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## **E-GOVERNMENT AND E-DEMOCRACY**

A Comparison of Opportunities in the North and South

**Irina Netchaeva**

**Abstract** / E-government can make government institutions more transparent, help citizens to obtain access to public information and broaden their participation in the democratic processes. But it is doubtful that all these possibilities can be fully realized today or in the very near future, because only a small proportion of the world population has access to the Internet. This article analyses the possibilities and obstacles to using the Internet to promote democracy in different regions. It compares the situation of e-government and democracy in the North and South. The article focuses in particular on South Africa's experience, as a country which lives in both the developed and developing world at the same time.

**Keywords** / democratization / digital divide / e-government / North and South

### **E-Government – The New Way of Governance**

The concept of e-government appeared in the early 1990s but it was put into practice only towards the end of the decade. E-governments first appeared in industrialized countries. Nowadays, many countries in the world have e-government projects; the most economically advanced states have the most advanced e-government. In the post-Soviet territories only Estonia, Latvia and, recently, Russia have made the first steps towards e-government.<sup>1</sup>

To adopt e-government means to transfer government activities into online forms. The goal of this transformation is the same as the goal of transferring a private company's activity to the Internet, i.e. to increase work effectiveness. The concept of e-government is to facilitate citizens' access to a great amount of diverse information. For the public, e-government means a simplification of their interaction with government thanks to Internet connections. The speed of the information exchange between bureaucrats and citizens is increasing dramatically. The main characteristic of advanced e-government is interactivity. Establishing e-government includes several stages.

- The first stage consists in the formation of different departmental and ministerial online sites, which carry only specific department information.
- At the second stage these federal and municipal sites become interactive. In some countries there exist special government pages where you can find

**TABLE 1****The Stages of E-Government Development in Different Countries**

	USA	GB	Singapore	Russia	SA
Separate local and federal sites	+	+	+	+	+
Possibility to ask questions (email)	+	+	+	+	
Possibility to take part in forums and opinion polls	+		+		
Some services online	34%	30%	47%		13%
E-government portals. Social services online. Polling online. Public participation. Interactivity	+		+		

answers to the most frequently asked questions. Some sites enable one to send email – which is the most accessible Internet service most often used by ordinary citizens.

- At the third stage, users are given the opportunity to take part in forums and opinion polls.
- At the fourth stage, the federal government and departments offer online services such as payment of fines, renewal of licences, registering one's car, moving house and so on.
- At the final stage all departments and government organizations in the country are brought together in a unified government portal, which offers a complex of different services for the population. The portal gives citizens an opportunity to take part in online discussions, comment on policy and legislation proposals and vote online. Ideally at this stage e-government may be used to further the means of democracy (Table 1).

The Singapore portal eCitizen was the first e-government project to be implemented. Only a few other countries now have more or less viable portals: among them are the US portal Firstgov, the portal MAXI in the Australian State of Victoria, and the Canadian government portal. The UK, Australia, France and Germany are now working on the formation of e-governments.

Most states are now at the first stage of the formation of e-government: 71 percent of government websites around the world are using the Internet just to offer citizens access to already published information. In April 2001, the business-consulting agency Accenture surveyed 22 governments and found that even the innovative leaders had completed less than half the work required to provide mature online services. The US, Canada and Singapore not for the first time were recognized as the leaders in the field; although it is interesting to note that with the new administration the rating of the US fell several points. Countries such as Japan, Brazil, Malaysia, South Africa, Italy and Mexico were

ranked as 'platform builders' as they currently provide only a few online government services (Accenture, 2001).

In October 2001, the Taubman Center for Public Policy of Brown University in the US and the World Markets Research Centre (WMRC) published the results of the Global E-Government Survey, which rated 2288 government websites in 196 nations on a set of 22 criteria, such as information availability, service delivery, public access, online payments, portal access, disability access and security features. It put the US in first place (scored 57.2 percent), Taiwan in second (52 percent), Australia in third, Canada in fourth and the UK in fifth position. Overall, European countries scored 34.1 percent. Taiwan and Ireland are the only countries that accept digital signatures on their government sites (WMRC, 2001).

In all the surveys it is mostly developed countries who were rated. African countries (apart from South Africa and Lesotho) are mentioned very seldom since many of them do not have appropriate government sites online yet.

## **E-Government Does not Necessarily Mean Democracy**

It is clear that in the final stage e-government portals perform two main functions: to help the population in their everyday life (online services) and provide citizen participation in the democratic process. These two functions are quite different and must not be confused.

On the one hand, e-government is an instrument for better governance and for improving communication between government, business and citizens. On the other hand, some specialists think that IT use in governance may intrinsically change relationships in society, help to achieve real democratic means and even transform people's social and political consciousness. Tracy Westen, professor at the Annenberg School of Communication in Los Angeles, argues that because democracy is an interactive form of government, the revolution in interactive communications will inevitably have its greatest effect on the most important 'interactive institution' – government itself – and that the new communication technologies will not just affect democracy; they will transform it (Westen, 2001).

But real life demonstrates that in the countries of the North, where the services sector outstrips the industrial sector, new technologies are changing the character of labour, and information is becoming the main capital, and the main commodity as well, yet, the consciousness of people is not notably changing. The most developed societies remain consumer societies and they have not reached the democratic ideals yet.

Online administration, communal and social services certainly facilitate and improve people's lives but they do not help to bring people nearer to real democracy. Today, a good part of e-government is focused on elections. Candidates and parties can communicate directly with their supporters, bypassing the media. Frequently, the focus of government online is limited to polling and voting. Probably because of that e-government is sometimes conflated with e-democracy. It is obvious that the term e-government is rather general

and not precise, but the term e-democracy is wrong by definition. In our opinion there is no e-democracy. There can only be democracy as such.

Democracy is an abstract idea. We cannot say that any state has real democracy for all. But we can call some countries democratic when the majority of their populations have and use democratic rights. Whereas the 20th-century scholars emphasized the values and norms of democracy, contemporary researchers more often pay attention to the description and explanation of present-day democratic practice and look for means and ways to achieve the democratic ends.

In short we can characterize democracy as equality and liberty. Democracy is the ideal society where all citizens together decide how this society should be run and ruled. In a democratic state each citizen has the right to participate, to ask questions and receive answers, to have their own point of view and opinion. Real democracy is achievable only when all individuals take part in all aspects of political, social and economic life. Thereby, the participation principle is pivotal to the concept of democracy and democratic governance. Direct democracy is theoretically the ideal form of participation of the people. It is generally assumed that direct democracy is a higher form of democracy in comparison with representative democracy. (Though some scientists are sure that direct democracy inevitably leads to ochlocracy – rule by uneducated masses, or the coming of permissive society.) To date there is no example of direct democracy in the world.

Representative democracy was chosen as the main form of governance since many founders of democratic states (mainly the nobility and new economic elites) were afraid of the consequences of direct democracy. Representative democracy appears as a practicable variant for societies, which cannot provide all the people with the information and media needed for making decisions and for declaring one's opinions. But this conflicts with the idea of equality, inasmuch as the representative power defending some of the rights of the minorities does not provide equal representation for those not supporting the mainstream beliefs.

Aware of the restrictions of representative democracy, many countries make some effort towards the transition from representative to direct democracy. Initiatives such as referendums, public opinion polls, term limits, growth of ballot initiatives and elimination of intermediaries in different spheres may be regarded as achievements on the way to real democracy. The use of e-technologies surely may contribute greatly to the advancement of these initiatives.

But the development of IT systems and establishing government portals do not ensure the achievement of real democracy. Indeed how can we talk about real democracy when even in the UK and US (where more than a third of the population is now online and nine out of ten people are working in information businesses), low-income and older people seldom use the Internet and still feel uncomfortable using IT? In Russia the Internet usage has a total subscription of between 2.4 percent and 6 percent (on different estimates), in South Africa (SA) the figure stands at 4.4 percent and the world average is between 3.3 and 6 percent.

So to some measure the thesis of this article is connected with the subject

of digital divide. As we know, the largest part of the world population has no physical access to the new technologies now or the possibility of access in the near future. Even by 2005 four-fifths of the population will not have access to information and communication technologies (ICTs). (In 2005 it is estimated there will be only 1 billion users out of a world population of 5 billion.)

If we ask who mainly uses government site information – public organizations, local administration bureaucrats, business people, activists or poor people? – the answer will be evident. To participate in the social, political and democratic life of the country through information technologies people must have access to them, know how to use them and want to do it. Ordinary people in the developing countries, even if they have opportunities to use ICTs, as a rule do not do this. The classic example is the South African 1999 election. Not only the Internet, but even the SA traditional media did not affect the outcome of voting, although SA sites covered the elections very actively. At that time, the online audience was restricted to less than 1 million users, and the majority of the population voted for the black candidate from the African National Congress though almost all the media supported the Democratic Party.

Government websites may become efficient only if they are widely used by people irrespective of age, gender, race, profession or geographical location. Accordingly, the French project to give all newborn children an Internet address is not at all odd.

The lack of a tradition of intercommunication and public discussion is blocking the fruitful use of online government sites. The countries of the North, like Sweden, Finland and others have a great advantage in this respect for not only do they have advanced infrastructures, integrated databases and a majority of their populations online, but they also enjoy a culture of openness, in which people are used to having personal information in the public sphere.

But even in the ideal situation, when a country's entire population has access to the web, some of them will never use it, just as today not everyone takes part in their country's elections for example. In the developed countries and in some countries in transition, we encounter the problem of declining citizen participation in the democratic process, which manifests itself in low election activity, dwindling membership of political parties and the lack of interest in political life. Sometimes television serials and shows gain higher polling ratings than the national elections or international democratic activities. In his speech to the Global Forum conference in Naples, the UK Parliamentary Secretary Graham Stringer declared that the UK and other countries within the European Union and the OECD are facing the trend towards declining citizen participation in the democratic process and that traditional democratic channels have lost much of their ability to engage people (Stringer, 2001).

We can see today that people are not eager to use government sites as democratic tools. Numerous studies conducted in the US and in other countries have demonstrated that citizens more often choose e-government online services which can help them renew a driver's licence, find reservation and parking information, pay state taxes and so on. The most preferred options named by the people polled were connected with consumer services: ordering publications, buying stamps, filing complaints (Pardo, 2000; WMRC, 2001).

The majority of the web population uses the Internet for entertainment or as a medium of communication (email comes first) but not as a medium of political participation. Consequently, we cannot say that the implementation of e-government in the future would lead to more participation by the population in the democratic processes.

E-governance proves to be a powerful instrument in the hands of administrations, politicians, business people and NGOs, but it serves ordinary people to a lesser degree. Using the new technologies can make government more transparent and accountable to the people. But at the same time the new opportunities let the political powers advertise themselves more effectively and suggest unreliable or patently false information.

Accordingly, the establishment of e-government does not necessarily lead to openness and liberalization of society. Moreover, it can lead (and already does in some countries) to the restriction of the second main condition of democracy, namely liberty. In this respect it is not remarkable that home affairs and police departments have benefited most of all from the establishment of e-government.

The existence of full e-democracy requires all citizens to register. Singapore is the classic example. This small country developed its e-government very rapidly. Singapore's government portal eCitizen has provided inspiration for many e-government services around the world. Singapore was the first country in the world which used the Internet to conduct a population census. But at the same time the administrative structures demand registration of all citizens and keep the public under rigid control. If a citizen does not turn up at the polls, his or her name will be struck from the register and his or her right as a citizen to vote lost (eCitizen, 2001).

In the US, federal agencies claim that encryption technologies frustrate their crime-fighting efforts. They are demanding that software providers supply them with the keys to decode private messages. A similar backdoor policy, proposed by the Clinton administration, failed but the terrorist attacks have renewed the debate.

Providing the e-government systems cannot change the established order and make the police or totalitarian states much more open. Conversely, there is a danger that due to implementation of new technologies in governance, society may become more transparent for control and, consequently, more controlled.

## **The Opportunities in the North and South**

The US and the UK are acknowledged as leaders in e-government by almost all studies and surveys. The US spends \$200 million a year on an e-government fund to support interagency projects and innovative uses of IT. The country has the most advanced e-government portal, Firstgov; 34 percent of all government sites have inline services (when the entire transaction could occur online). Only Singapore has a higher rate of inline services. Still the US is the only country where e-government websites have fee-paying services.

The UK Cabinet Office has an 'E-democracy Team'. Probably this is the only government organization that has a team specially assigned 'to promote e-democracy'. Now the UK government is conducting a new campaign 'UK

Online', aimed at getting people, businesses and government online, also the UK has a high rate of population access to ICT. Every adult in the UK is able to claim an 80 percent discount on computer literacy courses. Particularly important are the UK government's plans to create a network of community online centres, where people can get access to the Internet and training. The centres, located in the most popular and visited places such as colleges, libraries and even football clubs, are designed to offer cheap access to the Internet. The first 600 centres were opened in March 2001. Another 6000 are planned to open by the end of 2002. All schools and public libraries will be connected to the Internet. To achieve this goal the UK government is going to invest £1 billion in e-learning (UKonline, 2001).

There is no doubt that the countries of the North have more money for establishing advanced ICTs. They have bigger pools of skilled technicians and a higher level of literacy and computer literacy than the third world countries. They also have more information-rich people for whom home computers and Internet access are not luxuries as they are for the majority of people from the developing regions. But even the North countries have numerous hurdles in their transition to information society and formation of e-government. The developing countries are exposed to the same hurdles and many other social, economic and communication problems. The lack of infrastructure, money and knowledge is the main barrier on the poor countries' way to establishing e-government. Mike Jensen and David Akst compare deficit of information and communications with the lack of food and dub it information famine (Akst and Jensen, 2001).

The African countries themselves understand the importance of IT for developing, improving governance and exchanging information with the outside world. Till now the Internet has been used in Africa mainly as a communication (email) and information tool accessible only to information-rich people and users from abroad. At the moment television and radio are still the more democratic and open media and are used far more than the Internet in the region; the Internet affects the majority of the audience only indirectly as the information source for the traditional media.

E-government could bring additional benefits for the developing world, in the social sphere above all. Home affairs departments in African countries are overloaded with human activity problems: including birth, marriage and death registrations, changing documents, and grounding work permits. For example, in SA to register a new baby the inhabitants of rural areas have to travel very long distances and, often, parents cannot afford this. In the eyes of the officials, these unregistered children do not exist. Theoretically, all formal operations with documents can be easily done through online government systems.

Comparing the situation with e-government and democracy in the North and in the South, it is interesting to examine the South African experience. SA is a dualistic country, which exists as both a developed and developing society simultaneously but has strong links with the global economy.

Over the last decade, SA has made a great step forward in the telecommunications sphere. SA has the best telecommunications sector in Africa; 96 percent of all telecommunication lines in SA are digital. In the course of 10



years SA leapfrogged from unranked to 20th place in the world with regard to web usage. Some specialists and journalists believe that SA is not far behind Europe and the US in Internet training. Recent research shows that nearly 20 percent of SA companies are already involved in e-commerce: 26 percent of large companies, 20 percent of medium-sized companies and 16 percent of small companies (Miller, 2000).

At the same time, the majority of the SA population lives in poverty and has no access to ICT. The greatest problem is the digital divide. After almost seven years since the country abolished apartheid only 14 percent of South Africans have access to a phone. Only 2 million people of the country's 43 million use the Internet.

Several years ago, the SA government declared its intention to transform itself into an e-government organization, a body where information could be accessed at any time by phone or by Internet. In 1998 the Presidential Commission published a report titled 'Developing a Culture of Good Governance', which provided recommendations on information management, systems and technology. In 2000 a new e-government policy was declared, aimed at coordinating and consolidating all government IT initiatives to eliminate duplication and improve the accessibility of government.

Last year South Africa made the next step in the direction of forming e-government: the Cabinet passed another project approving the use of technology to deliver services faster and cheaper to all its citizens. The aim of this project is to let all citizens obtain information, apply for services and submit forms online, no matter which department's services they need. In its e-government project SA is going to exploit public access institutions such as information terminals, located in post offices, public telecentres, schools, police stations and clinics, where community can share the necessary equipment and the cost of usage among a larger number of consumers or get connection free of charge. These public access centres are planned to be used not merely as the places where you can use communications facilities but also as public access points for telecommunications and information services and first of all for e-government, providing access for the many South Africans unable to subscribe to paid services.

As we see in its programmes and plans, the SA government puts an emphasis on public access. There are 20 government projects, addressing the need to make information technology accessible to all. It is remarkable that the state encourages, even prods, the private sector into investing in education and technical training. If a school is not able to pay for a private telephone line the local server provider must supply a public payphone.

At the beginning of its e-government campaign the SA influential newspaper *Business Day* wrote enthusiastically: 'Since every department will be linked to one central system, the customer that is you and I will make one inquiry no matter what we require. No more queuing around the block. No more filling out a yellow form only to find you needed a green one. No more paper documents mysteriously going astray.'<sup>2</sup>

But in practice up to now the SA government departments are poorly linked, though the country is spending a total of about R8.6 million (US\$1.5

billion) a year on ICT. The systems in use often differ from one department to another and in many cases do not allow them to communicate efficiently with each other, with the business world or with citizens. Although the SA Police Service was one of the first government departments to use new technologies in their everyday work, so far there is no e-way to send criminal records from one province to another. Most national and provincial SA government departments do have sites that provide official information, but there is no department providing service delivery as some northern states' sites are doing.

The administration personnel have neither the skills nor tradition to communicate through the Internet. Although generally all departments have e-mail, when one departmental director writes to another the common mode of communication is paper. The same applies to communication between the business sector and the government. Administration officials always communicate with individual citizens in paper form as well.

There are other obstacles in the SA administration's way to e-government. It is difficult to attract skilled IT professionals as they prefer the private sector for the higher salaries. Clerical workers often refuse to adopt modern technologies in government departments for fear of losing their jobs.

In these circumstances the problem of administration staff's special education and training has become the primary issue which the developing countries need to resolve to use e-government's resources fruitfully.

The use of new technologies in governance can undoubtedly provide an opportunity to raise the quality of life, foster economic growth and help people in their everyday life. In the developing world e-government could bring additional benefits in the social sphere above all. Two-way communications between government, citizens and businesses can help the developing countries to settle many day-to-day problems. But the digital divide, the lack of a tradition of intercommunication and public discussion as well as the lack of a culture of openness and the skill to obtain personal information from the public sphere are barring the development of e-governments in the African countries and putting a brake on the democratization of their societies.

The developed and developing countries have different targets and they apply different strategies in forming and using e-government. The US strategy gives the main attention to technological aspects. The state tries to build the most sophisticated portal with the maximum quantity of information accessible. But the problems of access to the Internet and training in IT sphere are left to individual choice.

The European model concentrates on social aspects. The European vision has always been 'an information society for all'. The European countries consider education as the main condition for the success of their e-government projects. Achieving this goal requires investment in people and combating social inequality. It may be said that the European countries try to form a socially oriented model of information societies and e-governments.

In their strategic plans the European countries and the US underline the necessity to bar exclusion of minority groups within the population. They give special attention to disabled people. In SA the majority does not yet have access to all forms of literacy and remains excluded.

In the circumstances faced by African countries the community-oriented model of ICT use is the most suitable (Netchaeva, 2001). E-governments in the developing countries will be successful only if these countries are able to provide universal access for the majority of their population through establishing community centres, telecentres, post offices, terminals or other centres of public access, which can ensure collective use of ICT.

## Conclusion

The world is transforming rapidly as the new technologies penetrate all spheres of our life. People have got new opportunities to get in contact and to communicate. There are many contradictory opinions and ideas about the role of new technologies in governance and democratization of society. Some specialists think that IT use in governance may drastically change the models of relationship in society, can help to achieve the real democratic means and even may change the people's consciousness. We cannot fully agree with this affirmation. IT cannot change societies, governments and social institutions only by the fact of its existence. E-government can facilitate the citizen's participation in social and political life, providing access to public information and suggesting a forum for public discussions, letting people follow the government's political decisions and even affecting them but only if e-governments are accessible to the whole population. Surely e-government can involve in social activity people that have felt underrepresented in the past and attract those who have been excluded from participation in the country's life. But it should be emphasized that this may be done only if we have educated, skilled and mature citizens since the e-government system is but an instrument, which cannot be self-sufficient, which plays the same role as the mass media, government press services, public relations systems and so on. Without a digitally literate population, universal access to ICT and developing a culture of openness, the task of the democratization of society will not be realized. Real democracy is achievable only when all individuals take part in all aspects of political, social and economic life. The participation principle is pivotal to the concept of democracy and democratic governance. And lastly, there will be some people who never want to use new technologies, so the alternative (face-to-face) offline government services should always be available.

## Notes

1. On 5 July 2001 the Russian government embraced a course to establish e-government in Russia and approved the federal programme 'Electronic Russia'. Its financing gets top priority, the budget comes to US\$2.4 billion; US\$200 million will have been spent already in 2002. The government will finance the project from local and federal budgets (81 percent).
2. *Business Day*, 22 December 2000.

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## Government Portals and Sites

- Australian State of Victoria: MAXI ([www.maxi.com.au](http://www.maxi.com.au)).
- Russia: E-Russia ([www.gov.ru](http://www.gov.ru)).
- SA ([www.gov.za](http://www.gov.za)).
- Singapore: eCitizen, ([www.gov/en/sg](http://www.gov/en/sg)).
- UK: UKonline ([www.ukonline.gov.uk](http://www.ukonline.gov.uk)).
- US: Firstgov ([www.firstgov.gov](http://www.firstgov.gov)).

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