Information Society and Digital Democracy - Theoretical Discourse

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Abstract

This article gives a theoretical overview of the Information Society and Digital Democracy, its essence, characteristics, goals, and tasks; critically assesses the main drawbacks and problems of the existing system, including its long term prospects. The Digital Revolution brought about the Information Age and Information Society with new humanistic values and opportunities. Digital Democracy became a new conceptual product of these revolutionary changes in society and a new challenge to the traditional political paradigm of a country's government and management. Conceptual studies of the Information society and especially Digital Democracy recently began and are on an initial level of development with two main directions: theoretical and practical inquiries; with many discussions of its ability for self reformation and eradication of existing problems in current societies. This article is an attempt to better understand formational tendencies and prospects of this newly born sociopolitical paradigm.

Keywords: Information Society, Digital Democracy, E-government, Post-Industrial Society

Great scientific discoveries traditionally produce technological revolutions, which deeply influence not only the economic, social, political and cultural order of societies, but the theory and practice of political government and management. Analogous to the Agricultural and Industrial Revolutions, the Digital Revolution marked the beginning of the Information Age.

If steam power was the technological bases of the Industrial society, information technologies became the catalyst for the changes in work organization and in societal structure and politics occurring in the late 20th century. The Information Society is seen as the successor to the Industrial Society.

Since the 1970-s, the contemporary world has been experiencing the Digital Revolution, the change from mechanical and electronic technologies to high tech, digital technologies. Central to this revolution is mass production and the widespread use of digital logic circuits and its derived technologies, including: computers, digital cellular phones, fax machines, and other devices. The use of computers and the Internet is rapidly transforming societal interactions and the relationships among citizens, private businesses, and the Government.

The Information Society is a direct product of the Digital Revolution, which continues to the present day. The Information Society is often identified as: Post-Industrial society (Bell, 1976); Post-Modern Society (Giddens,1990); Network Society (Castells,1997 a,b); and Digital Democracy (Hague & Loader, 1999; Alexander & Pal, 1998;

Hacker & Dijk, 2000).

The Information Age brought about significant changes not only in how people communicate with each other, but also to the broad political landscape. In the new wired world, collections of widely scattered individuals with a common interest or a shared concern about a specific social issue quickly form and make their collective voice heard. Such communication could not have existed only a few years ago. Politicians and political parties are using new information and communications technologies to an unprecedented degree, as are citizens, with potentially profound impacts on democracy and representative institutions (Alexander & Pal, 1998).

In academic studies there is no universally accepted common definition of the Information Society. In the mid 1970s, Daniel Bell argued that through the social structure of employment, there has been a transition from an economy based on material goods to one based on knowledge and information. He concluded that a Post-industrial society was based on services and information. The majority of employed people were not involved in the production of tangible goods. Science and technologies become immediate forces of production (Bell, 1976, pp. 127, 348).

The decade later, by the end of the 1980s, the term "Information Society" was widely used in much of the popular press, as well as scholarly journals, but still "with little or no operational definition." (Steinfield & Salvaggio, 1989, p.1).

In the meantime, all authors agreed that the advanced

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countries were entering a new phase of societal development (Beniger, 1986). It took about two decades to give a more precise understanding of the goals and challenges of the Information Society. The World Summit's Declaration of 2003 on the Information Society characterized the Information Society as people-centered, inclusive and development-oriented, "where everyone can create, access, utilize and share information and knowledge, enabling individuals, communities and peoples to achieve their full potential in promoting their sustainable development and improving their quality of life, premised on the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations and respecting fully and upholding the Universal Declaration of Human Rights" (Declaration of Principles Building the Information Society, 2003). According to these characteristics the Information Society provides freedom of information for individuals, communities, and people as an instrument for the attainment of social, economic and political freedoms.

There are several urgent challenges for today's Information Society: "the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger; achievement of universal primary education; promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women; reduction of child mortality; improvement of maternal health; to combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; ensuring environmental sustainability; and development of global partnerships for development for the attainment of a more peaceful, just and prosperous world" (Declaration of Principles Building the Information Society, 2003). In this Declaration of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) are named as "a powerful instrument, increasing productivity, generating economic growth, job creation and employability and improving the quality of life of all", as a means of "promoting dialogue among people, nations and civilizations" (Declaration of Principles Building the Information Society, 2003).

An essential foundation of the Information Society is equality in receiving and expressing information and opinions without interference through any media, regardless of frontiers.

Communication is seen as a fundamental social process, a basic human need, and the foundation of all social organization. It is central to the Information Society. Everyone everywhere should have the opportunity to participate and no one should be excluded from the benefits offered by the Information Society (Declaration of Principles Building the Information Society, 2003).

The Information Society brought about not only new humanistic values to mankind, but also the formation of a new level of Democracy. Digital Democracy has become a leading system of the political, social, economic and cultural functioning of the Information Society. Digital Democracy is a framework in which the Information Society functions. Digital Democracy presents a higher level of Liberal Democracy. It accelerates Liberal Democracy's

capacity and productivity. Digital Democracy presents a symbiosis of electronic technologies, its developments in digital data transferred into ICT in use of millions of people and nations. Digital Democracy interacts among people, parties, governments, business, local communities and social networks. Digital Democracy as the new ICT applications emerged out of the "dialectical interaction between technology and society" (Castells, 1997, p.5).

Hacker and Dijk (2000, p.1) defined Digital Democracy as "a collection of attempts to practice democracy without the limits of time, space and other physical conditions, using ICT or CMC (Computer-mediated Communication), as an addition, not a replacement for traditional 'analogue' political practices". Digital Democracy combines representative and participatory democracy, with qualitatively more power transferred to demos armed with ICT (Castells, 1997, p. 6). Digital Democracy actually "explores the rapidly evolving interaction between cyberspace and social policy" (Alexander & Pal, 1998).

Digital Democracy on both theoretical and practical level explains how ICT influence democracy and ongoing political processes. ICT are to play a significant role in the achievement of a strong democracy grounded in community networks. A number of scholars believe that ICT contains the potential to accelerate the development of democracy, and to facilitate a "quantum leap in the field of democratic politics" (Becker, 1998, p.343).

Digital Democracy with its ICT brought about qualitative changes in the everyday life of millions of people worldwide and offers the development of a new variety of democracy, based on the unprecedented level of peoples' interactivity, as users can communicate on many reciprocal bases.

Digital Democracy provides an opportunity: to create global networks beyond national boundaries; practice a new level of free speech with limited state censorship; create a new level of free associations; construct and disseminate information (which is not subject to official review or sanction); challenge professional and official perspectives; and break down nation-state identity due to users' adoption of global and local identities (Hague & Loader, 1999, page 6).

In recent decades a number of significant studies on Digital Democracy have appeared. These studies have tended to focus on the systematization of ongoing processes in society, especially on issues of how the emergence and development of ICT systems influence political processes, their purposes and democratic processes in general (Hacker & Todino1996; Hague & Loader, 1999; Hacker, & Dijk, 2000). Authors are grounded in the assumption that there are two important sets of issues for the study of digital democracy; one is the theoretical and the other concerns practices, critical assessment of ICT role in development of democratic processes and Digital Democracy specifi-

cally (Hacker & Dijk, 2000; Forman 2005).

The theoretical issues center around concepts of democracy, ideas and definitions for electronic democratization, the role of Internet, ICT and CMC in the political system, the influence of existing political culture; comparisons of American and Europe in development of Digital Democracy, structural transformations of public spheres and new concepts of public opinion. (Hacker & Dijk, 2000, p.4; Dijk, 1996).

Proponents of Digital Democracy suppose that, as digital technologies enable people to break particular limits of time and place and to communicate simultaneously through networks, and because this technology offers abundance of information, it can cure ills of modern democracy (Grossman, 1996; Westen, 1998). However, the problems of contemporary democracy go deeper. Some scholars believe that, no technology is able to fix a lack of political will, knowledge, experience, motivation and skills required for full participation in various democratic activities. No technology can dissolve the social and material inequalities that appeared to be so strongly related to differences of electoral process and political participation process (Levine, 2002).

Public participation in democratic decision-making processes assumes from "the right to be informed" up to "the right to directly decide" (Lourenco & Costa, 2006). Although the ICT play an important role in today's public sphere, it still lacks real public participation as a collaborative main actor in decision making processes. "When was examined more fundamental uses of technology that foster political community through deliberative and value-infused communication, was found that the current city use of web technology does little, if anything, to foster this type of democratic revitalization" (Hague, & Loader,1999, p.18). This skeptical attitude toward ICT and Digital Democracy is reinforced by some arguments that much of the use being made of ICT with in local communities has little bearing on the goals of (re)engaging people in politics and strengthening the democratic process.

Critics of Digital Democracy and the role of ICT in advanced societies indicate other threats in the driving forces of the society's the multimedia systems, which are not under governmental, but corporate control. Possibly the whole system may be controlled by a very small number of global corporations (Castells, 1997, p.374). Remedy from this threat might be only grass roots political activism and to a call for the revitalization of 'social capital' (Moore, 1999).

A small number of vertically integrated transnational corporations, with means of opinion control, combined with the declining influence of nation-states, provoke additional threats to individual's security systems and especially people's privacy. Many scholars from various disciplines consider invasion of privacy to be the most serious problem along with the process of management of information, its collection in massive quantities and possibility of its manipulation in innumerable ways (including sharing information without the user's knowledge) (Salvaggio, 1989, p.115).

Other impediments to democratic participation and dynamic development of Digital Democracy were identified: lack of civic education, citizen apathy, and the disconnection between citizens and their representatives (Hale, Musso, Weare, 1999, pp. 97-117). The size and complexity of modern nation-states complicates citizen's realistic opportunity (or perhaps desire) to influence their environment beyond their local community.

Democratic theorists and political reformers have suggested a number of reforms to address these drawbacks. Some reforms call for changes to pluralistic democracy, others see long term prospect in a more fundamental development of participative democratic processes, including municipal governance (Hale, Musso, Weare, 1999, p.115).

The real problem is still community informatics, which is concerned with the study of the effects of ICT on community development, restructuring and the confluence of social networks and electronic networks. This field is still too much in its infancy to cast much light on these still embryonic developments (Hague & Loader, 1999, p. 10.) But this direction is one of the important and prospective fields of peoples' activities with the development of their own information systems, which may act as early indicators of future developments.

Digital Democracy gave birth to the new phenomenon "Electronic Government" or E-government. E-government is the part of the Digital Democracy, its main instrument to govern the societies. E-government integrates ITC in the process of government. E-government facilitates creation and dissemination of information between governments and people, among governments, as well as between governments and businesses.

E-government significantly transforms bases of government, making it more democratic, transparent and accountable (Office of E-Government & Information Technology, the White House, Washington D.C.). E-government qualitatively improves its communication with people, facilitates peoples' participation in decision making processes. Electronic government is a critical element in the management of government, to be implemented as part of a management framework that also addresses finance, procurement, human capital, and other challenges to improve the performance of Government" (Public Law, 2002).

Digital Democracy should be seen neither as a panacea for all the ills of democracy nor as the harbingers of an evil state, but as a dynamic process tracing huge achievements with objective and subjective difficulties, problems and imperfections of previous democratic regimes.

Conclusions

The contemporary world witnesses Digital Revolution, which provokes deep transformation of economy and societal structure. Digital Revolution brought about Information Age and Information Society with new goals and missions. Digital Democracy became a new product of these revolutionary changes in the society and became a new challenge of traditional political paradigm of country's government and management.

Conceptual studies of Digital Democracy recently began. They are on an embryonic level with two main directions of studies: theoretical and practical. Although Digital Democracy gave birth to the E-government and qualitatively new level of intergovernmental communication, including communication with business and population, but still, main problems of advanced democracies remain: imperfection in societal communication; interactivity with government; and quality of public debates, especially participation of grass roots, local communities in decision making process and self government process.

Main challenges of Digital Democracy in long term development will be protection most fundamental rights of people, their participation in mutual collective expression; decision making process; and preserving autonomy, all the attributes of a political culture that includes a wide range of areas devoted to individual development. The free and competitive use of various technologies will become one of the best means of breaking up monopolies, public and private as a best guarantee of political freedom.

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