Towards more active citizens - a Swedish perspective

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Abstract
The Swedish participatory system is an open one, and it is still basically a one-way system. The Internet is being tried in many communes, still mostly for distribution of the written word. Citizens are beginning to note new possibilities to meet, to organize, outside of the established political forms, however. A step towards increased citizen activities can be noted. The next step concerns real citizen influence. We are not there yet.

Sweden - an open country

From the outside one can probably regard Sweden as an exceptionally open country. Although the country a quarter of a millenium ago was engaged in many offensive war projects in northern Europe - Sweden was then one of Europe´s physically seen dominating forces - during the latest century there has been peace in mind among Swedes: among citizens and politicians and even most of the military. The fact that Swedes have been taking part in no wars for a long time now, has made it natural for Swedes to work as negotiators in a number of international organizations and operations. One can discuss with Swedes.

This outer openness has had effect inwards. Since a long time Sweden has been giving the concept "public" a strongly wide meaning, referring to openness for all. The country has not been afraid to open up all aspects of public life for insight from broad national interests and concerns, as well as for international visits and observers. The Swedish legal system has been reformed likewise. The legal "principle of public openness" has been, and is, defended as a cornerstone in Swedish public life. This basic law is fundamental for Swedish democracy.

Public files are - in principle - open to everybody. A interesting practical problem has turned out to be, however, on what conditions? Who is to pay for copying? And how is the ordinary citizen to access this public information? Physical visits to an authority or to a government institution in the beginning was the rule, if one wanted access to public information. Paper and telephone bound communication today still dominates. Fax is expanding, although its life time may be limited in this respect. Lately, larger and larger quatities of public information naturally is being stored in databases that are available from the Internet, and it is discussed on what conditions these data bases are accessable for the public. At public libraraties, and public "citizen offices" (there are a hundred such offices, as yet), public files are accessable, from online home computers as well.

The integrity protection legislation constitutes a problem. As a (fairly new) member of the European Union, Sweden is forced to adopt the Union´s strong privacy restrictions. These are conservative, they are defined before the time of the Internet. A discussion has started about putting increased force on the European Union, to loosen the general privacy restrictions. The Swedish public openness is general and, by many, seen as stronger than privacy restrictions that are considered to be limited in reach.

Only a fourth of the citizens in Sweden have access to the Internet at home. And few visit public computer terminals. Therefore, it is considered that something ought to be done to make the online access more widely spread. Clearly, not only people who generally are educated, and have access to broad information, should have more of it. This balance is being addressed in the public debate at present. Advanced information retrieval systems are beginning to be tried to be made available to citizens, and it is being investigated if such systems are effective, if they can be used by the large groups of citizens, and not just the educated and experienced groups.

The discussion about who has access to what information, and on what terms, has come into focus in the Swedish public discussion.

Heavy educational efforts are being realized in Sweden during later years. The unemployment in the late 90s, of the order 10% (depending on how it is defined) has generated political measures for strongly increased education on many levels. It is hoped that increased educational experience will support the unemployed in the search for a job, and support them in their own creativity. This education is beginning to be successful, at least quantitatively. A massive course development for basic IT knowledge, for instance, is being implemented in 1998, with large numbers of students, young and old.

But - does such education support more active public participation in general, for the citizens, in public life? Are these types of citizen oriented educational measures broad enough also for that? Unfortunately, this can be questioned.

Increased basic knowledge in matters close to possible employment does not automatically induce increased knowledge and interest in public political matters. A recent report from an independant research institute in Stockholm, SNS "Demokrati och medborgarskap" ("Democracy and citizenship"), SNS Forlag 1998, confirms this. Embarassing knowledge gaps show to be real, even concerning very basic knowledge about the fundamental functions of society. An increasingly educated population shows decreasing interest for the fundamental function of society, including citizen participation in public life and political matters.

You seem to stick to what seems to be closest to you.

And, interestingly enough, there is not a big difference concerning education here. Also the highly educated show remarkable knowledge gaps concerning society´s basic functions, according to the report mentioned. (Who is responsable for what in the modern society? To what organization should I turn? ....)

However, this limited interest for organized responsability is not said to be followed by a feeling of powerlessness, leading to protest. Citizens seem to be astonishingly satisfied within the circles in which they live and act. They seem to turn to friends and neighbours for "contact", rather than to political organizations. They sign name lists, they participate in local financial collections ..... but they don´t protest.

The SNS report on democratic activities shows this change over time:

	1987	1997
Signed a name list for some action	37.0	49.1
Participated economically in financial collection	39.8	38.8
Rejected (boycotted) certain goods	14.8	28.7
Been in contact with public servant in state/commune	20.7	18.6
Been in contact with association or organization	19.2	16.5
Been in contact with politician	8.5	10.3
Worked in non-political organization	9.7	8.4
Been in contact with or participated in mass media	9.4	7.1
Carried campaign sign	10.6	5.3
Been in contact with legal expert	7.4	5.4
Participated in demonstration	5.2	3.8
Participated in other type of public activity	2.0	2.1
Worked in political party	3.0	1.8
Worked in action group	2.2	1.3
Participated in strike	2.3	1.0
Participated in illegal protest activity	0.4	0.3

Table: Political participation. Percentage who during the last year have tried to support a positive development or counteract a negative development in some societal matter that is not personal. (SNS. Demokrati och medborgarskap, 1998)

It can be seen above that citizens quite seldom find it natural to turn to established organizations. Political party concern has lost in strength. This conclusion is supported also by other empirical studies.

For organized politics, this is a momentum, among the citizens there is low interest for established forms. For what types of organizations are there interest, then? We don't know yet. Probably there is not a final answer, politics always searches for new form. But we have new measures to suggest today. What are their strengths and weaknesses? There is room for analysis.

There also is an astonishing lack of basic political knowledge. This is shown in other tables in the same report. Is this essential? If so, what could be done about it? Should we introduce knowledge examinations outside the public voting booths at election times …. Or deliberation in online forms? To make sure that people know what they are voting for? - Hardly, who could organize that?

And how much basic political knowledge is relevant? To participate in political agenda setting perhaps it is will that we need.

If so, to express citizen will, could technology help? The platform in Sweden in 1998 is the following:

	Percent of total
Uses computer	48.0
Uses the Internet	23.7
Uses the Internet for society information	16.6
Uses the Internet for society information fairly or very often	4.6
Have some time during the last year used the Internet in connection to some activity aiming at a better society	2.7

(SNS, Demokrati och Medborgarskap, 1998)

We can see above that frequences of Internet contact are low, but that there at least quantitatively is expansion room. (For comparison, it can be added that Sweden shows the world's highest penetration of telephones, 69 % of all citizens have an earth bound phone, and close to 30% have mobile phones).

One way public information, to start with

Communes and authorities in Sweden are actively building up broad public databases. This is so in many countries now. One could expect that this would have been exceptionally natural for Swedes, with its history of openness and active public life. But, to tell the truth, to reach this position has taken unexpectedly long time. Why?

It has taken mental time to transfer the paper bound openness to digital forms. Conceptual, educational maturing, political carefulness, buraucracy, many types of reasoning lie behind this. Transforming the value of public openness from paper to cyberspace has showed to be demanding for government in Sweden. Also, there has been active integrity defending legislation, mentioned above, to counteract unconditional public openness. Computer stored documents with person identifiable information has been subject to concern and regulation from the public authority the Data Inspection Board. In fact, Sweden was the first country in the world to adopt countrywide privacy legislation, in 1973, for protection of computer stored personal data. For a long time, this was strongly looked after. Lately, however, increased public openness is being demanded in the public discussion. Openness is now considered more important than was the case some time ago. The Internet has helped here.

More or less every public authority, and almost every commune (there are 258 in the country), have now built own home pages on the Internet with more or less complete information about its public activities, including names of officials and public servants, their places and their responsabilities.

How can the situation be summarized? Where is Sweden situated in the spectrum of citizen supported public dialogue? A scale could be tried. Generally, the introduction and acceptance of a computer supported cooperative system in a society follows a certain pattern. Very briefly this can be seen as:

- conceptual introduction
- visionary descriptions
- public debate
- conceptual educational efforts
- early adoption by experts
- principal understanding by academics
- practical experiments in limited areas
- general acceptance in community islands
- in principle acceptance by government
- widened communal experiments
- university analysis
- evaluation from government
- university and industry conference presentations
- formal public trials
- public evaluation
- general conceptual acceptance
- practical citizen oriented experiences
- misuse
- systematic correction
- reorganization and reimplementation
- international evaluation of common experiences

The summarized position for communal experiments and trials in Sweden in the late 1990s is somewhere below the middle of this scale.

Public dialogue on its way

Many political representatives today welcome increased contacts between citizens and the public system. This is so, in principle. Much interest is being focused on the public home pages on the net, where communes and public authorities present themselves in fine colour and graphics. Mail boxes are available on many levels.

So, the doors are open, and the dialogue is invited. This is especially so in August 1998, since there is a general election a month later.

Only, not many citizens use these "new" forms of information access and dialogue. And many of those who do are not the ones that one generally would expect to be the ones who would get the greatest benefit from this access and dialogue. Surely many e-mail letters are sent to politicians, and many types of debate are active on the BBSs, but dominating amounts of the letters and discussions show to have origin from citizens who already are active in other forms of public dialogue. There is a participation unbalance.

It is beginning to be evident that some kind of further development is needed to reach a broad democratic dialogue. To achieve active participation from the really large groups of citizens, specific actions are needed. The question is only, what types?

To answer that question, practical experiments have to be made, and conclusions drawn. Such reasoning is being heard today. The problem is the financing. Public research boards have limited resources. Hope is being placed at Building Societies who, in some cases, have showed interest in supporting public online services at home, hoping that commercial activities will follow.

Insight, but limited direct influence

General interest is shown from astonishingly many groups of people in trying to achieve more active push on the political system. There is widely a clear political interest, there are citizen proposals. But, many questions that are asked are not aimed at elected political representatives. This is being reflected in the Swedish mass media. Criticism towards polititians is being described and discussed. It has reached a point where even questions are asked about the function of the representative political participation as such. Why should I participate, when nobody listenes and cares for my priorities? Are there formal alternatives for the dialogue?

There is a serious drawback for conventional political participation in Sweden at present. The content, the political interest, surely is there. But to pick up this active political interest, a change in organized system probably has to be achieved. The question is, what type of organization should we try, and what language is to be used for the agenda setting?

Increasing numbers of citizens are opening their eyes towards the Internet. This is an important first step.

Seen from the organized political side, insight is invited, but to open up to real political citizen influence - there is doubt. Still it is discussed in what forms the public desires should, and could, be presented to the polititians. Limited public interest is shown concerning possibilities to shorten the distance between expression of citizen desires and public implementation in the organized political system.

Voting online still is looked upon with doubt by many. Politicians generally look upon it as an emotional threat.

On the other hand, online citizen participation in discussion groups is treated positively. It is interesting that the difference between these two is considered to be so big. In reality, to achieve concensus in a group discussion online is little different from group voting. This is not recognized by many, however. This understanding will generate a wakening up, when it arrives.

How close to applications?

Systems for citizen cooperation have been discussed to some length up til now. Theoretical experiences exist. Practical experiments, however, of relevant sizes have had to wait, often mainly because of lack of resources.Usually, the desired practical experiments simpy are not considered to be profitable, seen in the short perspective that is common among financers.

Projects to analyze the effects of such cooperation can be functional or applied. The functional approach analyzes the system in itself, including its relations to the external world. Applications, on the other hand, try to prove that the technology in question is functionable through the application - the external system functions better when the actual technology is tried. Can specified applications sell general democratic participation? Are they limiting the generality?

An related question is if a democratically satisfied citizen is a more mature and happy commercial consumer? Surely democratic action and commercial activity are two diametrical concerns, democracy costs rather than pays (at least in the short run).

But, if democracy is used to support personal satisfaction - we feel happy when we have participated - then such participation may perhaps support increased and balanced commercial consuming. Indirectly, yes, but still, perhaps the total effect would be positive. If this connection would be true, however far-fetched as it may sound, then one could expect commercial support for many democratic applications. Then democratic action would bloom! But is this connection possible, and plausible?

Summing up, the fact that Swedish citizens are opening their eyes, and are starting to use the many communal online information systems, mostly still of one-way type, is an interesting and important first step. The next step will be that citizens will organize themselves, many probably outside of the established political parties. And the citizens will start to express opinions. The establishment will be challenged! The response and cooperation from the established political forms, as well as from new forms, will be exciting! Maybe we can expect surprises!

Several references on the Internet have been used for this text.