Local Democracy Shaping E-Democracy

Zahid Parvez

University of Wolverhampton, UK
z.parvez@wlv.ac.uk

Abstract. This paper offers a fresh perspective to study the role and implications of information and communications technologies (ICT) in processes of local democracy. It moves away from earlier perspectives that have given privilege to information flows, information technology features or strategies employed by human actors in their accounts. The paper proposes a theoretical framework, derived from Giddens theory of Structuration. This framework suggests that the material technology cannot be understood in isolation from the way it is appropriated in social processes. It brings to the forefront technologically enabled social practices rather than the technology itself or the actions of human actors and thus avoids technological or social determinism. It highlights the importance of the interplay of the context, social structures and agency factors in the technologically enabled social practices. When applied to processes of local democracy, it brings forward a number of important insights for policy makers and ICT designers.

1 Introduction

Local governments in the UK are increasingly implementing and using ICT for improving their administration, coordination and local governance and democracy processes, as well as providing public services electronically to citizens. This paper has two broad aims. The first is to develop and propose a theoretical framework, derived from a structuration perspective, for studying technology in social processes. The second aim is to apply this framework to investigate the role and implications of ICT in processes of local democracy and to report the findings.

2 Structuration Perspective

Literature highlights numerous perspectives that have been advocated by different commentators to understand the role of technology in social processes. At one extreme, technology is viewed as an autonomous force or a key driver in shaping social processes. Perspectives at this end tend to emphasize the direct effects of technology on people and institutions. However, they underplay the influence of human actors and the role of social context in shaping and moderating the role of technology in institutions. At the other extreme, perspectives tend to place a greater focus on human and social factors in the technology process. Views from these perspectives tend to argue that human actors or social factors are the key determinants

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in social change. Technology is either assumed to be neutral or is believed that human actors and institutions can freely select them [1]. Thus, perspectives from this side emphasize the variable effects of technology on social processes, as the effects are perceived to be context dependent. However, when these opposing perspectives are applied to understand the role and implications of technologies in processes of democracy, conflicting scenarios emerge. These include the prediction of radical changes in democratic practices and the rise of new forms of governance and models of democracy. Views range along a continuum from utopian visions of Athenian style direct democracy to the other extreme of dystopian scenarios of Orwellian society [2]. However, as reported by numerous authors [1, 2, 3, 4] reality is far from these depictions.

There is no doubt that insights gained from the above perspectives have contributed much in developing current thinking on digital democracy. However, a broader perspective is lacking; one that would align theory more closely with empirical reality. It is argued that such a perspective need to give greater consideration to the interplay of technology, human agents and social processes. To move in this direction, the paper argues for employing the structuration perspective and believes that it could offer some deeper insights to explain the role and implications of technology in social processes.

The structuration perspective suggests that the material technology cannot be understood in isolation from the way it is appropriated in social processes. It therefore brings to the forefront technologically enabled social practices rather than the technology itself or the actions of human actors and thus avoids technological or social determinism. It highlights the importance of the interplay of the context, social structures and agency factors in the technologically enabled social practices. Technologies are employed to support social practices (e.g. for accessing information, on-line discussions, consultations, etc.). Human actors are enabled and constrained through the way these technologically enabled democratic political practices are structured in an institutional context. Orilkowski [5] draws on Giddens general theory of Structuration [6] to develop a model for understanding technology in social processes. She calls this model: the Structurational Model of Technology (SMT). This model emphasises the duality of technology - that is, 'technology is created and changed by human action, yet it is also used by humans to accomplish some action' [5, p405]. In other words, Orlikowski argues that social processes shape technology, but through the on-going use of technology, they are also shaped by it. Her model draws attention to the interplay of institutional properties, technology and human agents.

However, on a closer examination of the SMT as proposed by Orlikowski [5], it is felt that a number of issues require addressing in order to align it closer to Giddens general theory of structuration. First, Orlikowski focuses her model on the concept of the *duality of technology*. However, Giddens structuration theory emphasises upon the *duality of structure*. The SMT therefore, does not entirely conform to Giddens general theory of structuration. Second, the concept of 'institutional properties' in her model is vague and hence requires further development. Through addressing these issues, some adaptations have been made to the original SMT as proposed by Orlikowski [5]. The adapted SMT (or the ASMT) as a theoretical framework to analyse the role of ICTs in processes of local democracy is presented diagrammatically in Figure 1. This ASMT makes the following changes and elaborations to the original SMT that was proposed by Orlikowski [5].

1. Changes the focus from 'technology' and 'duality of technology' to the duality of structure of technologically enable social practices (TESP)
2. Elaborates on the concept of 'institutional properties' and argues for this concept to be equated with institutional 'context'. Also, using Pettigrew *et al* [7] developed notion of context, it differentiates 'context' into 'inner context' and 'outer context'.
3. Identifies the modalities (i.e. sources of structure) of TESP. These are located in both objective (i.e. codified) and virtual (i.e. subjective or exist as memory traces) sources. These modalities are enacted in the role of technology in TESP

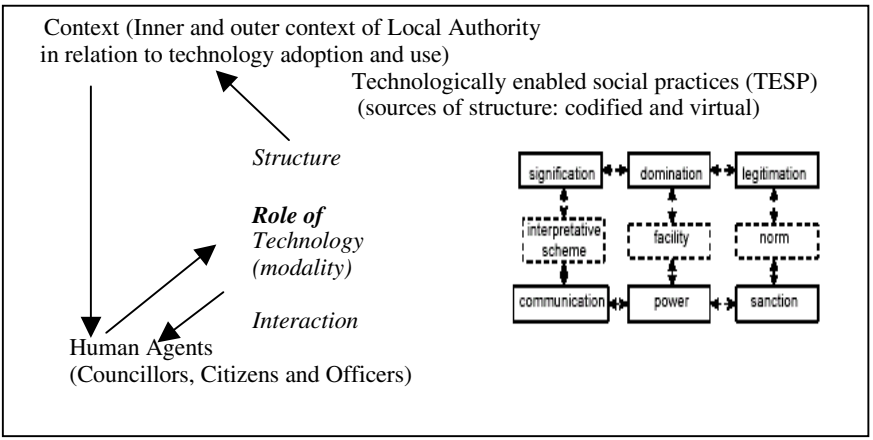

Fig. 1. Adapted Structurational Model of Technology (ASMT)

It is argued that these adaptations are more faithful to Giddens theory of structuration. The ASMT enables the examination of the inner and outer institutional context within which ICTs are shaped and employed, the role of human agency during interactions with TESP, and also how these practices are structured.

3 Empirical Work

The second aim of this paper is to report on the findings that have been gained from the application of the ASMT in processes of local democracy within the UK context. Employing this framework to analyse the role and implications of ICTs in processes of democratic political processes, the following research questions were addressed:

1. What TESP are being developed by local governments within the UK context?
2. To what extent does the context (inner and outer) influences the development of these TESP in local democracy?
3. To what extent does the structures of these TESP enable and constrain human actors in these practices?
4. Are there any implications of these TESP on the processes of democracy (i.e. are they influencing change in democratic processes and practices, and contributing to the formation of new models of democracy)?

The research strategy employed comprised of three strands: use of case studies; primary survey data to understand the general developments in TESP amongst the top

ten local authorities (i.e. the best case examples) that were awarded for their innovations in public electronic interaction during 2001 (by SPIN and SOCITM); and use of secondary survey data collected across local authorities in the UK on ICT in local governance and democracy. The methods employed included documentation analysis (e.g. documents on E-Government statements, ICT use policy, ICT strategy plans), observations, on-line questionnaires and semi-structured interviews from appropriate personnel in three local authorities in the UK.

The investigation aimed at eliciting data from different groups of actors in order to obtain a broader and balanced view of the role of ICT in processes of local democracy. From case studies, data to understand the broader institutional context that influences ICT policy and conditions their use was gathered from personnel responsible for ICT policy, budgeting, design and implementation. This data explored the objectives and priorities of the local authorities as well as any external and internal pressures that influence ICT policy. More detailed data relating to the ICT that were actually made available to political actors was elicited from officers responsible for this. Data to explore the social structure of TESP, aimed at understanding the structures of signification, domination and legitimation. For this, data was gathered on the intended purpose and functions of ICT, actual purposes actors assigned to them, how actors were enabled and constrained through the use of ICT, power and control issues and how ICT use is legitimated. In addition, data regarding human agency issues was collected from officers, councillors and citizens who actually employed ICT in processes of local democracy. This aimed at understanding the actual use of ICTs, what problems were faced during their use, and whether or not their use was in line with that intended.

4 Findings and Conclusions

Influence of Context: Findings indicate that the outer ICT context of local authorities plays an important part in driving the ICT agenda and subsequently influencing the shape and role of ICTs in local democracy. The three main drivers from the outer context include: consumerist and managerialist agenda, the theories of the information society (as these act as a source of ideas and concepts for the role of ICTs in society), and the information age models of democracy (as they influence thinking about democracy and how ICTs can be employed in improving and enhancing the processes of local democracy). The key drivers from the inner context of local authorities that influence the role of ICTs in local democracy includes: the vision policy-makers have for enhancing democracy, specific visions and agendas driving ICT strategies and budgets allocated for ICTs in local democracy. However, the strength of these drivers vary amongst local authorities and as a consequence there was some variations in the type of TESP in place in different local authorities. Thus, findings indicate that ICT, at the time of data collection, mainly served the managerialist, consumerist and e-government agenda and played little role in enhancing interactivity between political agents in local democracy.

TESP: ICT are being employed for providing local information and for speeding up or facilitating actors in performing their information related roles such as access to timely information and responding to communication. Communication flow structure was on the whole simply asynchronous and not interactive. In addition, officers are

increasingly using ICT in the provision of services and are therefore able to capture citizens' preferences and choices at the point of service consumption (and this finding confirms what has been reported by Bellamy and Taylor [8]. Through this process, ICT are facilitating an 'informating' role for officers.

Agency issues: Actors primarily see ICTs in processes of local democracy as tools to support established processes and not as a means for bringing change to these processes. However, there was some evidence to suggest that some actors are beginning to employ ICT in different ways to that intended. For example, two councillors have attempted to set up an e-group for citizens in their constituencies. This is likely to increase through time, and hence would exert pressure for change. The use of the Internet in particular is empowering some of the elected Councillors who use this as a tool for enhancing their effectiveness. For example, it is enabling those who use this to access remote information directly – to become more aware of what other local authorities are doing as well as learn about the developments and research findings related to local authorities that are published by institutions on the Internet. This assists in enhancing their contribution to policy-making and improve their effectiveness in processes of local governance. However, this appears to be an example of 'unintended consequence' of ICT in processes of local democracy. An analysis of the data collected also suggests that there is a great deal of citizens' apathy and ICT has not helped to alleviate this to any great extent. Very few citizens actually appear to employ ICT for engaging in processes of local democracy. Thus, the provision of ICT to political actors on their own does not enhance political participation and engagement. Other factors such as the institutional context and the wider political culture also need to be addressed if citizens' engagement in democracy is to be increased.

Implications of ICTs: There was no evidence that ICT are leading to any radical change to the institutionalised models of democracy. However, evidence suggests that two sub-models of democracy are emerging under the dominant representative model, one on the policy-side (the Demo-elitist) and the other at the service delivery side (the Consumer democracy model). Evidence points to the existence of stronger interaction between officers and elected Councillors via ICT for policy issues than between Councillors and citizens. This suggests that there are signs of a Demo-elitist model of democracy emerging in local authorities, which has also been reported by Hoff et al [9]. In addition, at the service delivery side, evidence points to a greater interaction between citizens and officers than between citizens and elected Councillors. This suggests that a Consumer model of democracy is emerging at the point of service consumption. This again confirms the findings of Hoff et al [9].

In conclusion, on applying the adapted Structurational model of technology (ASMT) to investigate the role and implications of ICTs in processes of local democracy a number of insights were gained. Findings suggest that ICT in processes of local governance are in general being shaped by the institutional context and hence appear to be reinforcing the representative model of democracy. However, their continued and wider use could increasingly place local authority officers at the centre of power in local democracy, and thus introducing the possibility of strengthening the demo-elitist and consumer models of democracy. Moreover, as the elected Councillors begin to build their confidence with ICT, become more computer literate and acquire ICT skills, could use these to improving their role and effectiveness in the processes of local democracy.

Finally, for improving democratic participation and engagement, policy makers need to give due consideration not only to technological issues, but also to the existing institutional context, theories and models of democracy and the political culture, TESP, as well as the rules and resources that influence the development of these practices and conditions their use. Policies need to bring to surface the implicit social structures, which can enable or constrain human actors in TESP. Moreover, human agency issues such as citizens' access to ICT for political information and to participate in the decision-making processes, as well as issues such as computer literacy and training, user-friendly computer interfaces, and on-line costs that enable and constrain political agents in their interactions with ICT need consideration if democracy is to be enhanced. A consideration to these issues can guide policy-making in public administration in a more integrated way.

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