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E-democracy and Socio-economic Development

Completed Research

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Abstract

In its ideal, an e-society is a society where technology is fully accepted by the public in all aspects of daily life. Though this ideal may still be some time away, many aspects of the e-society are already in common use or are starting to become widely implemented. This includes e-government, e-democracy, e-information, e-service, e-participation, etc., which have the potential to greatly impact socioeconomic development. In this paper we explore how these innovative e-technologies may transform society in both developed and emerging economies and be used to avert social exclusion from democratic decision-making. Based on literature review, we define several commonly used e-concepts and illustrate their relevance to socio-economic development with practical application examples around the world. We conclude our paper by pointing to several promising research opportunities.

Keywords

E-consultation, e-democracy, e-government, e-information, e-lobbying, e-parliament, e-participation, e-petition, e-referendum, e-service, e-society, e-voting, ICT4D, socioeconomic development

Introduction

Our civilization seems to be on a path towards an e-society, a society where the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) is increasingly accepted and integrated in all aspects of daily life (Loo 2013). In this emerging e-society, innovative ICT for development (ICT4D) solutions conceivably support ordinary people in developing labor market competitiveness, improve quality of life and standard of living, and generally contribute to socioeconomic development. The phenomenon of e-society is associated with a wide range of related terms, such as e-government, e-democracy and e-inclusion.

Socioeconomic development is defined as a process of positive changes in social and economic conditions (Roztocki and Weistroffer 2016). A multidimensional framework proposed by Roztocki et al. (2019) indicates that innovative digital technologies are crucial drivers for socioeconomic development. It seems evident that innovative ICT4D are pivotal in transforming society in both developed and emerging economies. At the country level, these changes may be reflected in overall advancements in socioeconomic conditions, such as an increase in national product and wealth, an improved labor market, more political freedom, and increased involvement of the general public in political decision-making processes. In particular it may reasonably be expected that ICT4D will help in creating an e-society free of exclusion, a society in which underprivileged and socially disadvantaged segments of the population actively participate in the democratic process.

The main objective of this paper is to elucidate how concepts, supported by innovative digital technologies, such as e-government, e-democracy, e-information, e-service, and e-participation, may improve political freedom and increase ordinary people's involvement in political decision-making processes, and thereby advance socioeconomic development. In essence, our main research question can be formulated as follows: How can innovative digital technologies reduce exclusion and get ordinary people more involved in the political decision-making process?

Thus, we follow the call by Rodríguez Bolívar et al. (2010), who more than a decade ago called for more research on e-government, e-democracy, e-governance, e-deliberation, and e-voting. In the research presented in this paper, we discuss past and present initiatives (cases) that use innovative digital technologies such as e-government, e-democracy, e-information, e-service, e-participation, and that can be associated with socioeconomic development. In our work, we do not focus on a specific country, but rather we present concepts associated with e-society and e-democracy that are relevant and applicable in any country. All these terms are explained and defined in the following section of the paper.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. After reviewing some background information and offering definitions for the examined technologies, we briefly describe our approach to searching the literature and the Internet for relevant cases. We then discuss these past or current initiatives involving e-democracy, e-participation, e-voting, e-consultation, etc. and then conclude our paper by pointing out several promising future research directions.

Background

As society is increasingly evolving toward an e-society, many new concepts have emerged, in addition to the more established ones like e-business, e-commerce, and e-government. While Magoulas et al. (2007) refer to e-society broadly as a research area that covers various aspects of deploying information and communications technologies for large user communities, Loo (2013) gives a narrower definition of e-society, defining it as a society where e-technologies are so fully integrated into the fabrics of the society that their use no longer entails major household decisions. An important aspect of the e-society, an aspect that is most relevant in socio-economic development, is e-democracy, with many associated concepts, like e-government, e-voting, and e-participation. In the following subsections we briefly discuss these concepts and try to provide definitions that are both concise and precise. An initial hierarchy of e-concepts related to e-society discussed in this paper is depicted in Figure 1.

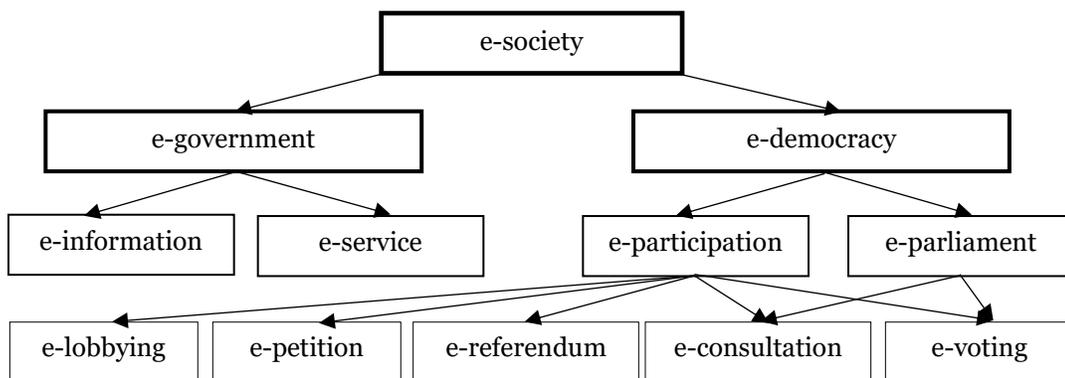


Figure 1. Hierarchy of E-concepts in an E-Society

E-government

The term e-government emerged in the late 1990s (Grönlund and Horan 2005), and generally describes a variety of interactions between national or communal administrations on one side, and residents and other entities on the other side, using ICT (Reitz 2006). It most commonly involves government information (e-information) and government services (government e-services) being made available through the internet via web browsers or mobile apps. Based on Grönlund and Horan (2005), we define e-government as the

utilization of ICT, and particularly the Internet, by central, regional, and local authorities, to provide information and various services to the public.

Innovation in e-government mostly relates to improving the effectiveness of e-information and making governmental e-services more efficient. In addition to increasing the efficiency (faster service and lower costs) of governmental e-services, innovative digital technologies can also serve to increase government transparency and thereby reduce corruption (Kneuer 2016).

E-information

E-information is perhaps the most basic concept related to e-government. Based on Khan and Krishnan (2020) we define e-information as the use of websites and web forums, newsgroups, e-mail lists, and mobile phone application, by central, regional, and local authorities to share information and data. E-information may include public transportation schedules, recreational opportunities, and available governmental e-services. E-information may also include updates on regulations, policies, and initiatives. But e-information can also be used as a means of communication in special circumstances, such as during catastrophic events, for example.

Governmental e-service

Boyer et al. (2002) define e-services as any interactive services delivered over the Internet using advanced ICT, including services provided by private businesses as well as government agencies. In the context of e-government and e-democracy, we define e-services simply as interactive government services provided over the Internet. Possible examples of governmental e-services include on-line renewal of driver's licenses, payment of taxes, and applications for business permits. As special type of e-service that is increasingly important and popular is e-filing of tax returns. In a way, governmental e-services also include e-information, as citizen may use digital means to request and receive specific information from administrations.

E-democracy

In spite of being one of the most used term in political debates, the precise meaning of the term "democracy" is fuzzy and its use varies (Musiał-Karg 2017). In addition, many countries claim be a democracy despite large parts of their population hardly participating in the political decision-making process (Musiał-Karg 2017). The term "democracy" is derived from Greek and essentially means governance ("kratos") by the people ("demos"). Thus, a democracy is a political system where the power over legislative, judicial, and executive bodies is exercised by the people or citizens of a country.

Macintosh (2004) defines e-democracy as the use of ICT to support the democratic decision-making processes. According to Päivärinta and Sæbø (2006), e-democracy refers to the use of ICT in political debates and decision-making processes, complementing or contrasting other means of communication. Some authors equate e-democracy with e-government; however, e-government is not limited to democratic societies, and moreover, e-government does not typically involve the public in government decision-making. E-democracy, as most e-concepts, does generally make use of the Internet, and thus we adapt the definition by Macintosh (2004) as follows: E-democracy is the utilization of ICT, and particularly the Internet, in democratic decision-making processes.

E-participation

The 2020 UN E-Government Survey (United Nations (2020) describes e-participation as the "process of engaging citizens through ICT in policy, decision-making, and service design and delivery in order to make it participatory, inclusive, and deliberative." Macintosh (2004) defines e-participation as being "concerned with the use of information and communication technologies to engage citizens, support the democratic decision-making processes and strengthen representative democracy." Wimmer (2007) states that e-participation "is a complex area of applying information and communication technology in the context of citizen engagement in the discourse with politicians and governments." Based on all these, we define e-participation as the utilization of ICT to engage citizen in the discourse with politicians and governments.

E-parliament

The 2012 World e-Parliament Report (United Nations 2012) defines e-parliament as a legislature that is empowered to be more open, transparent, and accountable through ICT. It also states that an e-parliament is an efficient organization where stakeholders use ICT to perform their primary functions of lawmaking, representation, and oversight more effectively. According to Olasina and Mutula (2015), e-parliament refers to the use of ICT in the performance of legislative functions by legislators and citizens. Thus, we define e-parliament simply as the utilization of ICT in the performance of legislative functions.

E-lobbying

Perhaps the most elementary form of a bottom-up version of e-participation is e-lobbying. Lobbyists endeavor to persuade government officials to support or oppose specific policy issues, and e-lobbying is lobbying by electronic means. Thus, in line with Aidemark (2003), we define e-lobbying as organized campaigning for or against specific issues using digital means, usually e-mail directed at elected representatives such as members of parliament. E-lobbying is closely related to e-petitioning.

E-petition

A petition is a request to do something, usually addressed to a government or public entity. An e-petition is a form of petition conducted by electronic means, usually a website. Many governments have implemented specific e-petition platforms, where citizens can raise issues or propose specific actions, such as the "We the People" government website created under the Obama administration, but now dissolved. Such e-petitioning systems are bottom-up applications that provide citizens with a channel to request their governments for specific changes (Luna-Reyes 2017). As such, e-petitions can be regarded as a form of advocacy democracy (Matthews 2020). We define e-petition as the utilization of ICT, and particularly the Internet, by citizens to request of their governments specific actions or changes in policies. Both, e-petitioning and e-lobbying use electronic means to request specific actions from government officials. But a petition is usually more involved, raising new issues or proposing particular actions, whereas lobbying is usually asking for a pro or contra vote on an issue already under discussion. In addition, e-petitioning is a more formal process, usually requiring a minimum number of supporters to be considered by the authorities. In contrast, e-lobbying can be initiated by grassroots movements with no specific number of participants.

E-referendum

An e-referendum is a referendum conducted via electronic communication means, where referendum refers to direct voting on specific issues by the people, i.e., a form of direct democracy. Musiał-Karg (2012) defines an e-referendum as a form of voting on a specific matter, where voting takes place using ICT, such as the Internet or mobile phones, rather than ballot boxes. Thus, we define an e-referendum as the utilization of ICT for direct voting on a particular proposal or certain matter. An e-referendum can be considered as a specific type of e-voting, but rather than voting for a candidate or party in an election, it is voting on a particular issue placed before the people.

E-consultation

Luna-Reyes (2017) describes e-consultation as a top-down approach in which central, regional, or local governments ask citizens for their opinions on policy options or pending legislations. E-consultations aim to increase the legitimacy of policies and laws by soliciting input from citizens. We define e-consultation thus as the utilization of ICT, and particularly the Internet, to solicit public opinion about pending governmental initiatives or proposed regulations. E-consultation could be labeled as a top-down version of e-participation.

E-voting

E-voting generally refers to any type of voting using electronic means (Svensson and Leenes 2003). E-voting may use stand-alone electronic voting machines that record and count votes in a specific public site, or it may entail personal computers or mobile devices that are connected to the Internet, allowing voting to take

place remotely, from any location. There are many forms of e-voting, and depending on the type of election, may involve ordinary members of the public, elected or appointed officials, or government members. E-voting may be used in general elections, such as for president of a country, or a legislative representative, or it may be on specific issues within smaller regions and groups. E-voting could also be employed for recall elections, where voters can remove previously elected officials before the end of their terms. Thus, though there are many kinds of e-voting, involving different kinds of voters, we use the simple and broad definition, stating that e-voting is voting which involves electronic means.

Methodology

In our research, we searched the literature and the Internet for suitable cases related to the concepts discussed and defined above. In our search, we tried to identify practical examples that illustrate these previously described concepts related specifically to e-democracy, that is, we excluded e-government, e-information, and governmental e-services from our search, as those concepts are not directly related to the democratic decision-making process. We tried to find case studies from different countries, though these concepts and technologies are applicable in any country or society.

To obtain relevant case studies we searched various databases, including EBSCO, Elsevier, Emerald, JSTOR, SAGE, ScienceDirect, Scopus, Springer, Taylor and Francis, and Wiley Online Library. We also used various search engines and Google Scholar. In our keyword search we looked for the specific e-concepts in the title, abstract, or keywords of the papers.

Results

In this section, we present several cases that we were able to find in our literature and Internet search and that highlight the previously defined e-concepts related to e-democracy. We focused on cases showing particularly interesting digital innovations relevant for socioeconomic development. All these initiatives seem to be important to socioeconomic transformation as they contribute to improved political openness and increased participation by the populace in the political decision-making process.

E-participation and Urna de Cristal in Columbia

We define e-participation as the utilization of ICT to engage citizen in the discourse with politicians and governments. An example of an e-participation initiative is Urna de Cristal (“Crystal Ballot Box”), an e-participation platform launched by the presidency of Colombia in 2010 (Abusleme 2020; Berrio-Zapata and Berrio-Gil 2017). This platform is built around three different types of e-participation (called campaigns): education, consultation, and influence. The objective of the education campaigns is to inform the population about various policies. Thus, the Urna de Cristal education campaigns may be classified as e-information. The consultation campaign of Urna de Cristal gives people the chance to articulate their preferences and opinions by answering online questionnaires on specific topics. Thus, this campaign could be classified as e-consultation. Initially, the objective of the influence campaign was to provide citizens with influence on the political decision-making process. However, accordingly to Abusleme (2020) at the time of writing no influence campaign had been implemented at the national level. Urna de Cristal makes use of social networks such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Google+, and Instagram as well as web radios and TV channels (Berrio-Zapata and Berrio-Gil 2017).

E-parliament and the “Movement of Free People” in Poland

We define e-parliament as the utilization of ICT in the performance of legislative functions. This includes debating and voting on issues. A recent and interesting e-parliament initiative in Poland is the Movement of Free People (in Polish: Ruch Wolnych Ludzi) (Zagórski 2021). This grassroots project is based on the principles of direct democracy using innovative ICT. All voting is conducted digitally by using online voting tool based on Blockchain technology provided by iVoting (<https://ivoting.pl/en/>). The objective of Movement of Free People is to assemble citizens interested in e-participation by offering virtual debate rooms and opportunities to voice their opinions by regular e-voting on various issues. In addition, a longer-term objective may be to participate in future elections to the Polish Parliament (Sejm) and to virtually assemble the parliament on this platform.

E-lobbying and the LobbyForMe website in the USA

E-lobbying, according to our definition, is the organized campaigning for or against specific issues using e-mail or other digital means. An example of an e-lobbying platform is LobbyforMe.org (Baxter 2017), intended to provide an opportunity to ask politicians, administrators, and other decision-makers for help on specific issue. It is based on the assumption that when a large number of citizens contact their elected representatives and demand explicit actions, the representatives would respond and use their authority to act on the behalf of the electorate.

E-petition and "We the People" government platform in the USA

Many countries, including Australia, Germany, Norway, and the UK, have implemented e-petition platforms to enable citizens a more direct influence over political decision-making processes (Dumas et al. 2015a). We define e-petition as the utilization of ICT, and particularly the Internet, by citizens to request of their governments specific actions or changes in policies. In the USA, the "We the People" government platform was introduced under the Obama administration to allow people to petition the federal government for specific causes and register signatures from supporters (Dumas et al. 2015b). Petitions using this platform that within 30 days received at least 100,000 digital signatures received an official response from the President's office (Dumas et al. 2015b).

The "We the People" government platform, which is now dissolved, was very popular and attracted over 15 million users (as of September 2014), and over 22 million signatures for over 35,000 petitions were submitted (Dumas et al. 2015b). However, as reported by Dumas et al. (2015b) only a small fraction of these e-petitions resulted in changes satisfying the petitioners.

E-referendum in Switzerland

A traditional referendum is direct participation by citizens in political decision-making, where votes are binding for the final outcomes (Musiał-Karg 2012). Generally, referenda are not widely used in most countries or localities. The perhaps best known example of a country where referenda are customary though, is Switzerland, where they have been common since 1848 (Rappard 1912). Because the use of traditional referenda in the political process is limited, the use of e-referenda is also limited. Switzerland seems to be leading in this transformation, as e-referenda were introduced there in 2000 (Musiał-Karg 2012). One of the goals for introducing the option for e-referenda was the conceivable inclusion of those segments of the population that did not commonly participate in a traditional referendum, namely disabled people and Swiss citizens living abroad (Musiał-Karg 2012). As reported by the same research, the introduction of e-referenda did attract participants who had never partaken in traditional referenda. Thus, e-referenda appear to be effective in averting social exclusion from democratic decision-making.

E-consultation and the Darebin eForum in Australia

We defined e-consultation as the utilization of ICT, and particularly the Internet, to solicit public opinion about pending governmental initiatives or proposed regulations. An example of an e-consultation initiative is the case of the City of Darebin in Victoria, Australia, which in 2006 established a platform to consult members of the local community on various issues, such as transportation and approaches to protect the environment (Walsh 2007). To engage residents in political discussions, this platform uses a variety of tools such as online polls and surveys, online feedback forms, and Webinars (Bailey 2007). The users could also post their own opinions on various open topics. The Darebin eForum facilitates discussions on diverse topics and thereby allows ordinary people to become better informed as well as have their own opinions and perspectives made known (Walsh 2007).

E-voting on civil budgets in Poland

A recent study about the use of e-government services during COVID-19 in Poland observed that "...citizens are becoming increasingly more demanding and more frequently voice their discontent..." and seek greater involvement in political decision-making processes. More specifically, since the onset of COVID-19, the participation in e-voting on civic budgets (in Polish: Budżet obywatelski) more than quadrupled (Roztock et al. 2021).

The first participatory budgeting in Poland, labeled as “civic budget,” was introduced in 2011 in Sopot (Džinić et al. 2016). The main reason for introducing voting on civic budgets by the populace was to counter low election participation and to increase involvement in local budgetary affairs (Roztocki et al. 2021). Voting on civic budgets, whether by traditional means or by e-voting, is not limited to Polish citizens. Rather, all residents in a given community can submit various proposals for financing local projects, such as constructing a new bike way or new playground, improving a parking lot, or plant additional trees in an existing park. After a committee decides about the admissibility of submitted proposals, the residents can vote on their preferences. Usually, the results of this voting are binding for the authorities and the projects that receive the highest numbers of votes are financed. As e-voting makes the voting process more accessible and less time consuming, not requiring voters to physically come to a ballot location, e-voting can be considered an innovative digital technology for socioeconomic development.

Limitations, Future Research, and Conclusion

In this paper, we presented several initiatives that use innovative digital technologies related to e-democracy concepts that potentially have a large impact on socio-economic development. In our search for cases related to these concepts we found that e-democracy is a complex issue, and many authors use different names for the same or similar concepts in this regard. In addition, there are many overlaps in these e-democracy related concepts. For example, as shown in one of the discussed cases, e-participation, which we define as using ICT to engage citizen in the communication with politicians and governments, may itself be constructed from other concepts, such as e-information, e-petition, and e-consulting.

A limitation of our paper may be that we deliberated the many advantages of the virtual or e-versions of related democracy concepts, but we did not debate the potential problems associated with these concepts. For example, e-voting may be subject to cyber-attacks and experience data breaches and leakage. Programming errors may allow for multiple votes. Security mechanisms and user acceptance may be subjects of future research. For instance, creating and publishing transparent voting protocols may help reduce distrust about e-voting. Future research may also examine how the use of available e-tools (such as e-voting, e-petition, and e-referendum) can help increase the participation and influence of ordinary people on important matters related to their lives and economic standings.

A different avenue for further research would be to elicit opinions from citizens on how much involvement in democratic decision making they actually wish or aspire for. It is quite likely that there is a large segment of the citizenry that is able and willing to use the Internet and other digital means to more actively participate in political debates and decision-making processes. On the other hand, it is also quite possible that there are many citizens who prefer to not bother and not be active at all in this regard.

To conclude, our research presented in our paper confirms the validity of the call by Rodríguez Bolívar et al. (2010) for more investigations on e-concepts.

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