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THREE FACES OF ELECTRONIC DEMOCRACY

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ABSTRACT

The debate on the impact of the information and communication technologies (ICT) on contemporary democracy has lasted in political science since the beginning of the information revolution. Two dominating and antagonistic standpoints present the electronic democracy as either the cure for democracy crisis, or the factor deepening major problems of democracy. The text questions such a simplified perspective and proves that the overall assessment of the ICT influence on democracy is ambiguous. If the focus of the analysis is on the process of political mobilisation or the electronic service delivery, major consequences of electronic democracy are positive. They are e.g. lowering the barriers to entry into political market and making the state apparatus more responsive towards citizen's expectations. From the perspective of the unequal access to the ICT and possible introduction of the electronic plebiscitary democracy, new technologies seem harmful for the principles of democracy. Finally, if someone observes the impact of e-democracy on the overall level of political participation, he can advocate the thesis of no significant impact of the ICT on contemporary democracy. Consequently, there are three different faces of e-democracy. Doubtless, acceptance of such a model must determine directions of future research.

1. INTRODUCTION

Rapid development of information and communication technologies (ICT) is reflected in all aspects of public life. It refers not only to economy, education or media but to the realm of politics as well. The scope of social changes produced by the ICT is comprehensive enough to justify the use of the term 'revolution'. Therefore, 'the information revolution' plays the role of the basic phrase applied to describe both the technological breakthrough and new social phenomena. The beginning of the 21st century is much too early to prejudge the final shape of the society subjected to the influence of the ICT. The dynamics of the information revolution is far from exhaustion and any general predictions are very hazardous. Nevertheless, during the last decade various attempts of the social aspect of information revolution analysis were undertaken within all disciplines of social sciences. All of them focus on the impact of new technologies on basic mechanisms of social life, social structure as well as patterns of the human and social behaviour.

From the perspective of political science, the major plane of the debate on information revolution refers to the status of contemporary democracy. Is Internet empowering citizens vis a vis the state or perhaps the state obtained possibilities of unlimited control of its citizens? Is it easier for political outsiders to enter the political scene, if they use the ICT? Can the ICT be useful in overcoming the political participation crisis? Questions of that kind constitute the basic space for the analysis of political implications of the information revolution. All of them can be reduced to the more general

problem: *To what extent can the ICT change the basic construction of democratic system?* In other words, what vision of democracy is going to emerge from the information revolution?

The major problem with the political analysis of the information revolution implications is lack of coherence between various planes of inquiry. On one hand we have speculative and ideological visions of new democratic era, often not referring directly to political reality (see e.g. Rheingold [1993], Grossman [1995], Schiller [1996]). On the other hand, numerous empirical studies undertaken during the last decade have been mostly the detailed case studies. They have referred to the experience of individual countries and analysed single aspects of the problem (see e.g. Groper [1996], Bimber [1998], Larsen [1999]). Only in last years more comprehensive considerations, attempting to link empirical data with general inferences concerning the model of democracy emerged [Coleman, et al., 1999], [Hague and Loader, 1999], [Hoff, et al., 2000].

Nevertheless, political science still awaits not only the unambiguous vision of democratic system in the period of information revolution, but even the consent concerning basic concepts, which adequately describe the ICT impact on the realm of democratic politics. Great variety of terms used in different studies proves intellectual creativity of scholars. Nevertheless, it does not facilitate rational discussion and mutual dialogue. Thus, an attempt to clarify basic notions seems to be the pre-condition of the serious discourse.

2. BASIC TERMS

Political science is still in search of the term, which reflects adequately consequences of the information revolution in the realm of democratic politics. Moreover, after the decade of intensive studies, the inquiry seems very distant from the completion. At least five different notions are currently used to explain the model of democracy emerging from the information revolution.

The term, which has the longest tradition, is teledemocracy. It was used as early, as the 80. [Arterton, 1987] and still has some advocates [Dutton, 1992], [Watson, et al. 1999]. For Arterton teledemocracy is: “ (...) the use of communications technology to facilitate the transmission of political information and opinion between citizens and their public leaders” [1987, p. 14].

Cyberdemocracy (cyber-democracy) is another concept applied in many studies [Ogden, 1994], [Poster, 1995]. According to Taylor and Burt cyber-democracy is the system: “(...) that enables democratic dialogue, discourse and active participation supported by computer networking in general and by globalisation processes associated with the Internet, in particular” [1999, p. 142].

In political science literature one can also find virtual democracy [Hacker, Todino; 1996], [Norris, 1999] and digital democracy [Percy-Smith, 1995], [Hague, Loader; 1999] as labels referring to the consequences of the ICT use in the realm of democracy. The most popular term, used in studies concerning politics and political system in the period of information revolution, is though the electronic democracy (e-democracy). Many definitions of that notion are available in various texts. The emphasis is put on the role of the ICT in strengthening political participation [Korac-Kakabadse, Korac-Kakabadse, 1999], the increasing role of online plebiscites and debates in decision making [Moore, 1999] or simply any use of computers and computer networks for realisation of the basic democratic processes [Hagen, 1997].

Even the superficial reading of the above definitions proves, that authors often use the same term to describe different aspects of political process or refer to the same phenomena but make use of various notions. It results in lack of coherence between different studies and makes the process of communication a real challenge. In fact, each term used to explain the essence of the ICT impact on democracy underlines a different plane of the analysed problems. Teledemocracy refers mostly to all the democratic acts, which can be realised ‘on distance’ – especially elections and plebiscites. In digital democracy the stress is on peculiar method of information recording and transmission, whereas

the notion of electronic democracy is constructed on the crucial role of electronic devices and applications, which emerged in consequence of the ICT development.

Subtle differences in specific terms meaning could be the starting point for the construction of a few separate notions, referring to various aspects of the information revolution impact on democracy. Nonetheless, it seems that currently the arbitrariness of different terms use is the dominating pattern and we are not able to avoid some terminological anarchy. The establishment of the dominating language convention is not the basic aim of this text. Therefore, in the following parts of the paper, the phrase ‘electronic democracy’ (e-democracy) will be used as the basic term for description of the model of democracy emerging in consequence of the ICT use in the realm of democratic process.

3. INFORMATION REVOLUTION AND DEMOCRACY

The basic issue concerning the electronic democracy refers to its overall impact on democratic model of governance. Political science literature provides various answers to the question stated in such a way. In fact, they constitute the full spectrum of all possible points of view, and the debate itself is one of the most interesting in contemporary theory of democracy.

According to the most enthusiastic visions of e-democracy, we are just experiencing the democratic transformation, which can be compared with the emergence of Athenian democracy. Due to the mass use of the ICT in political processes, common people will be able to participate in each aspect of the decision-making directly. Consequently, elected representatives will no longer play the dominating role in democracy. They will be overthrown by common citizens [Grosman, 1995]. Not all concepts of electronic democracy are so radical, but many analysts find the significant empowerment of common people to be the most visible and obvious consequence of the ICT use in the realm of politics (see e.g. Etzioni [1993], Negroponte [1995], Ward [1996]).

At the opposite end of the continuum describing the new technologies impact on democracy, one can find many visions prophesying negative consequences of the ICT spread in the democratic processes. Alienation of people is the most important result of the growing role of new technologies in everyday life, and alienated individuals are not able to re-construct democracy and resolve its current problems.

On the contrary, the development of e-democracy must lead to the intensification of the democracy crisis [Garson, 1995]. This tendency will be strengthened by the growing commercialisation of the cyberspace. The profit-oriented logic of public life is rapidly being moved to the realm of the Internet, including the political use of the Net.

From the political perspective one can say that: “As virtual reality comes to mirror the real world, cyberspace simply becomes another arena in the ongoing struggle for wealth, power and political influence” [Margolis, Resnick; 2000, p. 7]. Thus, instead of being the alternative for the ‘consumer democracy’, the ICT have become another channel for the introduction of market mechanisms to politics.

What is then the real status of electronic democracy? Is it a New Agora or rather the ultimate proof the democratic system degeneration? Considerations of that kind still play important role in the political science literature. The major argument of this text is however that there is no adequate answer to questions phrased in a way formulated above. There is no single face of electronic democracy. In fact, the careful observer of the political reality in the period of the information revolution must notice at least three different faces of e-democracy. Each of them reflects a different aspect of the ICT-driven political phenomena and each implies a separate vision of the democratic process.

3.1. First face of e-democracy. The remedy for democracy crisis.

Among major aspects of contemporary democracy crisis, two seem to play a crucial role. They are interconnected and both of them determine the overall attitude towards democracy. The first factor is

the growing level of citizens' alienation, resulting from their disappointment and frustration with democratic elite performance. The crisis of the civic identification with the state and its institutions makes democracy a very fragile construction. Moreover, its ability to challenge possible threats has been lately very often questioned.

One of important consequences of such a situation and another dimension of democracy crisis is the growing indifference of citizens and the decline of the general level of participation in political organisations and civic associations (this tendency is often described as the disappearance of social capital, see Putnam [2000]).

In that perspective, the growing role of the ICT in political processes can be regarded as a remedy for democracy crisis. It refers to two aspects of electronic democracy mostly. The first one is the impact of new technologies on the dynamics of political mobilisation.

If we accept the definition of the mobilisation as the process by which citizens are stimulated to participate in political actions [Bimber, 1998, p. 391], the major obstacle on the way towards political activity is the high cost of political participation. The use of Internet and other new technologies reduces that cost considerably. The individual interested in some form of political activity is no longer forced to accommodate his daily schedule to the rhythm of campaign volunteering or political meetings. You can sign the petition, send a hundred messages to supporters of your party candidate or organise a joint demonstration with allies from different country - while drinking the evening coffee in your room in front of your PC.

As Pal writes: "(...) new ICT dramatically lower the barriers to entry into the political marketplace. Mobilisation is in principle easier because larger numbers of people can be contacted and politically aroused through electronic means" [1998, p. 122]. Of course, it refers to both individuals and political organisations. The greater problems has the specific organisation with collecting material resources necessary for the everyday activity, the more important are the ICT in organisation functioning. Great political parties can exist without the Internet, for many grass-roots movements and civic initiatives, the use of Internet is a pre-condition of both the presence on the political scene and the organisational survival.

From the perspective of the single organisation, there are three major advantages of the ICT use in the process of political mobilisation. They are: more effective communication, lower costs of basic activity and greater availability of information. Rational implementation of possibilities provided by new technologies makes it possible to be active and visible even for small groups with poor organisational structures. You can debate on the political platform or consult your planned activity with foreign partners without physical presence in the same place. Moreover, thanks to the Internet small groups can co-ordinate their efforts to make them more visible and more efficient. International networking – even in the global scale – no longer demands complicated (and expensive) acts performed by one central structure.

There are several examples proving the crucial role of the ICT in constructing new patterns of political mobilisation. It refers to both electoral campaigns and protest politics, aimed at the accomplishment of specific, detailed goals. Jesse Ventura's victory in the governor race in the state of Minnesota, in 1998 is often presented as the model of the optimum use of the ICT in campaigning. Ventura – ex-wrestler and an actor - was a political outsider, with serious problems with his public image and very limited campaign resources. His electoral Web site played dual role in the campaign. Firstly, it was a kind of the logistic centre, co-ordinating all his campaign - based mostly on individual volunteers, recruited ad hoc. Secondly, the Internet was a powerful tool for shaping the favourable image, the counterbalance for mainstream media, which did not regard Ventura to be the serious candidate [Madsen, 1998].

With respect to protest politics, the most spectacular successful campaigns in which the use of the ICT played important role were actions against American Communication Decency Act (introducing some form of the Internet censorship) in 1996 and the blockade of the OECD Multilateral Agreement on

Investments in 1998. In both cases the Internet turned out to be the decisive factor of mass protest mobilisation, enriching considerably conventional instruments available for civic organisations.

Another aspect of electronic democracy, which can be regarded as the evidence of the crucial role of the ICT in overcoming the democracy crisis, is connected with the formula of democratic state activity. It is the problem of 'electronic bureaucracy', most often referred to as the Electronic Service Delivery (ESD). At first glimpse the ESD has nothing in common with electronic political mobilisation. Both processes have however one important common attribute. They strengthen the common citizen - not a member of the political elite - in his relations with the state and its representatives and reduce costs borne by the individual in his interactions with the state.

The aforementioned political alienation of individuals was often associated with great distance between representatives of the state authority and everyday life of citizens. They perceived themselves as objects and not real partners of bureaucratic state structures. The process of electronic delivery of basic public services makes all the transactions with bureaucracy not only much easier and less time consuming for the individual. In terms of the general philosophy of the state functioning, the introduction of the ESD moves the 'centre of gravity' of mutual relations from bureaucratic procedures to citizen's satisfaction. Thus, the citizen becomes much more the subject of his interactions with the state, than he used to be a few decades ago.

The development of the ESD is of course only a part of the more general process. The position of the state apparatus vis a vis citizens was being redefined for some time, irrespective of technological transformations [Lips, 1998]. Nonetheless, it was the rapid expansion of the ICT, which provided technical instruments for the intensification of the whole process, and made it much more visible from the perspective of the common citizen. We can say that currently it is just the ESD, which is the most widespread aspect of the electronic democracy. From the perspective of the everyday life in democratic countries, one will much earlier experience electronic transactions with public administration, than any other dimension of the ICT use in politics.

The Internet makes it possible to realise all the transactions with public administration for 24 hours and from any place. Public multimedia kiosks or smart cards technology open the ESD even to those, who do not have the easy access to the Net. In countries, in which the electronic signature is legally accepted, there are currently no formal barriers to move the whole realm of public services to the cyberspace, as the alternative channel of relations with the state bureaucracy. Moreover, it is already the case in some regions of the most developed countries (see e.g. the Australian state of Victoria, and its comprehensive MAXI system - <<http://www.maxi.com.au/index.htm>>).

If you are the common citizen, paying taxes and tickets for overspeeding but not very much engaged in political activity, the ESD can make you believe that new technologies are able to reconstruct the state institutions towards more responsiveness to your needs and expectations. If you are participating in various forms of political activity, the Internet will make it much easier to spread your ideas, reach other people sharing similar opinions and mobilise all of them for effective political action. In both cases, you will find democracy, its institutions and mechanisms more friendly and regard the ICT to be an important instrument of political empowerment. Political scientist will say: electronic democracy can cure the disease, contemporary democratic politics suffers from.

3.2. Second face of e-democracy. Another stimulus for democracy crisis.

For many radical advocates of electronic democracy, to implement this idea entirely means to introduce electronic plebiscites and referenda as major mechanisms of the democratic decision-making. From technical point of view such a possibility will be feasible (at least in the most developed countries) in near future. Does it mean however that we should wait for this moment impatiently and regard the electronic plebiscitary democracy to be the desired model of democratic system?

Doubtless, plebiscitary democracy gives all the individuals the maximum direct influence on the shape of the public life. In the period of information revolution the access to the computer is the only precondition of such an influence execution.

Nonetheless, democracy is an extremely complex and subtle system, as long as it is supposed to secure political stability and the balance between differentiated interests. If complicated procedures of democracy are reduced to the single push of the computer key by each individual, completely new political system will emerge. Instead of the classic model of democracy, considerably supported by new technologies, we would construct a kind of the 'arithmetic democracy'. In the latter, the anonymous and impromptu majority would become the only body responsible for all the crucial political decisions. The efficiency of the system – measured by the time necessary for making a single decision – would grow. Nonetheless, the system efficiency is not necessarily positively correlated with the quality of decisions.

The essence of contemporary democracy – the public debate – is often cynical or dry. Still it is the forum for various opinions exchange, the compromise seeking and listening to alternative points of view. In electronic plebiscitary democracy the space for public deliberation of issues either disappears entirely, or is reduced to role of political spectacle deprived of any real importance.

In other words, there is no democracy without political discourse and the moment of decision-making is only the formal crowning of the deliberation. Electronic plebiscitary democracy is able to introduce all individuals to the realm of decision-making. There is no way however to change millions of individuals into conscious participants of rational public debate. Moreover, anonymity means lack of accountability and the latter is one of the basic aspects of democratic governance [Moore, 1999]. Even if the decision turns out to be wrong, you are not able to call anyone to account for it. The 'people's will' is not personal. In that perspective the electronic plebiscitary democracy is much more the threat to democratic system than a chance for making it stronger. Entirely new rules of the game will rather add the new plane to democracy crisis, than resolve problems we already experience.

Electronic plebiscitary democracy is not the only challenge for contemporary democracy, generated by the ICT use. Not less important is the question of new technologies accessibility and its consequences for social stratification and the structure of power. That aspect of the information revolution is not directly associated with political system mechanisms. Nevertheless, it determines considerably both the social base of democratic politics and the overall assessment of democracy performance.

There are three major dimensions of the ICT accessibility. Firstly, it is the problem of the access to the technical infrastructure. In some regions of Africa one can be a very affluent and educated person but lack of telecommunication network makes it impossible for him to get online. Secondly, accessibility is very much limited by costs of new technologies use. Computers' availability in the market is not tantamount to their presence in private residences, schools, etc. It is estimated that the common American spends between 1% and 2% of his monthly income for the Internet use. In case of the resident of Bangladesh, the comparable service would require spending 191% of his monthly income [ITWeb, 2001]. Thirdly, the real level of the ICT accessibility is determined by computer literacy. Someone, who has never seen the computer or other electronic devices before, will not be ready to enjoy surfing the cyberspace, even if it is free and the PC is a gift from the 'Government Agency for Information Society Construction'. Lack of experience and practice is a serious barrier of the ICT use.

All aspects of the ICT accessibility are responsible for social consequences of the information revolution and thus for the prospects of electronic democracy. If there is a relatively equal access to new technologies, all social groups – regardless of their socio-economic status – can take advantage of the ICT development. Then, we can say that the electronic democracy is opened to anyone and its possible positive consequences in the realm of political life can be considered the instrument of citizens' empowerment. Still, if the access to new technologies is strongly determined by your social and economic position, the ICT – instead of making democracy more responsive for marginal groups and individuals from outside of the mainstream politics – create new social divisions and become the additional criterion of social stratification.

The end of the first decade of the information revolution is a good moment to grasp the overall tendency concerning the access to the ICT. Unequal distribution during the first phase of new technologies introduction is a typical situation (it was a case of both the radio and the television during first years of their presence on the market). After a decade, however, their availability can be either more balanced, or still be strongly determined by the socio-economic status of users.

In that perspective, American data from the late 90. support the 'digital divide' argument. If the differences in number of computers and number of Internet users in various groups of American society are compared, it turns out that between 1993 and 1997 almost all inequalities were either deepened, or they remained at the same level. Out of 6 analysed variables (income, education, race, age, sex and place of residence) only sex is no longer the predictor of the ICT use - in 1997 men have not been more frequent users of new technologies than women. In case of all other factors the socio-economic variables were still responsible for the access to the ICT [Bikson, Panis, 1999]. In other words, you still have much greater chances to enjoy attractions of the information revolution if you are rich, well educated, White or Asian, below sixty and living in a great city.

Moreover, results of other research prove that the position in a social structure strongly determines declared openness to various forms of electronic democracy. In case of the UK almost 75% of respondents of high socio-economic status (professional occupations) declare their participation in e-voting, if such a possibility is authorised by law. That opinion is however shared by only 40% of respondents from the bottom of the social structure (unskilled occupations). Similar proportions refer to sending e-mails to politicians, participation in electronic political debates, or getting political information online [Marcella, Baxter, 2000].

All the presented data confirm, that even in the most developed countries the access to the ICT is still strongly determined by the socio-economic position of the individual. In fact the ICT became the additional important criterion of the social stratification. Furthermore, if electronic democracy procedures were introduced to the political system in near future, the inevitable result would be the duplication of patterns of political participation and political alienation typical for contemporary democracy. Rich and educated would be exited with new possibilities produced by the implementation of the ICT in politics. At the same time, lack of funds for computer purchase or computer illiteracy could push politically marginalised individuals and groups even further away from the democratic process. People, who are already frustrated and feel deprived of political resources, would find the development of electronic democracy, to be the ultimate proof that they were members of the political 'under-class'. If the information revolution strengthens the existing inequalities, and makes the social structure more polarised, the electronic democracy can not be regarded to be the cure for democracy problems. Instead, it is the stimulus deepening its crisis.

3.3. Third face of e-democracy. New bottle for the old wine.

There are several reasons to regard the electronic democracy a chance to overcome a crisis of democracy. Not less serious factors make the ICT use in politics a threat for the principles of democracy. It is a kind of a paradox however, that also analysts claiming that new technologies have virtually no impact on basic problems of contemporary democracy, present many arguments to support their thesis. In fact, there is the third face of electronic democracy as well.

For advocates of the 'new bottle for the old wine' argument the problem of political participation seems most convincing. New technologies make political involvement easier and create new forms of political activity. Nonetheless, it has not been the lack of the sufficient number of participation channels, what democracy has suffered from lately. The major problem has been - and still remains - the decline of the participation level. Common citizens are less and less ready for public involvement, even in its basic forms, e.g. voting. The most significant contribution of the ICT to the process of democracy strengthening might be the increase of the number of individuals participating in various

political acts. If electoral turnout rose considerably as a result of the possibility of electronic voting, we could say that new technologies strengthened democracy.

The decided majority of data concerning the ICT-supported political activity – in that the use of the Internet by voters – do not confirm such an optimistic vision [Bimber, 1998], [Margolis, Resnick, 2000]. As Norris writes – referring to American electoral campaign in 1998: “Net political activists were already among the most motivated, informed and interested in the electorate. In this sense, during recent campaigns the Net was essentially preaching to the converted” [1999, p. 88-89]. In other words, the online participation in politics is based on the same minority part of the society, which was active prior to the information revolution. They are more visible for the political scene analysts, since the ICT have provided new forms of political expression and reduced the public activity costs. Nevertheless, they remain the decided minority. All the others, even if enjoy the benefits of the information revolution, prefer much more listening to the online rock concert than signing the online political petition.

Moreover, for people looking for political information in the cyberspace, the Internet seems to play much more the role of a method to access traditional news than a new source of information and a new model of communication. From the perspective of political participation, the Web is not a new quality, pushing democratic process towards entirely new patterns of behaviour and entirely new possibilities of the individual. While commercialisation of the Internet proceeds, political aspect of the Net becomes more the new and attractive branch of media market and media industry, than the autonomous product of civil activity. Technological progress (in the realm of media marked with the emergence of the radio and then the television) has changed the form of political spectacle but the essence of politics has remained almost untouched. Thanks to the media, people know their candidates and party platforms much better than in times of the stagecoach and the telegraph. Nevertheless, the electoral turnout is still in decrease in the majority of democratic countries and the overall level of participation indicates common indifference towards politics. The development of the ICT and the electronic democracy can change nothing, since it is the lack of the motivation and not the lack of technical possibilities, which limits the scope of political participation in contemporary democracy.

Thus, the electronic democracy is changing political mechanisms. Nevertheless, it is not increasing significantly the number of actors involved in the public life. The belief that the information revolution would change individuals who were not interested in politics into active citizens, conscious of their role in democratic society, turned out to be the sign of the unjustified optimism. After the decade of the information revolution we experience exactly the same problems of democracy as in the pre-computer times. New bottle can not change the taste of the old wine.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The overall impact of the new technologies use on democratic process is ambiguous and justifies drawing divergent inferences. One can find arguments supporting any general conclusion. It is the result of the fact that enthusiasts of electronic democracy are most often talking about different aspects of the ICT implementation in politics, than critiques of e-democracy. Consequently, they use the same term to describe various social and political phenomena. It is not very probable that in the near future the indisputable vision of the electronic democracy impact on politics will emerge. It seems that we must resign attempts of general judgements. Instead, we should focus on more detailed considerations, referring to the separated aspects of the ICT use in politics. Perhaps even the term ‘electronic democracy’ should be replaced with ‘electronic mobilisation’, ‘electronic participation’ or ‘electronic voting’. The latter are much more precise and can make the debate on political consequences of new technologies use more rational and substantial.

The above remarks must be supplemented with one obvious reservation. The information revolution is far from exhausting its development dynamics. No one can adequately foresee the future direction of the ICT transformation and the final shape of democratic mechanisms supported by new technologies.

Currently, almost all important aspects of electronic democracy are either experiments or – due to the limited access to the ICT – can be enjoyed by narrow, not representative groups only. Together with further spread of new technologies and the growing role of the ‘e-generation’ in public life, the ICT use in basic democratic processes and procedures can, and probably will, become as common as the TV candidates’ debate is today. It means that in the future completely different image can substitute for our today’s vision of electronic democracy as the ‘three faces statue’.

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