

## NEW TECHNOLOGIES FOR SUSTAINING DEMOCRACY AND PARTICIPATION

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**Abstract.** New technologies lead public organizations to sustain public trust, promote public interest and behave as responsive institutions fostering citizenship and collaboration in order to uphold values of representative democracy in front of an increasing disenchantment of citizens for traditional representative and democratic institutions facing the challenge of dealing with a mixed policy embracing elements of representative and direct democracy. Technologies are driving public institutions to sustain a participatory democracy and leading citizens to act as active co-producers of social, democratic and public value. Sustainability of public organizations seems to rely on embracing new technologies for opening up to contribution and participation of citizens in order to make effectively participatory and democratic government agencies and public administration.

**Keywords:** *new technologies; public organizations; e-democracy; e-participation; citizens.*

### Introduction

The role of information and communication technologies (ICTs) is to improve the relationship between government branch agencies and citizens in terms of public services and democratic values to be delivered and transmitted for future generations and wealth of community to support the development of society. The Internet and the technologies of information and communication help public organizations to sustain public trust and promote public interest as responsive institutions encouraging an active citizenship and collaboration by fostering democratic participation (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2003; Vigoda, 2002). Public organizations and institutions have to revitalize the public image in order to cope with a growing disengagement of citizens by providing new mechanisms of governance and collaboration (Bingham, Nabatchi & O'Leary, 2005) in order to support the structures of democracy by enhancing participation of citizens as means for creating and maintaining public value relying on dialogue and partnership between public organizations and various stakeholders. The aim of this paper is to elucidate how technology can drive public organizations to proceed towards a sustainable development by strengthening forms of democracy and encouraging the participation of citizens. This study is based on archival and qualitative data by analysis and review of the literature on the public sector for investigating how the advent of new technologies can help the development of democracy and participation connecting citizens with public administration open to accept the contribution of citizens to building knowledge and designing shared policies.

### **Public organizations as responsive institutions seeking legitimacy**

Public organizations as responsive institutions have to serve the public interest as result of dialogue with citizens based on a shared leadership and respect for people developing sustainable policies by making a meaningful contribution to community through a process of effective collaboration opening up to learning and change by interacting with citizens as partners (Bryer, 2006; Denhardt & Denhardt, 2003; Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000; Vigoda, 2002). Public organizations tend to contribute to democratic life by maintaining public trust underlying democracy gaining legitimacy and maintaining the organizational reputation as a set of beliefs about capacities, intentions and missions (Moynihan, Karpenter & Krause, 2014) seeking sustainability as a principle of governance driving decision-making processes that imply a higher degree of collective action across policy sectors (Fiorino, 2010). Today, public organizations having to interpret evolving values and preferences of communities should promote citizenship by encouraging public discussion, dialogue and integration with the community. Public organizations tend to set the agenda and facilitate sustainable solutions for public problems in order to realize the public interest by encouraging participation of citizens and shared responsibilities by involving citizens in government activities (Bourgon, 2007).

### **Building better relationships between public administration and citizens through technology**

Technology has made possible a greater access to the policy process as result of dialogue and shared values by enhancing the quality of citizens' participation (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000). The advent of the technology is driving public administration to redesign the relationship with citizens in terms of building both sustainable e-government and e-governance. While e-government refers to use of information technology to enable and improve the efficiency with which government services are provided to citizens (West, 2004), e-governance comprises the use of ICTs to support public services, government administration, and democratic processes in order to engage and improve an interactive relationship between government and citizenry. Public institutions increasingly tend to use the technologies of information and communication (ICTs) for involving citizens in policy-making in order to foster transparency, openness, and legitimacy. Public organizations are assessed because of delivering the expected value for citizens by developing e-government initiatives, by enforcing democratic and public values as impartiality, equity, honesty and fairness of government emphasizing a greater responsiveness from public administration to citizens (Cordella & Bonina, 2012). ICTs lead to new forms of governmental legitimacy and spaces of governance that reconcile the enforcement of outcomes beneficial for society and aspirations of individuals, groups, and communities (Navarra & Cornford, 2012). Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have an enabling role in establishing transformational change in the public sector by enhancing democratic processes and providing a dynamic environment for ongoing learning and action (Dawes, 2008) by making public organizations as open, responsive institutions willing to serve the interest of citizens (La Porte, Demchak & Jong, 2002). The introduction and promotion of new technologies of communication and information serve to solve the disconnection between people and governmental institutions in order to foster the public voice (Cavanaugh, 2000). New technologies help the transition of public

organizations in a new digital era for achieving a better government (Lips, 2012) by providing a clear leadership; to support the open and transparent government; by strengthening cross-government business capability; by improving operational ICT management. E-government as the use of information technology to enable and improve the efficiency of government service delivery contributes to enhancing the perception of responsiveness of public administration and reinforce process-based trust by sustaining interaction with citizens (Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006). The Internet is driving citizens to expect governments to promote transparency and interactivity in order to engender public trust (Moon, 2003).

### **Sustaining democracy through new technologies: lights and shadows**

Technology is opening up a new season for democratic systems, seems to be putting the democracy first by involving the citizen as the not merely recipient but the proactive user of technological tools and interpreter of will, and rights (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2003). The issues of the advent of new information and communication technologies are the e-government and e-democracy as innovative forms of managing public services and governing *res publica* by reshaping public administration in the last decade and redesigning governance in the future making citizens closer to governmental and public institutions (Lee, Chang & Berry, 2011). There are different definitions and perspectives about what is e-democracy. «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» (Trechsel et al., 2003, p.11). Päivärinta and Sæbø (2001) tend to develop a concept of e-democracy as a new and competitive form of communication and interaction. «The concept of E-Democracy refers to the use of information and communication technology (ICT) in political debates and decision-making processes, complementing or contrasting traditional means of communication» (Päivärinta & Sæbø, 2001, p.3). Thereby, the success of electronic democracy relies on the capacity to support and enable new forms of publicness within a public sphere (Tsagarousianou, 1998). Technology helps engage people in the development of democratic processes through enabling opportunities for obtaining information as requisite for engaging in deliberation, second phase desirable for participating in decision-making (Tsagarousianou, 1999). The quality of democratic governance is enhanced by Internet technologies if citizens are better informed (Kakabadse, Kakabadse & Kouzmin, 2003). The Internet and the technologies of information and communication making accessible data and information about parliamentary institutions and the legislative process lead citizens to exert influence on policy making (Grönlund, 2001) helping to reinvigorate traditional representative arrangements by leading representative systems to become as more decentralized, accessible and responsive (Zittel, 2003). ICTs contribute to better inform citizens about public issues and law making, facilitate debate by citizens approaching their parliamentarians before the vote (Milakovich, 2010). Thereby, ICTs positively contribute to democratic practice only in virtue of existing strong democracies (Malina, 1999). In modern societies characterized by complex decision-making, it is evident that political and representative assemblies tend to behave as mediators and referees in the transition from the representative democracy unable to solve uncertainty and complexity to governance networks (Klijn & Skelcher, 2007). Models of democracy in the information era develop along a *continuum* in which the parliamentary chain of steering may play a critical part or new kinds of democratic

practice are pointed (Bellamy, 1999). ICTs may be used as a means to reinforce the position of institutional politics in the system as a whole or to weaken this position and spread politics into society or outside the borders of the political system (Van Dijck, 2000). Internet technologies permit to restructure the linkages within the democratic representative system as to supplement the existing channels of political communication and information in virtue of Internet global capacity networking (Norris, 2000). Parliamentary institutions are embracing new technologies to connect with the public and inform, interact and engage citizens by coping with the increasing decline of confidence in democratic and public institutions disengagement and distrust of citizens feeling unheard by politicians (Lusoli, Ward & Gibson, 2006) as to avoid to become marginalized institutions under increasing pressure to present themselves accessible, transparent and open to the public (Coleman & Spiller, 2003). Thereby, some trends are perceived to be able to undermine the primacy and legitimacy of the electoral chain of command in western representative democracies: the overtaking of conventional politics by electoral media; the power of party discipline over representative institutions: the control of representative institutions by political executives; the displacement of decision-making into policy networks; the hollowing-out of the state. Thereby, representative institutions dealing with a mixed policy that embraces parliamentary and post-parliamentary forms tend to serve as symbols of political integration maintaining the functions of representation and accountability (Raab & Bellamy, 2004).

E-democracy can employ different techniques for increasing the transparency of the political process, for enhancing the direct involvement and participation of citizens and improving the quality of opinion formation by opening new spaces of information and deliberation (Trechsel, Kies, Mendez & Schmitter, 2003). There are different models of e-democracy in which ICTs open up to different possibilities coherently with role citizens can play. While in a liberal democracy, ICTs help the quality of information exchange between government and citizens included in decision-making processes, ICTs contribute to strengthening participation by involving citizens in decision-making processes coherently with the development of a deliberative democracy in which citizens have a defined role in decision-making processes. In a thin democracy, citizens act as customers of information gathered and disseminated by political institutions by using ICTs. In a strong democracy, the citizen can act as an opinion former. ICTs focus on discussion. Participation is seen as a means for providing education and enhancing an increased understanding about society (Åstrom, 2001; Päivärinta & Sæbø, 2006). E-democracy initiatives and projects may take and follow different shapes confirming that a technological and democratic linearity does not exist (Grönlund, 2003). There are some shadows and conservatory aspects that technology can deliver despite growing participatory and democratic potential and value. Technology may become a rhetorical tool for politicians that may oppose a civic engagement that could obscure traditional political representation (Maherer & Krimmer, 2005). Governmental institutions seem to assume managerial models of interaction that improve the flow of information between government and citizens as customers despite both consultative and participatory models for a better policy through interaction and consensus (Chadwick & May, 2003). The institutional context and the norms of the democratic governance provide the conditions that influence the shape of e-democracy practice. Thereby, the Internet appears to reinforce existing patterns of authority and influence (Rethemayer, 2006). The actors using ICTs tend to reproduce social structures or potentially challenge them introducing change in the political process (Parvez &

Ahmed, 2006). The risk of rhetoric, apparent and illusionary use of technology for democracy tends to emphasize the citizen as actor proactively playing for making difference as effective decision-maker (Fuchs, 2009).

### **Sustaining e-participation: rediscovering the active role of citizen**

The role of technology is to increase amounts of informal communication for sustaining the creation of social capital in communities as a factor encouraging public participation (Komito, 2005). Online citizen participation can enrich democratic processes by enabling public agencies to receive broader and more diverse opinions from citizens than those available through traditional means of off-line participation. During the last decade, the public policies of many countries support the development of e-participation initiatives for engaging citizens' society and revitalizing democracy. Today, democratic institutions are facing challenges related to making choices between deliberative elite and deliberative masses in terms of the trade-off between quality and equality of deliberation (Mele, 2005). A formal political system following a path of democratization should be oriented towards new participatory, deliberative, associative and direct forms of democracy (Anttiroiko, 2003). New technologies of information and communication help representative institutions to sustain public trust developing forms of direct dialogue with citizens in order to survive in their current forms. E-democracy relates to e-participation as knowledge, interactive and collaborative process in order to empower citizens for stimulating contribution to greater cohesiveness and inclusion (Ahmed, 2007). As the public is becoming disenchanted with forms of representative democracy, new forms of electronic communication help to support a democratic commitment by enabling a new dialogue between citizens and politicians coherently with the discovery of public values and the belief that government policies will be related to participation of community and people (King, 2006). The usage of ICTs should permit to enhance the quality of political participation enabling citizens to connect with parliamentary institutions for improving the policy process. Thereby, public institutions seem to be mainly interested in one-way information provision to citizens without searching the feedback of citizens about legislation or policies (Östling, 2011). The Internet provides a means of seeking the views of constituents on public policy. New technologies support e-democracy by encouraging participation of citizens in policy making in terms of services delivery and outcome, quality, efficiency and equity, civic engagement, deliberative and democratic effects (Sæbø, Rose & Flak, 2008). Three different stages are presented according to a growing scale over time in relation to OECD framework (2003) to take part in the decision-making and influence the policy agenda: *information* as a one-way relationship in which government make available information for citizens; in the *consultation* level citizens are encouraged to contribute their views on a particular issue; in the *active participation* citizens are empowered by actively participating in the policy making process (partnership). According to Macintosh (2004) three levels of participation are identified: e-enabling to support the access to the internet taking advantage of the large amount of information available; e-engaging as concerned with consulting a wide audience to enable contributions and support debate on policy issues; e-empowering to support active participation of citizens as producers of policy. ICT tools (ranging from web portals to consultation platforms, e-petitioning systems as examples) can be implemented to change or reinforce parliamentary institutions governed by path depth processes, support more participatory forms of citizenship

and facilitate a two-way dialogue reinforcing participatory forms of citizenship and public involvement based on a two-way dialogue. Web portals help to bridge representation and communication functions. The e-petitioning system is citizenship-oriented and focuses on the interaction between citizens and public institutions like e-consultations (representation oriented) (Pratchett, 2007).

## Discussion and conclusion

Technology seems to offer new opportunities for connecting and reconciling public administration and citizens by building and enforcing new forms of representative democracy by enhancing the active participation of citizens. New technologies drive public organizations to behave as responsive institutions engaging an aware and active citizenship for policy contribution. Putting online information and data seems not to be enough in producing a democratic participation and enlargement of citizens' involvement if the main actors of political representative systems do not change in searching for an effective and valuable engagement of citizens to be listened about their preferences on policymaking (Cardoso, Cunha & Nascimento, 2006). Only an equalized access to technology can contribute to involving people to participate in political and democratic decision-making processes (Krueger, 2002). Many people tend to be excluded because of the digital literacy divide (O'Donnell & Henriksen, 2002). Building sustainable public organizations relies on constructing and maintaining a bridge between public administration and citizens as the main shareholders by involving and engaging people by embracing technology for rediscovering the values of democracy, fostering the participation of citizens in public affairs and policy. Thereby, the design and implementation of e-participation initiatives seem to be still at early stages and in its infancy so that the future developments and advancements of the relationship between technology and democracy will depend on of the use of communities, politicians, movements and citizens too. Public organizations strengthening the channels of two-way communication for active participation by embracing an approach based on citizen-centered collaboration have the opportunity to encourage and foster a participatory democracy technology-driven by linking forms of representative and direct democracy in order to serve a legitimizing function as necessary intermediaries opening up to contribution of citizens through co-production of public values in terms of transparency, governance, integrity, social and democratic values. Sustainability of public organizations seems to rely on embracing new technologies for connecting with citizens opening up to contribution and participation in order to make effectively participatory and democratic government agencies and public administration.

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