

THE ROLE OF THE INTERNET IN CONTEMPORARY DEMOCRACIES

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Recent worldwide convergence of telecommunication and information technologies and dynamic development of mass media lead to noticeable changes in functioning of contemporary countries and societies. Currently, modern information and telecommunication technologies (ICT) begin to play greater role and filter down to almost every field of contemporary human life becoming a very popular subject of researches. *Information revolution*, that is a rapid technological development, within the scope of computers, communication processes and software (involving substantial decrease in the costs of processing and sharing information¹), is the driving force behind globalisation. As a result, many social spheres of men remain greatly influenced by modern technologies. Easy access to information (being a consequence of development of the Internet, television and mobile communications) affects millions of people in the world, and also changes rules of social life in a broader perspective². Increasingly greater social

¹ R.O. Keohane, J. Nye jr, *Power and Interdependence in the Information Age*, [in:] *Democracy.com? Governance in a Networked World*. Hollis 1999, pp. 200

² L. Porębski, *Elektroniczne oblicze polityki. Demokracja, państwo, instytucje polityczne w okresie rewolucji informacyjnej*. Kraków 2004, pp. 9

impact of telecommunication and information technologies and growing political importance of the Internet (as a form of ICT) seem to be vital arguments that substantiate the usefulness of this study. The aim was to answer question about influence of the Internet on political life, and thus its application into contemporary democracies. Answers to the above questions should be backed up with data concerning the usage of ICT (mostly the Internet) in various political processes. The further analysis include three phenomena: informing, communicating and voting.

THE INTERNET AND POLITICS

World wide web, usually referred to as the Internet, has the biggest scope as far as the usage of ICT in political life is concerned and, except for television, seems to have the greatest influence on politics. The Internet is the greatest source of information and services ever. Its users communicate with each other, conduct researches, cooperate and conclude commercial transactions. All of these processes are speedy and occur beyond the borders with the ease hardly imaginable before.

It is worth noticing the Internet is viewed as essentially important platform which helps to eliminate some limitations connected with physical remoteness. Even though the virtually common mobile communications spread systematically thanks to digital technology, specialists value the Internet for the possibility of asynchronous communication among others. Communication through the Internet enables to conduct many activities without the necessity to gather in one place. One can say the Internet has a greater potential than traditional media of communication, such as television, radio, newspapers or telephone³. It is interesting that since its beginning the Internet became exceptionally popular and took the position of undisputable leader among modern means of social communication.

Taking into account the impact of the Internet on political life, it is crucial ICT (including the Internet) allow to overcome barriers connected with the actual remoteness of voters to those who govern or represent the

³ P. Wimmer, (2004) *Elektroniczna demokracja*. Available at: <http://www.ucze.pl/InternetDemocracy.htm>, [Accessed on April 12, 2008]

governing. Undoubtedly, application of electronic techniques into democracy is a revolution. However, it is worth having in mind that despite speedy development of ICT, technical problems and e.g. mental limitations can stretch the process of intensification of ICT application to dozen or so years (especially in less developed countries). What is more, rapid development of the Internet influences contemporary civilization, hence changing the character of interpersonal relationships, way of communication, going in for politics and contributes to creation of a new quality of social life.

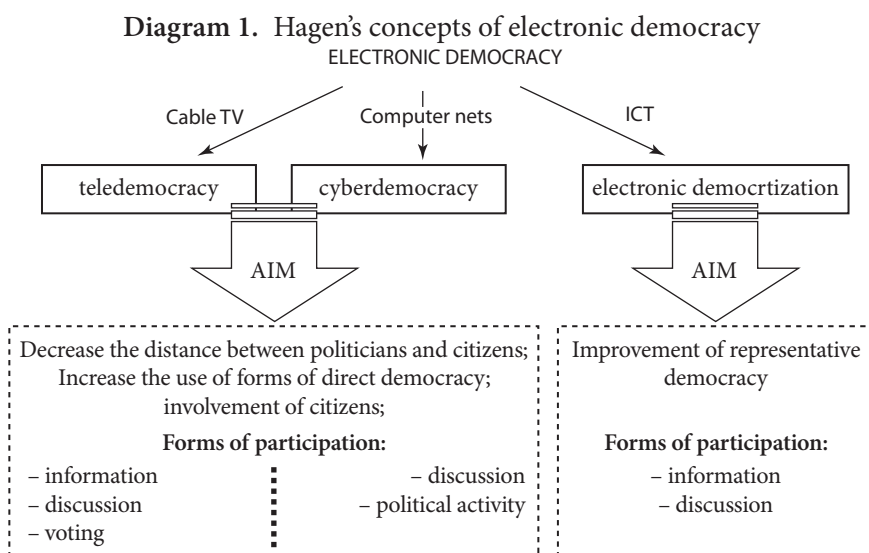
The Internet has become a tool for politics. The role of ICT gained such an importance that some theoreticians of democracy⁴ see the necessity of changing paradigm of understanding democratic system⁵ and introducing a notion of *electronic democracy*. There is no agreement in social studies how to understand this term, thus there is no uniform definition. It is worth, though, to present couple of definitions which seem to be the most distinctive and accurate for proper understanding of the term *electronic democracy*. According to Martin Hagen :an *Electronic Democracy* is any democratic political system in which computers and computer networks are used to carry out crucial functions of the democratic process – such as information and communication, interest articulation and aggregation, and decision-making (both deliberation and voting)”⁶. Hagen distinguishes three different concepts of electronic democracy: teledemocracy, cyberdemocracy and electronic democracy. *Teledemocracy* is the eldest concept of electronic democracy developed in the 1970s. It was designed to introduce additional forms of direct democracy within American political system and implement them using new communication technologies. The main goal of *teledemocracy* is to establish more direct democratic forms within political system by using the new communication technologies. Whereas the concept of *teledemocracy* emerged as a result of the cable television development, *cyberdemocracy* based on the evolution of computer networks. Unlike *teledemocracy* and *cyberdemocracy*, *electronic democratization* does not aim at establishing

⁴ E.g. B. Hague, or B. Loader.

⁵ B.N. Hague and B. Loader (1999), *Digital Democracy: Discourse and Decision-making in the Information Age*. New York: Routledge 1999.

⁶ M. Hagen, (1997) *A Typology of Electronic Democracy*. Available at: http://www.uni-giessen.de/fb03/vinci/labore/netz/hag_en.htm, [Accessed on April 12, 2008]

direct forms of democracy yet at improving the representative democracy⁷. *Electronic democratization* is defined as a form of development and reinforcement of democracy which uses new communication technologies to strengthen political power of those who are often omitted in the most important political processes⁸. The Electronic democratization supports development of representative forms of democracy and emphasizes the value of information exchanges and political discussions for citizens involvement in the political sphere. The concept has been crucial in the implementation of many political uses of computer networks today, especially in the area of political information systems.



Source: the current author's study based on M. Hagen, (1997) *A Typology of Electronic Democracy*. Available at http://www.uni-giessen.de/fb03/vinci/labore/netz/hag_en.htm [Accessed on April 12, 2008]

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ K.L. Hacker and M.A. Toino, (1996) *Virtual Democracy at the Clinton White House: An Experiment in Electronic Democratization*. *javnost/the public* 3(1) p. 72.

According to this approach, *Internet democracy* is similar or identical to *cyberdemocracy*.

Issues connected with *electronic democracy* are discussed by Polish scholars⁹. According to one of the most detailed definition presented by Andrzej Kaczmarczyk and Roman Czajkowski, *electronic democracy* is understood as a set of processes that are realized through electronic media from the beginning of a civil concept and the formulation of suggestions until their final implementation. This set comprises researching activities, planning, implementation and management (making decisions, taking control, information, communication and more). The authors claim that information society would create new model of democracy called *e-democracy* basing on the application of information and communication technology¹⁰.

Electronic democracy can be examined in terms of political market¹¹ which includes three main sets of people¹². Taking into account structure of the market enables to graphically represent influence of the Internet on relations and processes of political market.

Diagram 2. shows three processes that happen on political market: informing, communicating and voting. Besides their traditional dimension (illustrated with solid arrows), development of new technologies contributed to the emergence of new ways of communication, information and voting (illustrated with dotted arrows). ICT, and most of all the Internet, influence democratic processes thus supplement, quicken and facilitate three various

⁹ E.g. M. Grabowska, T. Szawiel, A. Kaczmarczyk, M. Sakowicz, and others.

¹⁰ R. Czajkowski, A. Kaczmarczyk, *E-Głosowanie – niezbędny element elektronicznej platformy do obsługi procedur w demokracji w społeczeństwie informacyjnym. E-vote – an essential element of electronic platform for services for democratic procedures in the Information Society*, paper presented during a conference “Tworzenie mechanizmów i struktur rozwoju elektronicznej gospodarki w Polsce”. Warsaw. 12.06.2001, pp. 48; <http://www.logistyka.net.pl/images/articles/1375/Ref-Czajkowski.doc>, [Accessed on April 23, 2006].

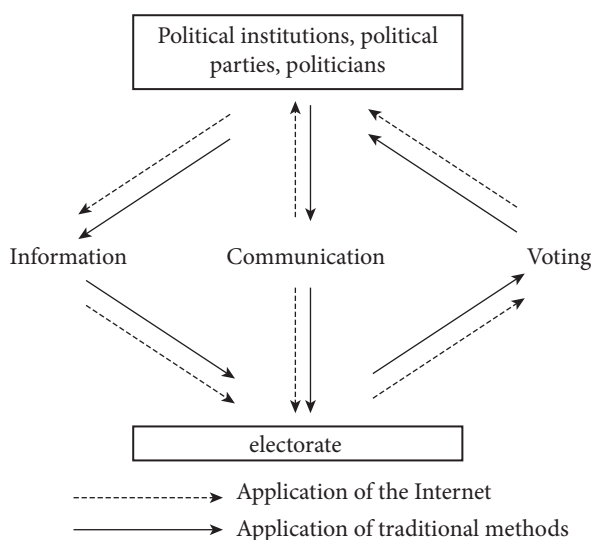
¹¹ *Political market* is a communication space in which political parties and institutions inform electorate about their activities through mass media; M. Cichosz, *Metody analizy i diagnostyki rynku politycznego*, [in:] A.W. Jabłoński, and L. Sobkowiak, *Marketing polityczny w teorii i praktyce*. Wrocław 2002, p. 91.

¹² The first group – political and public organizations; second – electorate, third – mass media; M. Cichosz, *Metody analizy i diagnostyki...*, p. 93

types of activities: sharing information, involvement in political debate and participation in decision-making political processes¹³.

The first process on political market is information. Public institutions generate enormous amounts of information which can be quickly delivered to citizens through the Internet. Enabling society to access information online¹⁴ is a revolutionary progress seen from the citizen's point of view¹⁵.

Diagram 2. The structure of political market and application of ICT



Source: the current author's study

Web pages of government, political parties, various political organizations or online news services allow society to gain necessary data about the government and its activities. Word wide web is a kind of bridge that con-

¹³ R. Tsagarousianou, *Electronic democracy: Rhetoric and reality*. Communications: "The European Journal of Communication Research", vol. 24, no. 2/1999. pp. 189–208

¹⁴ No need to leave home and travel to a given institution, no need to wait in queues.

¹⁵ Who previously had to use traditional ways of inquiring information which often included long bureaucratic procedures.

nects a given institution with society. From the perspective of the beginning of 21st century a considerable increase in application of the newest technological achievement into legislative bodies can be noticed¹⁶. The fundamental role in this scope is displayed by Internet web sites of national parliaments. The web sites have usually several significant functions: firstly, informational and educational function¹⁷, secondly, they provide “services” that support democracy¹⁸ and, thirdly, stimulate active involvement of citizens¹⁹. Except for information concerning a given parliament, online connection more and more often allows to view a parliamentary session or even to “tour around” the parliament’s building.

Interesting is how political parties use the Internet in the process of informing. Virtually, all of the parties use the Internet creating and systematically updating web pages. The central role of the web pages is to provide information about current activities of the party. However, Internet pages turn out to be an invaluable tool when it comes to conduct electoral campaigns or call up the party’s members and supporters. They are also indispensable when creating an image either of the whole party or individual members.

Politicians themselves more frequently use the Internet to inform voters about what they do. Apart from the fact that information concerning members of parliament are presented on display cabinets or web sites, Internet pages of political parties inform also about activities of specific politicians. Moreover, the latter try to win over the electorate and create their own, independent web pages, and in Polish political life it is more and more frequent.

¹⁶ L. Porębski, *Elektroniczne oblicze polityki...*, pp. 117–119.

¹⁷ Pages very often include information concerning the way legislative processes function, information about current affairs and detailed stenographic records of the parliamentary session. L. Porębski, *Elektroniczne oblicze polityki...*, pp. 117–119; J. Taylor, E. Burt, *Parliaments on the Web: Learning through Innovation*, [in:] S. Coleman et al, *Parliament in the Age of Internet*. Oxford 1999.

¹⁸ Information concerning the possibility to order parliamentary publications, apprenticeships job vacancies etc.

¹⁹ Informing about e.g. parliamentary session schedules. Additionally, the function is used to gain access to complete records of parliamentary session, laws and acts or other official documents.

The Internet is also used as a tool of communication between politicians and voters. It seems both political parties and politicians themselves have recently appreciated the Internet for the possibility it provides to exchange views with the electorate. Thanks to that, the Internet has become an important instrument to reduce distance between citizens and political environment. Undoubtedly, as time goes by and technology is developing, politicians realize the necessity of using the Internet to reach society and exchange views with electorate. It is clearly seen in that political institutions and governmental bodies include on their web sites forms enabling an interested citizen to input his or her comments and send them through electronic mail. Additionally, web pages often include addresses to contact a given institution through traditional post and telephone numbers which are helpful when contacting specific institutions, departments or people.

Similar phenomena occur in relations between a political party and a voter, and between a politician and a voter. Development of ICT created a new prospect for democratic dialog and allows millions of citizens to take part in public debate. This fact is used by political groupings and politicians who create their own Web sites, blogs, videoblogs or upload their election materials to the Internet²⁰. Recent years proved that great interest is particularly caused by blogs which are diaries of opinions, comments and feedback written chronologically. This kinds of Web sites with dated entries are more and more frequently owned by politicians, thus the entries often evoke wide debates. Blogs allow comments hence there is possibility to exchange views between a politician that owns the blog and a voter-reader. It is worth to notice blogs are not the only spot for political activities on the Internet. Heated discussions take place in community groups and forums.

The third process on political market is voting. One of the biggest advantages of applying the Internet is that electronic democracy has a potential to overcome barriers which hinder or limit the electorate to take part in direct decision-making processes. Internet electronic voting is the subject of interest of public institutions, political parties and politicians. It's being researched, pilot studied and a subject of trade agreements. *E-voting* seems

²⁰ Web sites include forms to contact representatives of a political party, politician's email addresses, internet forums or links to politician's homepages or blogs.

to gain more and more importance and begins to be one of the primary instruments of *e-democracy*.

Many researchers working on the problems of applying new technologies in decision-making processes claim that in the future citizen's rights and duties would be realized with the use of an infrastructure based on ICT. The essential element of such expansion would be the electronic voting²¹ which is currently implemented in some countries.

In Europe, the country which decided to implement *e-voting* was Switzerland where between 2000 and 2005 three cities: Genoa, Neuchâtel and Zurich, realized pilot study based on implementation of so-called *e-voting* at local, cantonal and federal levels. The main aim (except for cost reduction) was to adapt political procedures to the development of society and supplement traditional forms of voting (going to the polls and postal ballots) with new and attractive form of participation in decision-making processes. Implementation of *e-voting* in Switzerland was additionally aimed at increasing voter turnout and decreasing distance between widely understood authorities and citizens²². Former Swiss but also British and Estonian experiences would probably prove that electronic methods of voting will turn out useful in polling practices.

CONCLUSIONS

Contemporary democracy is changing. Application of ICT contributed to emergence of such notions as: *teledemocracy*, *technopolitics* and *electronic democracy*²³. Names of these new forms of democracy suggest the change

²¹ According to the definition "electronic voting [...] is the act of voting with the use of electronic means. Electronic voting comprises computer voting – which in turn comprises online voting – and internet voting which requires computer with an access to the Internet"; R. Czajkowski, A. Kaczmarczyk, *E-Głosowanie...*, pp. 47, 50.

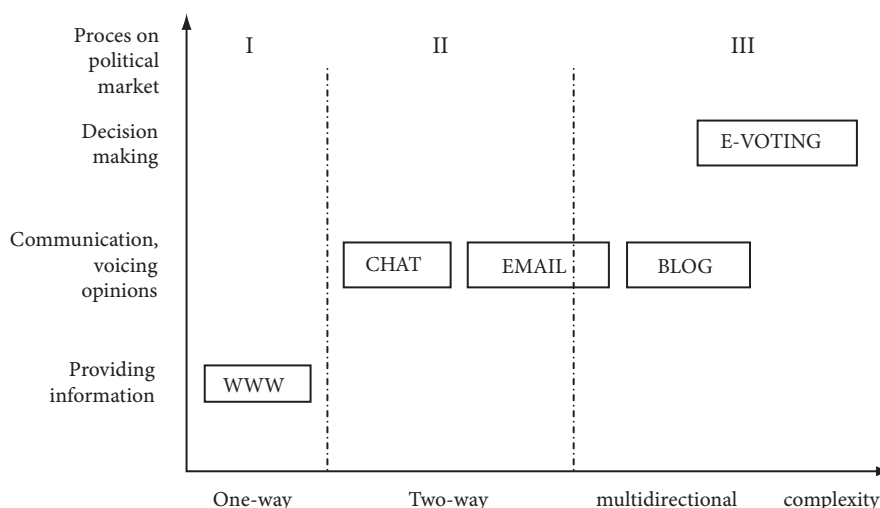
²² N. Braun, [no date] *E-Voting: Switzerland's projects and their legal framework – in a European context*. Swiss Federal Chancellery. Available at: www.admin.ch/e-gov [Accessed on December 17, 2005]

²³ M. Marczevska-Rytko, *Demokracja bezpośrednia w teorii i praktyce politycznej*. Lublin: UMCS 2001. p. 179.

of paradigm of democratic way of governing. As the society changes into so-called *information society*, relations on political market change similarly. Processes of sparing information, communication and voting procedures are supplemented with new solutions based on the application of ICT.

Diagram 3. presents tools which are applied on political market and which base on the Internet depending on the complexity of a given process. Sparing information seem to be the least complicated process, thus WWW markings are presented in the first part of the diagram. Chat and email are

Diagram 3. Internet democracy tools



Source: the current author's study

tools generally used in communication between two subjects, in some instances however the number of addressees can be larger. Hence, initially a two-way phenomenon can become a multidirectional process comprising greater number of subject communicating with each other (part II of the diagram).

Due to the multiplicity of subjects taking part in communication and decisions, part III includes three tools: blog and *e-voting*. It is worth mentioning that despite many advantages connected with application of the

Internet in political processes, many political observers still worry that practice of *e-voting* would increase citizen's interest in political decisions so much, they would like to have their even trivial cases solved through the electronic voting.

New media have already consolidated their presence in social and political life. The Internet as an instrument which actually emerged in the last twenty five years of the 20th century, became extremely popular and took the position of unquestionable leader among modern means of social communication.

To sum up, one can state that in spite of the growing importance of the Internet in politics, the currently largest problem in many countries is (and perhaps will be for the next several years) to reach those voters who do not have access to the Internet. According to British expert Damian Tambini, "e-democracy without common access to the Internet is the same which regular democracy was without common right to vote"²⁴.

²⁴ C. Langdon, *Demokracja i Internet*, „Unia i Polska”, <http://www.unia-polska.pl/index.php?id=4&q=437>, Accessen on April 16, 2008.