

The potential contribution of ICTs to the political process

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Abstract: This paper discusses the potential of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to help engage people in all parts of the political process: obtaining information, engaging in deliberation and participating in decision-making. It also discusses limitations or barriers to using ICTs in these ways. Despite these limitations ICTs are likely to be increasingly tried in the political process. It is therefore important that we educate our young people for participation in an e-enabled political process. The paper therefore reports on an educational project that demonstrated using ICTs in the political process and introduced some 13-14 year olds to citizenship and electronic democracy, concentrating on a local mayoral election. The responses of the participants raise interesting issues about how to use ICTs in education and the desirability, or otherwise, of electronic electioneering. The paper contributes to our understanding and experience of citizenship education, e-democracy and the use of ICTs in the political process.

Keywords: e-democracy, e-government, e-electioneering, citizenship education

1. Introduction

In the UK's 2001 general election only 59% voted, a fall of 12% from the previous election in 1997 and the lowest turnout since 1918 (Cabinet Office 2002). In the 2002 local elections the turn out was only 35% per cent (Cabinet Office 2002) and in England's 2003 local elections it was 37% (BBC 2003). Voter turnout is declining in other democracies too, including both Western Europe and the newly democratised countries of Eastern Europe (Cabinet Office 2002). The lowest turnout is often among 18-24 year olds: for example, only 40% of them voted in the UK 2001 general election (Cabinet Office 2002). The challenge for all concerned with democracy is how to interest and engage people, especially young people, in political communications and the democratic process.

This paper therefore discusses how information and communication technologies (ICTs) might be used to help engage people, both old and young, in the democratic process, through, for example, web-based public information kiosks, electronic citizens' forums and electronic voting. However, the paper also discusses limitations or barriers to using ICTs in these ways. Despite these drawbacks it seems likely that ICTs will increasingly be tried in political communications and the political process. It is therefore important that we educate our young people for participation in an e-enabled political process.

The paper therefore goes on to report on a recent project which used ICTs to introduce some 13-14 year olds to citizenship and electronic democracy, concentrating on a local mayoral election. The project demonstrated three potential benefits of using ICTs to support democracy (obtaining information, engaging in deliberation and participating in decision making), and is also an example of how e-democracy and an understanding and experience of the democratic process can be conveyed to pupils via ICTs. The project can be seen as a simulation of what might occur if ICTs had an increased role in the political process. This paper therefore contributes to our understanding and experience of citizenship education, e-democracy and the use of ICTs in the political process.

2. Potential contribution and limitations of ICTs

ICTs can potentially contribute to the democratic process by supporting three different types of activities (Tsagarousianou 1999):

- Obtaining information.
- Engaging in deliberation.
- Participating in decision making.

These can be seen as ordered and cumulative (Jankowski et al. 2000), as illustrated in Figure 1: free access to information on a particular political issue is a pre-requisite for engaging in public debate,

and such debate is desirable prior to political action, whether in an institutionalised form like voting or in a form outside conventional political structures like mass demonstrations.

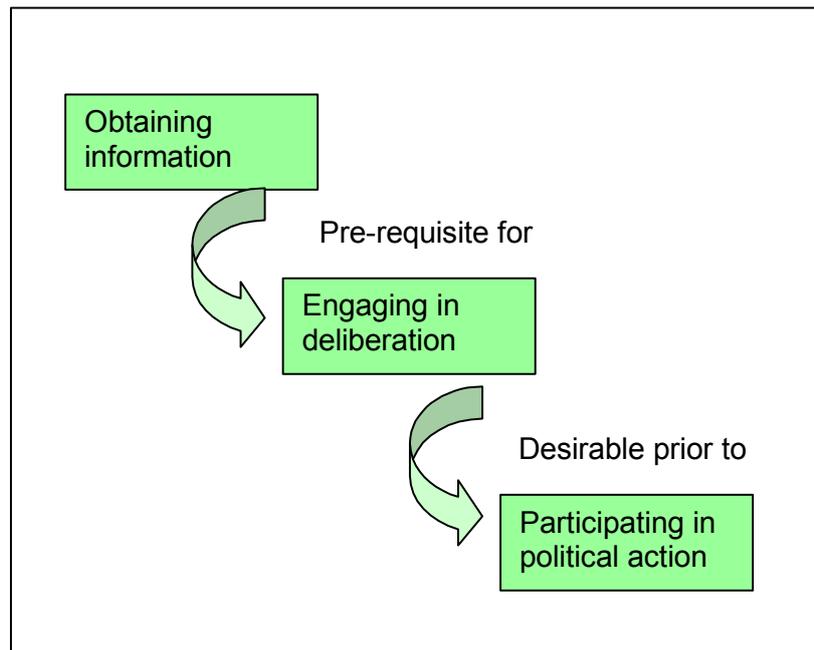


Figure 1: Potential contribution of ICTs to the political process

This section summarises how ICTs might support each of these three levels, and also the limitations which could restrict ICTs contributing in these ways.

2.1 Obtaining information

It has been suggested that citizens may lack the information necessary for participation in the political process, and need to be “trained in democracy” (Barber 1984; Hale et al. 1999). ICTs could help provide information about government and the democratic process through, for example, websites developed by government institutions, political parties, campaigning groups and on-line news services. The use of digital communications technology also supports 24-hour news-gathering and dissemination about current political events.

However, critics argue that although such citizenship information may be necessary, it is not sufficient for public engagement. Merely providing information implies conveying ‘facts’ from the experts to the citizenry at large (Hale et al. 1999; Yankelovich 1991). Moreover, political websites may be perceived as another aspect of political ‘spin’ - designed to make the owner look “cyber-hip”, modern and responsive to the information age (Becker 2001). Having set up a web site or a 24-hour rolling news programme, there is no guarantee that the

citizens will come to it. Previous research has shown that during the 1997 UK general election those tuning into campaign news on the TV were those who were already the most attentive to politics, and those who were undecided about voting were the least likely to be heavy viewers of TV news or regular readers of the press (Norris et al. 1999). It seems probable that the undecided are equally unlikely to look for web sites on political issues. There have also been fears that the proliferation of news channels and media, enabled by ICTs, may lead to the over-simplification and trivialisation of political discourse, with, for example, a concern with personalities rather than policies, leading to public cynicism and disengagement (Franklin 1994; Norris et al. 1999). Similarly, websites with their design requirements of ‘clean’ layouts without too much text (e.g. Nielsen 2000), may also over-simplify the presentation of political issues.

2.2 Engaging in deliberation

It is not just voter turnout that is declining, but also attendance at public meetings, political party membership and participation in political fundraising activities (Bryan et al. 1998; Hale et al. 1999).

However, in the UK at least, there is high membership of single issue groups, which often have a political dimension, such as those concerned with the environment, animal rights, Third World debt relief and anti-globalisation (Cabinet Office 2002; Demos 2002). The UK Countryside Alliance March in September 2002 comprised around half a million people. The London anti-war march prior to the invasion of Iraq comprised over one million people, chanting "Not in my name". UK citizens are not therefore apathetic about all political issues, but appear to be alienated from the formal political institutions and the current democratic process, and concerned that their voices are not being heard or their views properly represented. This gap between government and the governed has been attributed to the increased size and power of the bureaucracy, the political dominance of big businesses and other influential lobbies, and/or the perceived buying and selling of political candidates (Hale et al. 1999), and the perception of public politics as a form of 'spin' and public relations (Coleman 1999).

ICTs could help reduce this gap and increase deliberative dialogue by providing new communication links between citizens and their representatives. For example, e-mail provides a less formal, more spontaneous form of communication than the traditional letter to member of parliament (MP) or meeting in an MP's constituency surgery. The independently-run website FaxYourMP.com (www.FaxYourMP.com) enables any UK citizen to type a letter and submit it to the website and it is then faxed to the office of their local MP. In the USA anti-war campaigners used a website to organise a 'virtual march': on 26 February 2003 people telephoned, faxed or e-mailed their Senator and the White House to protest against any invasion of Iraq. On-line citizen discussion forums in which elected representatives also participate could enable the represented and the representatives to share experiences and deliberate public values.

However, using ICTs to enhance the communication links between citizens and their representatives requires that government and representatives must show commitment to listening and learning and responding promptly, otherwise the perceived or real gap between the government and the government will only increase. This requires increased resources, skills and facilities (Cabinet Office 2002). So far, many public institutions and elected representatives have concentrated on information provision rather than on the communication linkages that might improve democratic discourse (Hale et al. 1999; La Porte et al. 2001; Oates 2002; Taylor et al. 2001). The FaxYourMP website reports a survey carried out between April and September 2002. Over 10,000 faxes were sent during this period via FaxYourMP, but only 61% of them were responded to within 14 days (the House of Commons agreed timescale for replying to communication of any form). Its 'hall of shame' names six MPs currently refusing to accept faxes via FaxYourMP.com. The House of Commons Committee on Information has, however, recognised the problem (InfoComm 2002):

"A Member might decide to rule out the use of new communication channels on the basis that there is no capacity to deal with them. This is effectively what many Members do at present by declining to publish an e-mail address. It can be argued that it is better to keep using traditional systems properly rather than to use new systems badly. However, our view is that the demand for Members to adapt to e-mail and other communications technologies is so great that a more pro-active strategy is required. The reputation of Members—and of the House—could be damaged by a refusal to embrace such technologies at a time when they are becoming standard in most other organisations."

ICTs can also contribute to citizen-citizen communication. Party loyalties used to be based on class identities, but this relationship has been weakening since the 1960's (Butler et al. 1974; Norris et al. 1999). It is thought that political and civic apathy could be addressed by building or re-building effective local communities, thus replacing class-based group politics with strong civic associations based on groups of individuals in overlapping networks at the local level (Hale et al. 1999). ICTs are seen as a potential means of developing these communities through e-mail, discussion lists and chatrooms, creating a new virtual public space for discussion and debate and enabling actors to find or forge common interests (Rheingold 1994; Tsagarousianou et al. 1998).

However, research into Internet-based citizen-citizen communication suggests that much on-line discussion is characterised as bad-tempered and lacking in 'hearing skills' – perhaps attributable to the decline in public debate in open meetings and on street corners, where previously many people first learnt to argue effectively (Coleman 1999). Citizenship education must therefore also include

education in the skills of argument, to enable people to participate effectively and also to help them resist manipulation by the more articulate in cyberspace. Otherwise, instead of the ideal of 'rational discourse' (Habermas 1984, 1986) there could be poor dialogue and a skewed distribution of contributions (Wilhelm 1999). For example, in a newsgroup on abortion 5% of the contributors submitted almost 80% of the articles and the most frequent contributors were the least likely to post 'on topic' messages (Jankowski et al. 2000; Schneider 1997). There is also the 'moderation versus freedom of speech dilemma' – that is, how to balance the ideal of free speech against a reluctance to see ICTs used as vehicles for communicating racist or other undesirable material, or for enabling terrorist or other illegal organisations to interact and mobilise (Schmidtke 1998; Tsagarousianou 1998).

2.3 Participating in decision-making

The most obvious way in which citizens participate in political decision-making is when they cast their vote for their government representative. ICTs could make the voting process more convenient by enabling electronic voting, either from a voting station of the voter's choosing or over the Internet from anywhere (LGA 2002). This would also speed up vote counting. However, there are significant concerns to address about the demand for e-voting, secrecy of the voting act, security of the votes and counting systems, voter access to the technology and voter ICT ability before e-voting could be implemented on a large scale (BBC 2003; Electoral Commission 2003; LGA 2002; Phillips et al. 2001). Certainly more convenient voting procedures do appear to help increase voter turnout. The Electoral Commission's study of 2003 pilots has found that all-postal voting raised turnout in the local elections to around 50%. It has therefore recommended that in future all local government elections should normally be all-postal. The Commission does not see electronic voting as increasing turnout in the short-term, but does see it as important in offering increased choice of voting methods to voters (Electoral Commission 2003). It is currently anticipated that by the UK General election after next – sometime between 2008 and 2011 – those who want it will be offered the opportunity to vote electronically (LGA 2002).

Citizen participation could be extended to decision-making via electronic referenda. Again, however, there are important issues concerning secrecy, security and access. Although some countries (e.g. Switzerland) make regular use of referenda, it must also be acknowledged that such direct participation in decision-making is not always seen as desirable. In Germany, for example, the experiences and failure of the Weimar Republic, which had strong elements of such direct democracy, means that direct involvement by citizens in decision-making is seen as providing opportunities for populists or demagogues, and hence a threat to the democratic process (Hagen 2000; Schmidtke 1998). (See also Bannister et al. 2002).

ICTs therefore have the potential to enhance or re-invigorate political participation and the democratic process, but there are limitations or barriers to such uses of ICTs. As with all technology, their future role, if any, depends on the decisions and actions of individuals, organisations and society. However, it seems certain there will be attempts to try them as a means to enhance political participation. Within civil society ICTs are increasingly being used by active citizens (from promoting civil unrest and co-ordinating public protests to voting in TV's Big Brother). It is therefore important that young people, our future voters (or not) and important stakeholders in local communities and public services, are adequately prepared for the use of ICTs in the democratic process. It has been shown that when people's school curriculum includes political education they tend to be more interested in public affairs and more likely to participate in them (Emler et al. 1999; Hahn 1999). We must therefore ensure that the school curriculum introduces our young people to both democracy and ICT-enabled democracy. The next section reports on a project that was designed to give some school pupils such an educational experience.

3. CIRA'S E-dem project

In 2002 Middlesbrough, UK held its first mayoral election. Elected mayors are new in the UK and are another attempt to re-invigorate local politics. Previously mayors have been chosen from and by the elected representatives, but now communities can choose to have a directly elected mayor. At the same time the Community Informatics Research and Applications Unit (CIRA) based at the University of Teesside ran 'E-dem', an electronic democracy project. This involved university researchers, a local secondary school and candidates for the position of Middlesbrough's elected mayor. The E-dem project had three strands:

- A non-partisan website on e-democracy (www.edem.org.uk) (discussed below).
- A series of workshops where CIRA researchers ran sessions in the school on citizenship, democracy and politics, elected mayors and the use of the website.
- A survey at the end of the exercise via anonymous questionnaire to find out the pupils' reactions to the project and their views about politics and the Internet.

The website demonstrated the three potential benefits of using ICTs to support democracy as discussed in Section 2 i.e. obtaining information, engaging in deliberation and participating in decision making:

- Obtaining information. The website contained explanatory material about democracy and e-democracy, and links to other websites concerned with young people, democracy and technology. The six main candidates in the Middlesbrough Mayoral Election also provided a statement of their policies on the website, and, where available, a link to their full manifesto.
- Engaging in deliberation. In a discussion forum area, the participating school pupils could interact anonymously with the mayoral candidates, giving their own opinions and asking the candidates questions about their policies. Virtual anonymous discussion rather than face-to-face removed some of the inequalities of power and self expression normally found between young people and adults in perceived authority (Demos 2002).
- Participating in decision-making. Immediately before the actual Middlesbrough Mayoral election, the pupils could enter an electronic 'voting booth' and vote anonymously for their chosen candidate. The results were reported on the website.

This exciting venture therefore made use of ICTs as an educational tool and enabled the pupils to experience e-democracy and electronic electioneering. Previous research has shown that pupils' civic knowledge and engagement can be enhanced by such participation in democratic processes (Torney-Purta et al. 2001). It is quite common for local political parties to participate in school mock elections as a means of educating pupils about the democratic process, but this was one of the first times that schools and candidates in a local election have participated in an online forum and election. The project was an opportunity for the CIRA researchers to find out how the young people would react to the idea of using ICTs in the democratic process. It also provided an opportunity for the researchers to contribute to their university's wider community. 'Citizenship' is a new addition to the curriculum in English schools, compulsory only since 2002, and teachers are uncertain about what to teach and how, with calls for more resources to support citizenship education (Kerr 2000; Losito et al. 2001). Many teachers are also uncertain about the use of ICTs in the classroom, because of fears about their own lack of skills and knowledge (Valentine et al. 2001) or scepticism about ICTs as the latest 'silver bullet' in the classroom. The CIRA researchers could therefore contribute their technical and academic knowledge to try one possible ICT-based approach.

Twenty-three pupils participated in the project, as part of their citizenship studies. Clearly, this is too small a number to make any generalisations to the wider population of young people. However, their experiences and responses are relevant to evaluating the project and suggesting areas for further work. The project can also be seen as a simulation of what might occur if ICTs had a greater role in the political process. The next section therefore discusses the participants' comments and reactions and our reflections on the project.

4. Findings of E-dem project

4.1 Findings re obtaining information

All 23 questionnaire respondents reported that they found it easy to navigate around the site. Asked to rate the site's content, four found it 'excellent', sixteen 'good' and three 'acceptable' – none found it 'poor' or very poor'. When asked which part of the website they found most useful, of those that answered (21), responses were fairly equally split between the discussion area (11) and the candidates' area where they posted their policy statements (10). However, since the project culminated in the pupils voting for their preferred mayor candidates, it was likely that they would find the discussion area and candidates' area most relevant. If the final activity had been an essay on e-democracy, for example, the pupils might have found other sections of the website more useful.

With hindsight, the website could have been made more interesting by reducing its reliance on primarily textual material and adding multimedia content: graphics, sound, animations and video. It

would also have been more interesting if it had had more interactivity, for example, games and quizzes for the pupils based on the content of the website. It would also have been better pedagogically if the pupils had developed more of the content on democracy themselves. Through finding out about the issues, writing them up as webpages and researching into appropriate links to other websites they would have been more engaged with the subject, have developed skills of enquiry and communication, as required in the citizenship curriculum (QCA 2000), and they would also have developed a greater sense of ownership of the website.

4.2 Findings re engaging in deliberation

As Table 1 below shows, sixteen pupils posted messages to the on-line discussion area. Nine pupils posted one, six posted two and one posted four messages. We believe this participation rate is higher than would have been achieved if the pupils had been asked to raise questions and voice opinions in a face-to-face meeting with the mayoral candidates.

Table 1: Number of pupil postings

No. of pupils	No. of postings
1	4
6	2
9	1
7	0

Three of the six mayoral candidates participated in the discussion area. Two of these were independents (six and eight postings respectively), and the third was from a small party, the Socialist Alliance (fourteen postings). Interestingly, it was the three from the UK's main political parties (Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats) who did not contribute to the discussion area – although they could, of course, have been lurking. This is not what we expected. Candidates from the main political parties generally have more resources, including party workers to whom the job of contributing to the on-line discussion could have been delegated. Possibly they could not spare the time and needed to concentrate on the real election, or they may have lacked confidence in their own ICT skills. Whatever the reason, political candidates need to consider the potentially poor long-term impression left by not participating in an on-line electioneering forum. Previous research has found that young people are often interested in political issues, but feel disempowered and alienated because, they believe, they are not listened to or taken seriously by politicians (Demos 1999, 2002). Our E-dem project could have given the impression that some political candidates, or some political parties, were not interested in them. As noted earlier, the use of on-line discussions requires that candidates and representatives must be able and willing to listen and learn from contributions and respond promptly, otherwise the perceived or real gap between the government and the government will only increase (Cabinet Office 2002).

Questions posed to the candidates covered a broad range of topics, from crime to pollution showing that the pupils recognised the role of elected representatives in making decisions about many aspects of their lives:

- Crime:
 - Reducing crime
 - Crime blackspots
 - Crime and its types
 - Effects of crime
 - Young people and crime
- A better life for all:
 - Public perceptions of Middlesbrough
 - Job opportunities
 - Old aged pensioners
 - More disabled access
- Leisure facilities:
 - Facilities for 10-16 year olds
- College information:

- Student support
- Environment:
 - Surroundings
- Transport:
 - Travel
- Pollution:
 - Effects of pollution

Many of the questions concerned issues we might expect young people to be interested in, for example:

“How could you improve the facilities for children aged 10-16 in Middlesborough? Also how can you make these facilities more safer (sic) so parents do not have to worry about the place they are playing in?”

However, other questions showed interest in areas not often associated with young people, for example:

“What are you going to do to bring down the number of workplace deaths?”

Such a question reminds us that what might be perceived as adult concerns also have relevance for children.

The pupils not only posed questions to the candidates, but also expressed their own opinions. For example:

‘Why don’t you open more leisure facilities to keep children off the streets and committing crime?’

However, analysis of the contributions showed that no true dialogue developed in the discussion area. Neither pupils nor candidates sought to challenge previous contributions, the ‘discussion’ was just a series of questions and answers. A future project should therefore consider how to engender a two-way deliberation of policy, the potential for such dialogue being a key argument of proponents of ICTs in the democratic process (see Section 2 and e.g. Hale et al. 1999). For example, if pupils are reluctant to challenge, a teacher could make an anonymous, provocative contribution.

4.3 Findings re participating in decision-making

Table 2 below shows how many postings each candidate made to the discussion forum, and the percentage of the vote obtained in the pupils’ on-line election at the end of the project:

Table 2: Postings and percentages of vote

Candidate	Party	No. of postings	Percentage of vote
Rod Jones	Independent	6	54%
Sylvia Connolly	The Labour Party	0	17%
Ray Mallon	Independent	8	17%
Jeff Fowler	Socialist Alliance	14	12%
Ron Darby	The Conservative Party	0	0%
Joe Michna	The Liberal Democrats	0	0%

The winner was an independent (Jones), one of those who had participated in the on-line discussion, but not the one who posted the most contributions (Fowler). Hence our pupils were not simply voting for the person who appeared the most willing to participate. One candidate made no postings (Connolly), but received 17% of the vote. Pupils could have been impressed by her on-line manifesto, or influenced by press coverage or their parents’ voting preferences. However, in the real-life election Mallon won with 63% of the vote, but only 17% of our pupils chose him. Hence our pupils did not follow the majority view of the real-life electorate.

The fact that those candidates who did not participate in the on-line discussion received few or no votes suggests that, were such a pattern to be found in real-life, candidates might have to be willing to participate in on-line discussions. This raises an important issue concerning the implications of ICTs for electioneering. Many election candidates are likely to be from a generation that has not grown up with computers and ICTs, and may not feel comfortable with their use. Those without PCs or ICT skills may lose votes to those that are willing and able to participate in on-line electioneering. On-line electioneering could therefore become a compulsory part of the democratic process, possibly at the expense of other forms of electioneering. Currently the group most comfortable with ICTs is mostly comprised of young to middle-aged, middle-class men. Hence the use of ICTs could result in a distorted process, concentrating on virtual rather than real-life public spheres, and offering us a choice of candidates who are less representative of the wider population than is currently the case. A wider debate is therefore needed on whether we want to have on-line electioneering, and how we can ensure it does not distort the democratic process and representative democracy.

5. Conclusion

This paper has discussed how ICTs could be used to help engage people in the democratic process, through enabling opportunities for obtaining information, engaging in deliberation and participating in decision-making. It has also discussed the limitations or barriers to using ICTs in these ways. Despite these limitations there is sufficient interest in their potential that it seems likely they will increasingly be tried. It is therefore important that we educate our young people for participation in an e-enabled political process.

The paper then reported on the E-dem project, where we used ICTs to teach some pupils about the UK's formal democratic process and the use of ICTs within it in the context of a local mayoral election. The project was successful in using ICTs to explain democracy and e-democracy, in bringing pupils and election candidates together, and in providing an experience of electronic electioneering and e-voting. We suggest any future similar projects could be enhanced by: incorporating multimedia elements and interactivity via games or quizzes; enriching the educational experience by supporting pupils in developing a website on e-democracy themselves; engendering a two-way deliberation of policy between the candidates and their on-line electorate; and considering the need also to educate the candidates about e-democracy and the demands it makes of them.

The E-dem project can be seen as a simulation of possible actual electronic electioneering and voting. It indicated a possible relationship between the failure of candidates to contribute to on-line discussions and fewer votes gained. This needs further investigation and the implications for democracy of such a relationship need to be examined.

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