch in the canton of Zurich has developed (with the support of the e-Democracy Centre at the University of Geneva) a complete elections platform that covers everything from providing an online video election address, detailed candidate details, through to online voting. Other countries, such as the UK, have also held experiments with e-voting although concerns with security (emanating especially in the USA) have slowed the rate of adoption in many countries.³

Improving consultation

As well as enhancing transparency and accountability of politicians, the technologies are also being used to support greater responsiveness to citizen demands and to provide opportunities for better citizen engagement. Initiatives include:

- ***online consultation tools*** – it is relatively simple for public authorities to provide facilities within their websites that will allow citizens to respond to consultation exercises. Online questionnaires and so on are now becoming very popular. In Spain, the Ciudadanos2010 cities provide a range of tools for developing such initiatives. These can be supplemented by developing online panels of citizens who can be consulted at regular intervals (for example, www.Bristol.gov.uk). A further development has been attempts to make such consultations more relevant to citizens by allowing them to select in advance the types of issues they are prepared to be consulted on. For example, *micro-democracy* initiatives in the UK allow citizens to enter their post code (zip code) and the types of policy issues that concern them (e.g. education, transport, planning etc) into a website. When a public authority is consulting on these issues and in that geographic area, it sends an email or SMS text message to all registered citizens, inviting their participation.
- ***e-petitioning*** – The Scottish Parliament (working with the Teledemocracy Centre at Napier University) has led a linked development by providing online resources for citizens to develop online petitions. This software provides further

³ Although e-voting is an important component of the e-democracy it is beyond the terms of reference for CAHDE as it has already been addressed by the Council of Europe through its recommendation on e-voting (Legal, operational and technical standards for e-voting, Recommendation Rec(2004)11 and explanatory memorandum, Council of Europe Publishing).

opportunity for citizens to develop their own forms of engagement but in a way that means it is structured into policy makers who will need to pay attention to, and respond to, the demands of citizens.

- ***e-participation*** – in some advanced cases new technologies have been used to support actual decision-making among citizens. A European Union funded project (e-Agora) has trialled SMS text messaging and email engagement among citizens in Brazil and Chile, enabling them to take parting participatory budgeting activities through new technologies.⁴ This project is interesting because it has targeted lower socio-economic groups in particular in order to get them more engaged in the political process.

Building democratic knowledge

One of the other applications that governments are developing is the use of new technologies for democracy education: providing new ways for citizens to learn about politics and their rights and responsibilities. Such initiatives are focused especially upon young people, as it is often perceived that they are the most likely to use the technologies. However, others are more widely targeted.

- ***online games for citizen education*** – in the UK, the Local e-Democracy National Project (www.e-democracy.gov.uk) has developed several games that are aimed at helping young people understand the political process and the complexities that elected politicians may face in trying to balance competing priorities within scarce resources. While not widely used, they do provide a template and lessons for how such games could reach out to one section of the population that are currently disengaged.
- ***Budget modelling*** – another way that citizens can learn about politics is to be given more opportunity to engage in the decision-making process through a modelling process. In France, central government helps citizens to understand its current budgeting challenges by providing an online resource where citizens can, themselves, take virtual budgeting decisions. As well as helping citizens to learn about the complexities of the nation's budget, this website also enable the French Government to collect information about citizens' preferences.

Bridging social and political inequalities

One of the problems that most governments face is ensuring that all citizens have equal access to services: especially those from lower socio-economic groups. Those groups who are least likely to have access to modern technologies are often those who are also most likely to be disengaged from the political process. At the same time, they are also

⁴ Virapitarin, M. and T. Peixoto, Eds. (2006). *e-AGORA, Le Livre Blanc de la e-démocratie locale: Réflexions et Perspectives*. Paris, Ville d'Issy-les-Moulineaux.

the same people who are most likely to be the target of democratic engagement strategies and so on. Two initiatives are being developed in various European countries which seek to bridge the so-called digital divide and which provide the potential for widespread electronic engagement.

- ***Public access points*** – the European Union funded ‘Telecities’ project has helped a number of cities across Europe to develop (among other things) networks of online kiosks that provide citizens with free online access at locations across the city. It is also becoming increasingly common for public libraries to provide free internet access to all citizens.
- ***Community wifi hotspots*** – An alternative method for getting citizens online has developed through wireless technologies. In Budapest, there are several free to use wifi points that the local government provides in some of the more deprived parts of the city, explicitly aimed at getting more citizens online.

Facilitating community development

Much of what has been discussed so far has addressed relationships between governments and citizens (G2C) and, especially, those initiatives that governments (in the form of either public bodies or elected politicians) have developed to encourage greater levels of political participation and engagement. However, there is also an important role for technologies that support the strengthening of relationships between citizens or among groups of citizens. Again, governments can be important in providing the facilities and space for online communities to develop.

- ***Community resources online*** – Some governments, especially at the local level, provide resources for community groups and other not-for-profit organisations to have their own web presence, hosted free at the point of use. These resources may also include other tools as part of the package, including database and mailing facilities. The VOICE products offered by the International Centre of Excellence for Local e-Democracy (ICELE) are one such suite of developments (see www.e-democracy.gov.uk). These products allow community groups to self-organise on the internet, providing a virtual form of citizen-to-citizen organisation.
- ***Building campaigns*** – Another form of C2C self-organisation has emerged through internet applications that have been specifically designed to support grass-roots political movements. The Council of Europe has supported the development of CAIRNS: an internet system that helps to guide grass-roots movements through the political process. In the UK, the BBC Action Network (formerly BBC iCan) has a similar purpose: it allows users to search and link-up with other citizens who share the same concerns as them in their locality, in order to begin political campaigns (www.bbc.co.uk/dna/actionnetwork/).

These platforms, of course, require citizens to be motivated and have a particular interest around which they want to engage. At the very least, however, they provide an important complement to those initiatives which are directed by governments.

Enhancing deliberative spaces

At the other extreme from those applications which are seeking to improve the transparency or responsiveness of elected representatives are attempts to enhance the opportunities for citizens to engage in online deliberative spaces. The argument here is that where citizens have the opportunity to engage with one another in a public space they are more likely to be accepting of different opinions and more likely to change their views to accommodate competing perspectives. Thus, a ‘civic commons in cyberspace’ will create more responsible citizens and more consensual politics.⁵

- ***Online forums*** – Forums have existed online for some time but are becoming increasingly popular, especially at the local level. In Hungary they are one of the main e-democracy developments at the local level, with local governments hosting their own online discussions, some of which are widely attended. Forums can vary from email distribution lists to which participants post their thoughts through to various discussion forums and chat rooms. A key distinction in such forums is between those that have some form of moderation and those that allow complete freedom to citizens to say what they want. Moderated forums tend to have better discussions because they can prevent abusive or unconstructive comments and ensure that no individual dominates the discussion. However, moderated forums also run the risk of being accused of censorship on the part of the moderators: an accusation which is likely to inhibit membership.

Issues/Discussion points for CAHDE

- 2.1 *What types of initiative does the committee want to focus its work around?*
- 2.2 *Are there other e-democracy initiatives that the committee is aware of that should be added to the overview offered here?*
- 2.3 *Are different devices relevant in different contexts or for different issues?*

⁵ Blumler, J. and S. Coleman (2001). Realising Democracy Online: A Civic Commons in Cyberspace. London, Institute for Public Policy Research.

SECTION 3: DEVICES IN DEMOCRATIC PERSPECTIVE

These cases provide an inventory of the types of initiatives that are currently found in various countries across Europe. However, as indicated earlier, it is also useful to think about how these particular devices relate to the wider context of democracy. One way of undertaking this process is to reflect upon the effects of e-democracy along two dimensions: First, there is the extent to which devices are seeking to affect the institutions of representation or citizenship:

Representation – e-democracy devices may support or enhance the mechanisms of representation (for example, e-voting) or improve the functioning of representatives (intranet websites). They may also serve to enhance the transparency and accountability of elected representatives or public administrations (through Blogging, webcasting of meetings, online newspapers, publishing minutes and records on the web and so on).

Citizenship – e-democracy devices may also be used to support more participatory forms of citizenship, whether through consultation devices (e-panels, e-consultation and so on) through to deliberative mechanisms (such as online forums) or ‘bottom-up’ initiatives that seek to support the development of citizen action (from e-petitioning devices through to supporting community organisation online).

These two points are not necessarily in competition with one another. Indeed, the institutions of representative government are wholly dependent upon concepts of citizenship. Moreover, the different points do not capture homogenous concepts. At its most simple, the distinction between Schumpeter’s ‘realist’ view that leaders and representatives should be left to govern between elections⁶ and theories concerned with more participatory⁷ or communitarian⁸ forms of democracy provide a useful contrast. More recently, concerns with the ‘deliberative turn’ in democratic theory⁹ have provided other ways of conceptualising political engagement that emphasise political learning through dialogue. However, it is the relationships between these two extremes and the emphasis that particular devices are giving to different actors that is important. The tools of e-democracy may be seeking either to support existing relationships between citizens and the institutions of representative democracy, or indeed, to change fundamentally, this relationship.

Second, the distinction between devices that provide communication and those that seek to enhance interaction is important. Much of the same technologies recur here, but it is the way in which they map against the other dimension that adds value to this distinction.

⁶ Schumpeter, J. (1943). Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy. London, Routledge.

⁷ Pateman, C. (1970). Participation and Democratic Theory. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

⁸ cf. Etzioni, A. (1995). The Spirit of Community. London, Fontana.

Tam, H. (1998). Communitarianism: A New Agenda for Politics and Citizenship. Basingstoke, Macmillan.

⁹ Dowding, K., R. Goodin, E. et al., Eds. (2004). Justice and Democracy. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Communication - at its most simple, the internet and other new technologies provide the opportunity for public bodies to communicate more effectively with citizens. Devices here might vary from enhancing democratic education among particular citizen groups (such as young people) through to enhancing transparency by improving access to information, webcasting meetings and so on. It may also include opportunities for politicians to communicate with citizens and, indeed, the opportunity for citizens to contact public bodies (for example, e-voting is effectively a one-way form of communication in which citizens preferences are communicated).

Interaction – this other end of the scale clearly involves communication but it implies a more reflexive and iterative approach to communication, in which technologies facilitate two or more actors to engage in a dialogue. Online forums clearly sit at this end of the scale but other activities, such as participatory budgeting or those that facilitate community development are also significant here.

Figure 2: Examples of e-democracy initiatives

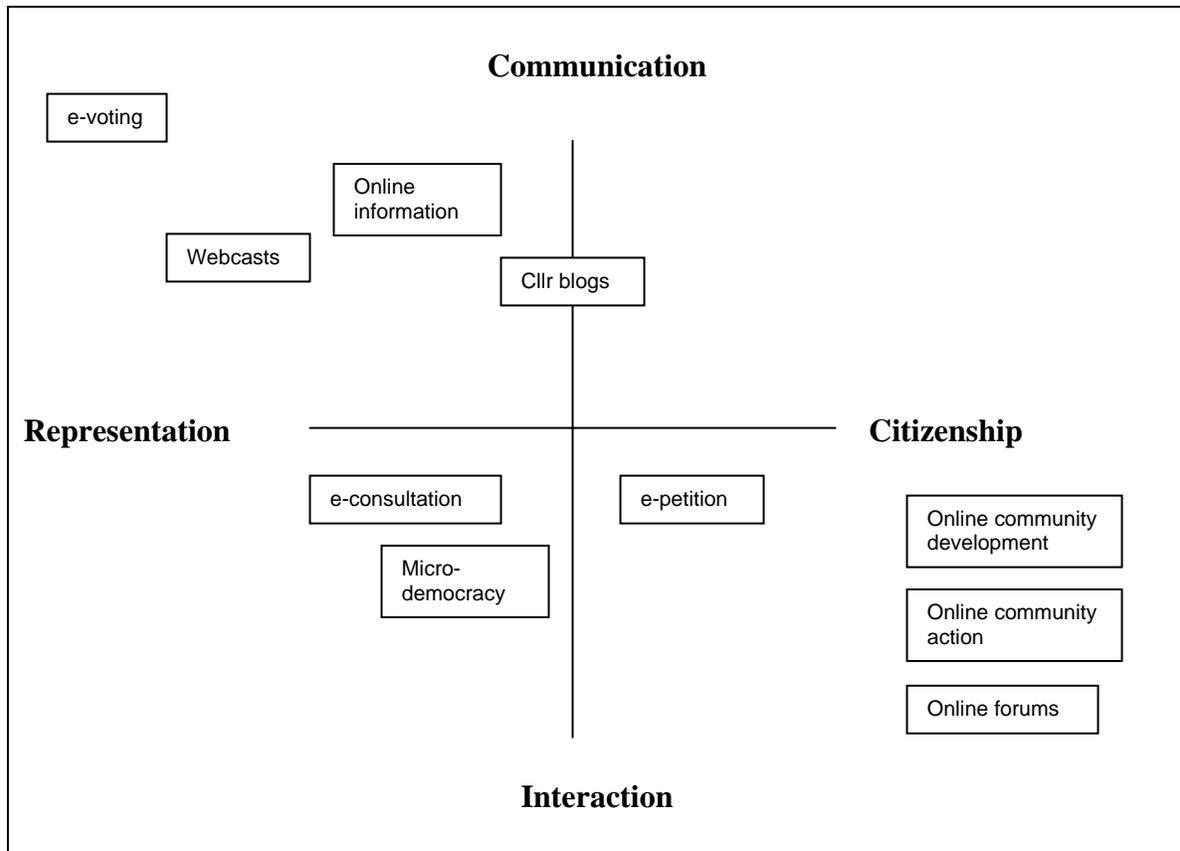


Figure 2 illustrates the relationship between these two dimensions, with some examples of different initiatives. These examples, however, are illustrative only. The way in which devices are used (and sequenced) may affect where they are placed on the matrix. Blogs, for example, may be very interactive and may also lead to great levels of citizen debate.

This framework provides a way of understanding not only how different initiatives might relate to one another but also their potential impact upon democracy. Importantly, it does not make assumptions about what is the best form of e-democracy or what is most needed in a particular circumstance: it simply reflects the effects of each activity. Consequently, it provides a mechanism with which to understand how specific initiatives may change or reinforce particular aspects of contemporary democracy. Using this framework it is possible to compare not only individual initiatives but also the range of initiatives that comprise the suite of e-democracy activities in a country. The challenge for CAHDE at this point is to develop an understanding of how different devices will affect democracy.

Issues/Discussion points for CAHDE

- 3.1 How do existing initiatives in the host countries relate to the framework offered above?*
- 3.2 How far do e-democracy 'solutions' relate to deliberate democratic design on the part of those who are sponsoring such initiatives?*
- 3.3 Are there unintentional consequences for democracy in implementing particular devices?*
- 3.4 Is it possible to implement devices that try to affect different democratic problems at the same time?*

SECTION 4: ISSUES AND CONCERNS

Regardless of the nature and direction of the devices being adopted, e-democracy raises a number of challenges. This section focuses on the issues and concerns which these technologies and their application give rise to. Some such as the issues around the digital divide are well known. Others, however, bear more reflection. Again, the list presented here is not necessarily exclusive or comprehensive. Instead, it seeks to capture the main issues and concerns that arise. There is a significant role for CAHDE in helping the Council of Europe to navigate its way through these issues and concerns.

e-Government *versus* e-Participation

Most governments are already developing at least some e-government applications which enable citizens to transact with public bodies in various ways, although the state of development varies considerably between countries.¹⁰ However, there is a significant question around whether e-government is a necessary or sufficient precondition for effective e-participation? In particular, should governments be seeking to develop synergy across e-government programmes or should e-participation be taken as a separate domain, dependent on different infrastructures and subject to different institutional norms? Certainly, e-government and e-democracy often depend upon the same technologies and can be seen as two sides of the same coin. At the same time, however, their function is very different. Many e-government applications are about performing transactions with individuals in as simple and efficient manner as possible (filing a tax return, making a planning application etc). By contrast, e-democracy initiatives are often seeking to foster more sustained relationships with citizens and may be seeking to encourage a sense of collective engagement and responsibility. The way in which they are implemented and the factors that might be used to evaluate their success, therefore, should be significantly different. In this respect, e-government and e-democracy are incompatible processes that should be subject to very different strategies. Indeed, treating e-democracy as an additional component in an e-government strategy may militate against its long term success.

Early adoption *versus* inclusion

There is no doubt that the new technologies can help develop particular democratic strengths. However, one of the problems that all e-government related implementations face is the extent to which new technologies are skewed towards particular sections of society. The digital divide is significant for any internet or other technology led development. In most countries, well educated people in full-time employment are the most likely to have access to the technologies and the ability to take full advantage of them. Those living in more deprived conditions, those who are poorly educated, the elderly and so on are least likely to have access to the same technologies. Any e-democracy application runs the risk of further advantaging the already privileged and

¹⁰ For details see the United Nations Global e-Readiness Report available at www.unpan.org/eqovkb

further alienating those groups that are already marginalised from conventional political processes.

Certain e-democracy initiatives, of course, deliberately target particular groups who are deemed to be marginalised: young people, especially, are often a target (for example, the Highlands and Islands authority in Scotland run their Youth Parliament online), as are those who have mobility problems or other impairments (for example, the municipality of Pilisvorosvar in Hungary has developed a website especially for people with visual impairments). However, just because such facilities are made available does not necessarily lead to greater inclusion. Even where citizens are given special access to the technology they may lack the wider skills and aptitude to take advantage of them, especially where they require complex forms of engagement such as searching through records of meetings or engaging in online discussions and so on. Well educated people who use these technologies every day as part of their working and social lives will continue to benefit more from e-democracy than the politically marginalised poor. The challenge for governments, therefore, is to balance the desire to push forward e-democracy initiatives without, at the same time, exacerbating patterns of social and political exclusion.

Top down *versus* bottom up

Most e-democracy initiatives are being sponsored and developed by governments, especially local governments. There are some organisations of civil society that are developing e-democracy tools (e.g. Smartvote in Switzerland, My Society in the UK) but much of the activity is primarily the preserve of governments. This observation is not surprising given the costs of getting e-democracy initiatives off of the ground. However, there is a danger that such top-down initiatives will stifle or capture grass-roots democratic activity, leaving little space for civil society to develop democratic processes of its own. Governments need to be sensitive to the fact that simply because they have offered particular avenues and devices for engagement, these may not suit all citizens. The social software that VOICE, CAIRNS and BBC Action Network offer are all examples of how grass roots activity can be prompted. However, all e-democracy initiatives create institutional forms and political opportunity structures which encourage political engagement in some forms and discourage other types of engagement. Governments need to avoid over-specifying e-democracy to the point that it stifles any bottom-up initiatives. The real danger of overly-comprehensive e-democracy initiatives is that they can further alienate governments from their citizens, especially as they place a further potential hurdle to face to face communication.

Informing *versus* information overload

As was noted in section 2, a major function of e-democracy devices is to enhance the transparency and accountability of governments. However, the challenge for governments in this respect is to provide information that is accessible to citizens or their

intermediaries. Much of the documentation of government (minutes of meetings and so on) is arcane and not easily understood by the ordinary citizen who is not engaged in the minutiae of meetings. Similarly, the processes are equally dense and often difficult to understand. Where governments simply place information online the initiative is unlikely to greatly enhance transparency. Indeed, the massive volume of information available on any policy can serve to obfuscate rather than clarify actions and responsibilities. Information needs to be structured so that citizens can quickly find the information that concerns them without significant effort on their part.

Of course, information flows between governments and citizens have traditionally been mediated through other organisations: news media, community or pressure groups, political parties and so on. If e-democracy is to be relevant it needs to work with these intermediaries and not seek to circumvent them. A concern with e-democracy is that it is often focused too directly at individual citizens and not sufficiently at the bodies of collective action that seek to represent citizens' interests.

Supply and demand

A fundamental question that needs to be asked about e-democracy is: who wants it? Much of the evidence on e-democracy shows that there is not an enormous latent demand among citizens to use the tools currently being developed. Most projects report fairly modest levels of take-up among citizens, although those that have used e-democracy devices generally feel very happy with them. Even high profile e-voting experiments attract fairly low levels of turnout compared with more traditional methods. The problem of low take-up was illustrated particularly in the Madrid Participa experiment in 2004, which allowed for a multi-channel public consultation exercise among 136,000 citizens in a district of Spain's capital city, Madrid. Despite significant publicity, less than 1,000 citizens participated (0.65 per cent) and even fewer used the various electronic channels available.

Such observations do not invalidate either specific experiments (which provide valuable lessons) or e-participation initiatives more generally. However, these observations do highlight the need for governments to proceed carefully. Expensive failures may have a negative effect upon democracy. It is necessary for governments to build the habit among citizens for using and trusting electronic channels for political engagement and this habit may need a slow development rather than a headlong rush. In particular, it is the wider context of citizen participation (the issues that they are encouraged to engage with and the ways in which they are responded to) that makes e-democracy more or less relevant.

Individuation

A further issue with e-democracy tools concerns the ways in which they are being used and, in particular, the habits that they are seeing to foster among citizens. In part, such

goals are the concern of the framework set out in Section 3. However, one particular issue around e-democracy is the problem of individuation that the technologies may accentuate or even accelerate. The literature on social capital has noted a significant trend towards more individualised forms of engagement which, it argues, undermines the sense of reciprocity and trust that lies at the heart of successful democracy. Patterns of public service consumption that have developed from private sector models encourage individual relationships with government. The danger is that repertoires of action and habit emerge which are highly individualised and which militate against the building of cooperation or consensus within communities. The tools of e-democracy, especially as they mediate relations electronically rather than face to face, run the risk of adding to habits of individuation.

The local/global tension

A significant problem for governments is the relationship between e-democracy initiatives that are focused on their territory and the global nature of the internet and other technologies. Governments may want to restrict engagement to those that are citizens of their territory but may find people from outside of their jurisdiction participating in initiatives (although technological barriers can limit this problem). More importantly, however, citizens may find it increasingly tempting to use the technologies to engage with like-minded people across conventional local, regional or national borders. From a broad political perspective such engagement is healthy and exciting. However, from the perspective of individual governments, such trends may further undermine engagement with the institutions of the nation state. In the worse case scenario, the advent of e-democracy may provide citizens with the tools to mobilise against incumbent governments.

None of these issues and concerns implies that governments should be scrapping or avoiding e-democracy. Indeed, it is actually the reverse that is being argued here. As the framework set out in Section 3 shows, e-democracy can have effects in a whole range of ways. However, in implementing e-democracy, all those involved need to be sensitive to these points.

Issues/Discussion points for CAHDE

- 4.1 Which issues and concerns should be the main focus for CAHDE ?*
- 4.2 Are there other issues or concerns that CAHDE should be addressing?*

SECTION 5: UNDERSTANDING E-DEMOCRACY IN EUROPE – TOWARDS AN AGENDA FOR CAHDE

It is up to the Committee to interpret its own terms of reference. However, it seems likely that the Committee will want to collect, analyse and compare information on the wide range of initiatives that are taking place in member countries. It seems likely that the Committee will need to address each of the following:

- Identifying best practice in individual countries – this process will need to include sub-central and local government initiatives as this is where much of the real work is happening.
- Provide a template for reporting and analysing initiatives – one such tool developed by De Montfort University in collaboration with the University of Geneva is attached as an appendix. The Committee may want to adapt this tool to their needs.
- Create outputs – The Committee needs to reflect upon how it will show best practice and lessons in the context of varying patterns of e-democracy across Europe. One solution might be to adopt Harvard style cases studies for the most interesting initiatives from which others might learn.

Other related research activities

There are a number of other researchers investigating e-democracy developments. The ones which are most relevant to this committee are:

- De Montfort University / University of Geneva programme of comparative e-democracy – this programme is developing a comparative database of e-democracy initiatives in Europe <http://edc.unige.ch/projects/>
- European Democracy Observatory at the European University Institute, Florence – this observatory is developing a broad set of instruments on European democracy, which includes a special focus on e-democracy www.iue.it
- The United Nations, through UNDESA, is developing comparative measures for e-participation as part of its wider e-readiness activities www.unpan.org/egovkb
- DEMO-net e-participation network (a Network of Excellence funded by the European Union's sixth framework) is bringing together academics from a range of disciplines and from all across Europe together to work on e-participation issues www.demo-net.org

APPENDIX 1: The De Montfort/Geneva research tool

This appendix provides a brief summary of a research tool developed by the two universities and which is now being rolled out in various countries across Europe.

Method

The method has been developed to enable further country studies to be added over time, thereby facilitating the development of a growing database of local e-democracy experience that can be systematically compared over time.

The method involved a specialist analyst in each country identifying the main local e-democracy initiatives taking place in that country. The analyst then interviewed key experts associated with each initiative, using a structured interview template.¹¹ In addition, the analyst produced an overview of developments in their country, highlighting the key themes and issues that had emerged from the interviews.

Five countries were selected as providing a broad cross-section of the e-democracy experience to pilot this tool. The five countries selected cover a number of dimensions that are normally taken into account when comparing local democracy in Europe including northern and southern European countries, and both old and recently acceded EU countries.¹² In addition, in selecting the countries the team were particularly keen to find contrasting experiences of democratic development and those that have already developed a reputation for e-government or e-democracy. Consequently, the five countries selected were:

- **Estonia** – represents a Nordic commitment to new technologies – a small country but with material commitment to and reputation for innovative e-government and e-democracy.
- **Hungary** – represents a recent accession EU country (2004) spanning a significant territory.
- **Spain** – represents a major southern EU country with a substantial commitment to (and experience of) local democracy.
- **Switzerland** – represents one of the leading European countries on e-democracy (especially e-voting) but outside of the EU.

¹¹ Copies of the instruments are available on the project website: http://edc.unige.ch/projects/index.php?page_id=1

¹² For example, see John, P. (2001). *Local Governance in Western Europe*. London, Sage.

- **United Kingdom** – represents a major European Union country (in economic and population terms) with a substantial commitment to e-government and e-democracy.

The collection of data in these countries took place between April and June 2006, although some of the initiatives analysed had been in existence, or had occurred, some time before these dates. In total, 49 cases were analysed in the five countries, including both the most prominent examples of e-democracy in each country and a combination of ‘typical’ and ‘unusual’ examples of e-democracy initiatives.

Data collection was premised on the need to understand not only the range of initiatives that are underway or have taken place in each country but also the institutional context. Consequently, the analytical framework was operationalised through a series of more specific topic headings and questions that formed the basis of the ‘expert interviews’:

1. Basis of initiative
 - Who initiated the project? (Type of actor: political leader, citizens, civil servant, private sector) and was it bottom-up or top-down?
 - When was it initiated?
 - How was it developed from the initial idea?
 - How does this initiative relate to other democracy initiatives in the area (both online and offline)?
2. Management
 - Who had overall responsibility for the project (position etc?)
 - What partners were there and what were their roles?
 - Were there other key actors?
 - How was the project financed?
 - What plans are there for sustainability/follow up?
3. Focus
 - What technologies were used?
 - What was the focus of the initiative (e.g. a neighbourhood, a particular group of citizens etc)?
 - What policy issues were the subject of the initiative?
 - How was participation in the initiative promoted?
4. Lessons (where relevant)
 - What problems did the initiative encounter (e.g. central/regional government support, finance, legal barriers etc) and how were these addressed?
 - Were there any specific financial or technical constraints which inhibited the development of the initiative?
 - What factors provided political support for the initiative?
 - How did the local government address the digital divide issue (citizen's access to the relevant technologies)? What understanding does the

municipality have of citizens' access to the relevant technologies (digital divide issues)?

- What (if any) are the demands/expectations from citizens for such initiatives?

5. Evaluation

- What were the main achievements of initiatives?
- What criteria have been used to evaluate the initiative (e.g. degree of participation, responsiveness of decision-makers, citizen satisfaction etc)?
- What initiatives are emerging as a result of this one?