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ICTs AND THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY

by

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A. Introduction

Democracy theory is in need of a new foundation, a new paradigm. The existing paradigm is that people's representation by parliamentarians, members of Congress and local councillors is an inevitable, but second best democratic arrangement. The weaknesses of existing democratic arrangements that are perceived, are, that members of the representative assemblies represent partisan interests under the guise of the general interest, that they tend to follow only their own partial understanding of what is good for their constituencies, and that they are more responsive to the requirements of the political party they belong to, than to the citizens whose mandate they have received.

From their first being in existence information and communication technologies (ICTs) are eroding the basis of legitimacy of the representational arrangements of the traditional democracy even further. The growing popularity of referenda, recall, co-production of policies and interactive policy-making underlines that people prefer direct democratic arrangements for the existing representative arrangements. ICTs make the distortion or misrepresentation of preferences of the electorate visible. Robert Dahl, the leading American thinker on democracy theory once cheracterized representative democracy as "a sorry substitute for the real thing". Representative democracy was deemed to be necessitated by the impossibility to realize direct democracy, by giving all citizens an equal opportunity to participate in the collective decision making process. ICTs' promise of direct democracy in the form of continuous opinion polling, instant referenda, teleconferencing, digital cities and discussion groups, makes the erosion of the legitimacy of representative democracy even more poignant. As a matter of fact, the promise of direct democracy through ICTs cannot be fulfilled.

- Direct democracy would lead to a single issue approach. Successive majorities on single issues would lead to incompatible policies within and between sectors. The complexities of policies require intermittent and iterative decision cycles, which are not feasible through referenda.
- Unless direct democratic mechanisms take the relative intensity, with which preferences are felt, into account, they introduce a dictatorship of successive majorities.

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They are not adapted to communicate the relative intensity with which opinions and convictions are held.

- Most political problems cannot be reasonably approached with a simple "yes" or "no", as opinion polls and referenda do. Besides, the short term perspective of the questions put before the electorate obliterate the long term perspective in which many policy problems have to be seen.

Just as little as mechanisms of direct democracy offer a solution to the problematic lack of legitimacy of representative democracy, "technological fixes" like remote voting will do. It is extremely unlikely that people will flog to the polling booth, just because they are offered the opportunity to cast their vote close to the shopping mall, yheir office, or wherever they happen to be.

A fundamental re-conceptualization of the democracy paradigm requires that a dependable picture of the "life world" of the citizens, instead of a derivative picture of the system's world of the politicians, is brought into the political arena and into the political discussion. The transparancy which is created by ICTs makes it possible to dispose not only of a dependable reconstruction of the "life world" of the citizens, but also of the impacts governmental policies have on this life world. The "informating" capacities of ICTs, highlighted by Shoshana Zuboff, in combination with Geographic Information Systems (GISs) can provide the insights that are necessary for modern democracies to function properly. Bureaucracies that handle those GISs will have to get a redefined role within the democratic system. In the remaining part of this article these statements will be worked out further.

B. Informating through Geographic Information Systems

The technology sociologist Zuboff ascribes to ICTs "informating" capacities, that is, they are reflexive: they not only automate processes by substituting human labour for machines, but the data they create shape new perspectives on the social, organizational and managerial situations in which they are used. (Bellamy and Taylor 1997)

In Zuboff's own words:

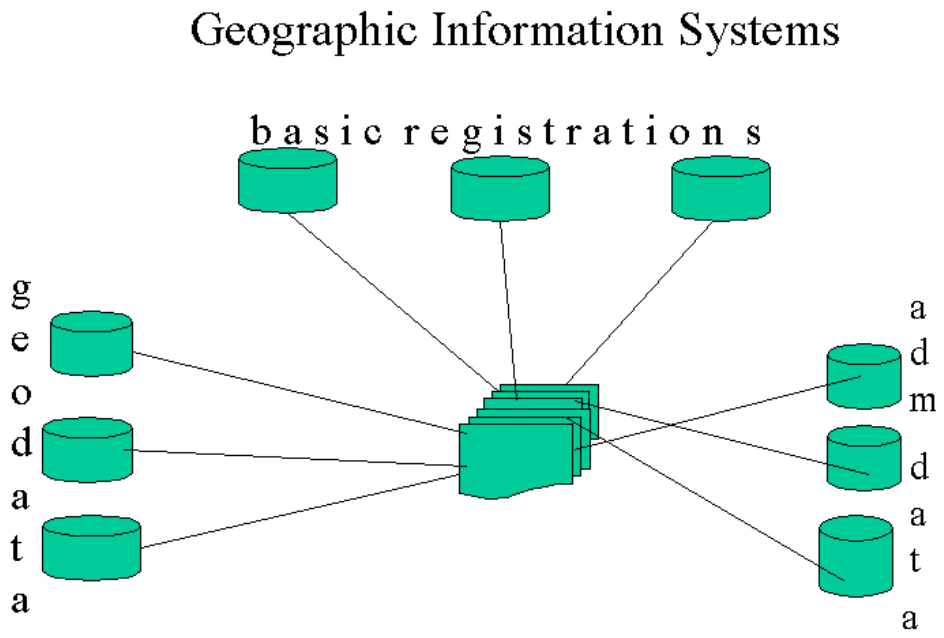
"...information technology is characterized by a fundamental duality that has not yet been fully appreciated. On the one hand, the technology can be applied to automating operations according to a logic that hardly differs from that of the nineteenth-century machine system - replace the human body with a technology that enables the same processes to be performed with more continuity and control. On the other, the same technology simultaneously generates information about the underlying productive and administrative processes through which an organization accomplishes its work. It provides a deeper level of transparancy to activities that had been either partially or completely opaque." (Zuboff 1988, p. 9-10)

And further on:

"The evidence indicates that informating typically unfolds as an objective, unplanned, autonomous process." (Zuboff 1988, p.306)

The informating character of ICTs is of great importance for the functioning of democracies, even more than for production organizations. Geographic Information Systems and Relational Databases are examples of applications with in-built informating capacities, which promise to play a major role in democracies of the future. Such applications force us to revise our democracy theory.

The growing use of Geographic Information Systems in public administration accentuates the reflexive capacities of Information and Communication Technological applications. In the modern types of GISs three different kinds of data can be brought together (see Figure 1): 1) geo-data about the physical environment in which groups or sectors of the population are living; 2) data from basic registrations, such as statistical data about levels of schooling, criminality, unemployment, health, life expectancy, public facilities, public transport etcetera, that give an insight in the cumulation of problems in quarters and sectors of society; 3) administrative data about the decisions that are daily taken by public servants and street level bureaucrats with respect to requests and complaints of citizens living in those quarters and sectors of society, a state or a city.



Through combination of these data the (un)responsiveness of public policies with regard to the problems in society is brought into daylight. Especially the administrative data, which are an unintended (objective, unplanned and autonomous) outcome of the workings of the bureaucracy are an interesting result of "informating". Some years ago our research in one of the larger Dutch cities brought to light that the deprivation of allochtone parts of the population, - for which the public officials claimed a growth of public funds, - was created by the deprivative decisions of the officials themselves. Without making use of the informating capacities of ICTs this enlightening result would not have been acquired. A conditio sine qua non for this of course is, that researchers, interest groups and the media will have access to those unintendendly

created administrative data. In my opinion one of the most important future bones of contention in democratic societies will be the access to the data concerned.

So, one of the attractions of Geographic Information Systems, which are based on the administrative data, combined with geodata and statistical data, created within or for public administration, is that their "objectivity" as they come into existence without the prupose to convince anybody. Furthermore, their analysis "by hand" would require so much time and effort, that they could be made only sporadically, and that the results would become available at such a late stage that they would hardly influence actual political decisions. As an offspin of administration with the help of computers, such analysis is done easily and just a matter of routine. Another attraction of GISs is that they visualize in a very convincing manner highly complicated relationships between conditioning factors of problematic situations. As such they have become strategic decision or policy support facilities.

C. ICTs and the democratic role of public bureaucrats.

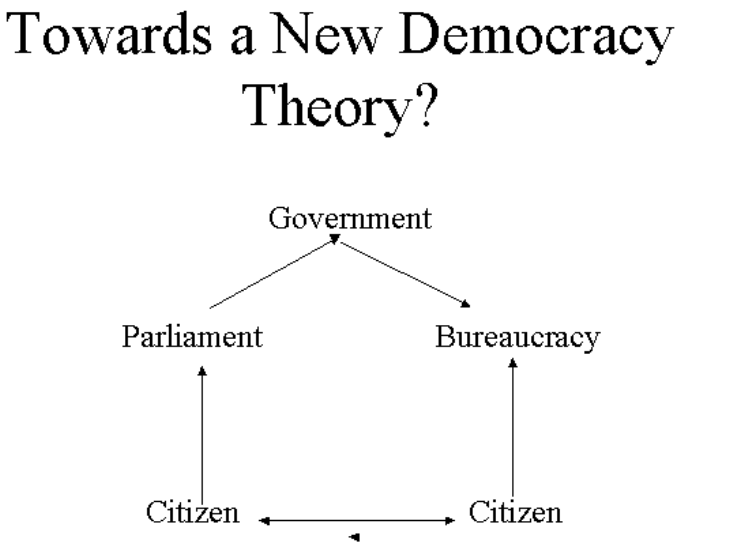
The powerful analytical and marketing tools and techniques, such as Geographic Information Systems, relational databases and tracking and monitoring systems, that modern public servants have at their disposal, strengthen their position towards the politicians. They tend to know better than their political counterparts what the "life world" situation of the constituency of the politician is. Citizens who realize that, approach the public servants directly, without intermediation of the politicians. Politicians themselves also rely more and more on the expertise, insights and analytical power of the bureaucracy, which is enhanced by the developments of ICTs. In this way important intermediary roles for the public servants are evolving.

However, the democracy theory, which forms the foundation and legitimation of the democratic practice, does not take those intermediary roles of the bureaucracy into account. It recognizes only the role of intermediary organizations, such as political parties and interest groups, next to forms of direct participation, in their relation to representative elected politicians. The channels of interest representation which through the same interest groups and direct participation exist in the relationships with the non-elected bureaucrats are completely neglected.

In this way democracy theory overlooks the importance, from the viewpoint of the citizen, of the influence of the bureaucracies on the shape public policies get and on the standards according to which these policies are implemented. For the citizen the value of democratic principles and practices consists more in the practical outcomes of democratically chosen policies, for which outcomes public servants are mainly responsible, than in the formal way in which those policies come into being. Existing democracy theory ignores the professionality of the public servants, which is immersed in the specific situation of "their" sector and which puts them in a representative position with respect to their constituency.

The transparancy of public administration in the information society, which results from the development of ICT applications, as analysed above, forces us to re-conceptualize the democracy theory. Built up from the basis of constituencies two different channels of democratic

participation have to be recognized: one via elected representatives and one via non-elected bureaucrats (See Figure 2).



Together the elected and non-elected representatives of the different constituencies in society may frame the policies to be executed. A division of roles has to be invented and instituted, to make sure that the elected representatives will not be shifted aside by the non-elected ones. As long as formal democracy theory practically excludes discussion about the representative potentialities and the actual representative roles of bureaucracies in a democratic sense, these bureaucracies get a chance to marginalize the political representatives. In such a case the bureaucracies are excused in not being answerable for the influence they exert.

A necessary requirement will be that the bureaucracies are completely open about the way in which they develop and implement policies. Untrammeled public access to the data, used as well as not used during the drafting of policies, and to the (informating) data, created during the implementation of policies will become a cornerstone of such a new democracy paradigm.