
Editorial

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In a little over a decade, the study as well as the practice of e-governance has grown dramatically. Crude attempts to draw global conclusions about the effects of e-governance have been frustrated by the heterogeneous and labile nature of the object of study. And yet well-conceived theoretical and empirical studies, focused on the analysis of specific technologies, practices and discourses of e-governance, are as necessary and valuable as ever. This special issue includes six research papers which analyse a varied range of technologies and practices of e-governance in different countries and political contexts.

Whereas most e-democracy research has focused on advanced liberal democracies, the first paper, by Stephen Coleman and Ildikó Kaposi, explores the relationship between the internet and democratisation in the context of 'new' or 'third-wave' democracies ('A study of e-participation projects in third-wave democracies'). The authors conduct descriptive case studies of six democracy projects in new and emerging democracies and arrive at well-considered conclusions about the specific problems and opportunities that the use of the internet presents. While they acknowledge the real difficulties involved, the authors remain optimistic that the internet can play an important democratic role,

especially in contributing to a culture of free public communication and democratic openness.

The next two papers examine the use of the internet in election campaigns. Having been generally slow to employ the internet's potential for interactivity (Gibson and Ward, 1998; Schneider and Foot, 2002; Schweitzer, 2005), political parties in several countries now seem increasingly eager to engage the electorate in participation through forums, blogs, e-mails and social networks. While the 2009 US presidential election is a much-discussed example, the papers by Francisco Brandão Jr. and Carlos Marcos Batista ('E-participation in electoral campaigns: the Brazilian experience') and by Nicolas Desquinabo ('Debate practices in French political party forums') consider the use of the internet in election campaigns elsewhere. Brandão and Batista draw upon a wealth of empirical data in their analysis of the 2006 Brazilian presidential election. Investigating the websites of the two main presidential candidates, social networks, and, most interestingly, e-mails sent by voters to major candidates, they present a generally positive picture of the democratic benefits of the internet. In his contribution, meanwhile, Desquinabo studies the online forums of political parties' websites just before the last French presidential elections in 2007. Basing his argument on an analysis of discussion threads, he emphasises the influence that institutional moderation and interface design may have on the form debates take (see also Wright and Street, 2007). Interestingly, and *contra* the normative emphasis put on face-to-face interaction in much political theory, his analysis suggests that online debates may facilitate more equal, sustained, and developed argument among interlocutors.

Research on e-voting has focused mostly on the politics of e-voting, how e-voting is hampered by trust, security and privacy concerns (Moynihan, 2004; Xenakis and Macintosh, 2005), and by fears of an emerging surveillance society (Enguehard, 2008). Meanwhile, some scholars argue for a more nuanced conception of risk which takes into account the non-functional aspects of voting, such as the symbolic (Coleman, 2005). However, there are few studies on the public acceptance of e-voting and studies of the impact of e-voting on political behaviour are rare. These issues are taken up by Anne-Marie Oostveen and Peter van den Besselaar ('Users' experiences with e-voting: a comparative case study'). They adopt an experimental research design to investigate the experiences of users, conducting e-voting experiments in five different geographical and socio-cultural contexts. They identify at least one unanticipated consequence of remote e-voting systems: if they were to replace traditional voting systems in the future, large groups of citizens may well be excluded from participating in the democratic process. At the same time, they question the common belief that e-voting will boost the number of people who vote in political elections.

The final two papers raise critical issues about the development of e-governance technologies, especially how the contexts of the design of e-government systems can clash with the contexts in which they are subsequently deployed (Heeks, 2005). Charru Malhotra, Vijayraghvan M. Chariar and Lalit K. Das conduct an in-depth analysis of a project which uses the internet to deliver public services in Indian villages ('User-Centred Design model (G2C2G) for rural e-governance projects'). Starting with a broad overview of theories that aim to explain technology adoption, they show that this project was unsuccessful because its implementation failed to incorporate contextual reference points into the design process. To bridge the disappointing gap between expected outcomes (e.g., to facilitate economic and social development) and the actual outputs of e-governance projects, they recommend moving from a hierarchical to

a more user-centred approach to design, which takes into account community knowledge, the perspectives of citizens and traditional rural practices in the areas in question. Finally, in their contribution, Athanasios Karantjias, Spyridon Papastergiou, and Nineta Polemi consider principles for the design and deployment of e- and mobile-government networks ('Design principles of secure federated e-/m-government framework'). Moving beyond centralised e-government approaches to consider more advanced and ambitious government frameworks, they provide a systematic account of a framework for electronic/mobile government, called *f-GEM*, which comprises a range of fundamental design principles: modularity, interoperability, security, privacy, scalability and extensibility, reusability, composability, use of Open Standards, and maintainability.

Taken together, the six papers included here address a number of general theoretical and methodological matters that are central to leading e-governance research. In assembling this special issue, we had three more specific questions in mind, related to the concrete uses of e-governance.

- 1 How do cultural and political contexts affect e-governance?
- 2 What are the expectations and perceptions of users of e-governance?
- 3 How might e-governance technologies, practices and discourses contribute to improving democratic politics and public life?

By addressing these questions in different ways, the papers included here enrich our understanding of e-governance and contribute to an ongoing debate about the future shape it can and should take.

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