Communication as support for civic contacts and democracy

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Background

Democracy was born long before the time of the computer. Agitation and persuation attempts were applied in the local community. Can we enhance this with new means, or is the system too fragile for modern enhancement? It is worth finding out.

The points of view below can be referred to a perspective of a fifth of a century. The author had the opportunity to introduce e-mail in Sweden in 1976. Now, in the mid-90s, several forms of electronic contact and participation is technically possible. Are they democratically meaningful?

Democracy builds on contact, contact between the citizens, the participants of the democratic society. Democracy cannot reach further out than the reach of the human or artificial communications network that supports it. Democracy is value addition on top of the human citizen network. It is a sharing of responsibility and result from decisions that are taken together.

Democracy is participation between those who want to participate. No outside force can make democracy function.

Democracy´s counterpart is dictatorship. A dictator takes decisions without hearing his or her citizens. This can be taken as definition of dictatorship. It lies implicit in the word. Taking decisions in isolated rooms.

The concept of democracy is not defined as sharply as that. Its meaning is not as precise and mathematical as its counterpart´s. Instead, it has many faces. It is multifacetted, and refers to participation and sharing of many-dimensional resources. Democracy functions when it fully reflects the wide characteristics of the society where it is used.

The democratic conditions

Is democracy dependent on the nature of the political system in which it is to be used? Is democray possible in a one-question-society? Perhaps, if we concentrate only on the possibility to communicate. But if we stress that democracy gets its true meaning only when it functions, when it creates alternatives and new combinations and development, then the answer is that democracy needs plurality as bad a lawn tennis court needs its grass.

Today's young people seem to unify their participation patterns. The broad web of the older society is being reduced into separate strings, fewer and fewer. It is up to the optimistic democrat to point at the weakness that such a net represents. The fewer strings in the web, the larger the holes, and the greater the risk to fall through. And the prize of parachutes is increasing, at least morally.

This is a danger. There is a lower limit to which this reduction of social strings can be driven. It is up to information society to present alternatives to the young people, alternative realms and forms of expression. And it is up to the new society to point at the joy of participating, giving one's contribution.

A synical comment wound indicate that the incresing number of compu-terized bulletin boards opens so many possibilities to participate that it becomes doubtful if any human ever will read what is published. The participator cannot count on readers any longer. There is too much being published for that. But here the moral enters. The joy of participating may well exceed the satisfaction of receiving feedback from a reader. Compare with the newspaper situation. You never know exactly how many that read your newly published newspaper article. It is satisfactory enough to know that there may be dozens, or thousands. The joy of participating is not related to the number of readers, or users, or respondants, that you get.

This is why bulletin boards expand nowadays. They are the modern form of the newspaper. You don't know who will be your reader, and, to be honest, do you want to know this? You publish not for a specific individual, but for a group of unknown readers. And the motive for writing is not related to the names of the members of that group.

Who reads? Who participates? The experts only? There is a risk with today's technology that the fast development creates borders between those who know how to, and those who don't. If this border is growing, we shall have failed. Instead, we must put effort in creating systems that invite to be used by the participants who today are unfamiliar with technology. Democracy functions when the last member of the group has given his or her contribution, and is satisfied.

Can technology help?

Every systematic development has probably been in contact with evil and undemocratic forces. Some types of technology never pass this, and remain technology for the intellectual elites. The telephone was considered as such for a long time. It would never become people's technology, it was said. But contact desires, mass production and lowered prices have shown otherwise.

Today's personal computers are marketed on features that surely can fully be used only by specialists. Steps to a democratic information society probably stress the ability for a PC to be used directly by the elderly, instead of the youngsters. But the PCs are not built for that.

A democratic shell over the PC leaves five or ten buttons open, and shields the rest, so that it can be used by the many. Specific software could provide such shelters, why is such software not available?

For those of us who have worked with the videotex systems of the 1980s, it is evident that computerized democracy will not expand by itself. Many types of support will be needed, different types of support for different group of users. We know quite well that the handicapped have well-expressed needs for specific technology, to overcome physical human barriers. We also know that people who are linguistic newcomers in our society normally have needs for language translation services, to be able to communicate with the formal representatives of society, and with the rest of us, in a normal way. But all other groups? What are their needs of specific communication forms? We have a gigantic challenge here, first to find out needs, and then to create understanding and raise resources to build the support systems according to these needs.

However clever and intelligent types of support that will be provided, it will probably show to be a challenge to motivate the really large groups of possible participators to participate. This is an educational motivation problem. This difficulty will have to be overcome if we want to characterize the systems as democratic. One way to do this is to make the systems more participative. The democratic system reflects participation, it must be evident that someone out there listens to what is on you mind. We don´t need to know exactly who, but if there is a constant uninterest and we find over time that no one listens, then the number of participants will decrease.

The need for feedback

So there is a need for feedback in the systems that we create to support democracy. The easiest form is to put up e-mail boxes around every corner. But again, these boxes must be organized to be emptied and the messages to be read by someone, otherwize they are without democratic meaning. Again, we don´t exactly need to know who will read, but we must know that somebody, somewhere, does.

Some type of increased responsiveness will probably have to characterize our coming democratic systems.

Are there different types of democratic efficiency in different types of technology? Is a system of picture telephones more democratically efficient than yesterday´s acoustic modem typewriters? Or is the contrary the fact? The question can probably be reduced to the same question as we touched upon above: how efficient are different types of technology in group contact and responsiveness?

Democratic participation needs possibilities to express opinions. Is a picture telephone efficient in this? Over the years there have been numerous attempts to introduce picture telephones to large groups of people, but all have failed so far.

There seems to be no large scale need for a technology such as picture telephony, at least at present. Are these types of technology good for participation? Judging from television, the moving picture medium is better suited to express feelings than facts, at least in today's form of organization. And at least factual democracy needs facts as carriers of opinions, to be able to be manipulated, debated and put before common decision making. It is more difficult to take a common decision on desired types of faces or dancing steps than it is to decide about where to build the public garage or how to arrange local day care financing.

And interactive television? Although this is not more than an enlarged picture telephone, is it possible that such a medium better can combine the virtues of the written or spoken word with the emotional expression of a local citizen group? And when, if at all, will such a medium arrive on the market? We don't know, at present there is a tendency away from this, practical trials stress narrowband technology instead of broadband systems. But we shall see.

Naturally we should not exclude the risk that online support might be allocated to also purely emotional forms of "democratic" environments. Put in the hand of Vladimir Zhirinowsky, a pure and straight-forward interactive TV system reaching millions would be an almost certain distaster. But this is understood by many nowadays. There exists an at least theoretical need for what we might call "democratic filters" in the increasingly responsive systems. We can build filters that make it difficult or impossible to reach emotional and fast decisions online. As a matter of fact, it is probably easier to build efficient computerized democratic filters than it is to implement such filters in everyday real physical life. In real life we have chosen the representative democratic system to guarantee the filtering function, that time for second thought is being provided. But in information society? How shall this time span be guaranteed?

The online democracy is a potential, a possibility to support both more active citizens than today with expression forms, and to make critical awareness an everyday concern. True and perfect democracy reaches the people, the thousand non-experts, and gives them expression chances, a new type of pencil and paper. But it will need much effort to create democratic support systems that implement this.

The democrat takes risks, and uses the form he or she needs to express them. If new media can be increasingly efficient in expressing opinions of groups of citizen participants, then they will be more democratic than the media of today.

The democratic intensity

How intensely should computer supported democracy be applied? What frequency, what level of interactivity is desirable? This is sensitive. Today's general political elections with their propaganda campains can easily be complemented with more frequent computerized dialogues.

The fundamental background behind a successful computerized dialogue naturally is the access to relevant knowledge. Without informed participants the manual or electronic polls are meaningless. Alternatives must be clear for the participator and for the voter.

What type of subjects are well suited for online cooperation? Here there is scientific experience available. One may say that certain types of contact are well suited, while others are not. We know that online contact and support systems function well among friends or other established collaborators, while they are less well suited for newcomers in a discussion. Practical experiments ought to bear this in mind, and use complement instead of substitution.

Topics for successful electronic communication should be sharply defined, and should refer to well established knowledge. It should be easy to formulate alternatives to discuss. Better still, discussion alternatives should have been distributed in advance.

Many different types of support software have been developed for computer related opinion polls. This concerns checks of knowledge amongst the participators, the main voting procedure, different types of statistics more or less online, afterward evaluations etc. Together these types of activities indicate that there may be even more stability in the electronic system than it is in the manual system. On the other hand, the electronic versions may also be especially dangerous, if security is unstable.

Participation

The democrat naturally wants to participate in decision making. It is interesting to analyze today's changing forms of civic contacts. Seen in perspective, several of the practical forms of democracy today show a distance between the actual citizen participation activity and the moments of the political decision making. This is the indirect and representative democracy, a system where election of political representatives, who on behalf of the citizens take decisions, is carried through with considerable time span between election opportunities. Representatives are elected for amounts of time that often is counted in years.

When applied with little delay between participation and decision making, on the other hand, we have the more direct democracy.

The representative system has the advantage that it makes available for the decision making system considerable time for reflection and penetration before the actual decision making. Therefore this system may be well suited for general and longterm decisions, often with economic content. The direct system, on the other side, often is associated with risks for hasty decision making, directed by emotional engagement. This system may be better suited for decision making concerning shortterm matters.

The border between these two types of democracy is not sharp. In fact, there are many forms where interim forms play fundamental roles. Participation may include simply giving advice, or it may include taking responsibility for the decisions taken. It can be considered interesting to analyse the difference between advisory participation and actual decision making participation in reality with the use of computerized models.

Empirical comparisons between these different types of democracy have been carried out only with limited frequency, though. Reasons are, among others, that such experiments often are resource consuming.

In information society there is a continuum between the indirect/representative system and the direct democratic system. It is possible to choose a position "on a scale" between the two. This flexibility invites to practical experiments. This may concern both increased access to knowledge and political participation. In this context, applied information technology may:

- increase political efficiency by widening access to political presence
- create and support inspiration for participation
- offer wide access to database supported knowledge
- offer qualified searching methods concerning relevant knowledge
- supply different groups with different information retrieval possibilities
- establish computer supported contact with knowledge experts
- investigate specifically generated time delays in the decision making process, to counteract too hasty decisions.
- help create opinion on relevant matters
- offer widened participation in decision making, and thus support spreading of power
- counteract stiffness in the decision making process
- offer minimization of total society cost for the democratic system
- analyze the functioning of new democratic organizations
- support a widened overall democratic participation, and thus avoiding to create borders between those who have time and resources to participate and those who don´t
- evaluate democratic efficiency, measured with different concerns in mind

The local system

A fundamental democratic desire is to be able to reach all participators. Technological support systems explicitely or implicitely in the hands of the few are democratically unacceptable. The number of personal computers with modems in use still reach only between a fifth and a quarter of all households, even in western countries. Democratic participation wants to build on larger distributions than that. Every citizen should potentially have participation means at hand. Only in France there is a high penetration, so far, with the 7 million Minitels in use. But already in the middle of the 1990s, new forms of local contact fora are possible. Experiments and trials are being born in many parts of the world at present.

Trying out the local democracy is probably the most important and interesting. It is from the local perspective that development will be born. Children always have been small in size. Really, totally centralized democracy is practically impossible. Ever so efficient communication systems will fail if they do not realize this.

But will even the local and soft computer supported democratic system be stable enough in practice? We don't know this yet. Is is of great interest to collect experiences from experiments that go on in many parts of the world, to find out about this. Universities and research institutes should be strongly encouraged to further such collection of experiences.