*Developing a European Polity:
the case for governance on the
Internet at the European Level*

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Jamal Shahin

*MERIT – Maastricht Economic Research
Institute on Innovation and Technology*
PO Box 616
6200 MD Maastricht
The Netherlands
T: +31 43 3883875
F: +31 43 3884905

http://meritbbs.unimaas.nl
e-mail:secr-merit@merit.unimaas.nl

International Institute of Infonomics

PO Box 2606
6401 DC Heerlen
The Netherlands
T: +31 45 5707690
F: +31 45 5706262

http://www.infonomics.nl
e-mail: secr@infonomics.nl

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1   Governance and government

> *Governance means nothing more (and nothing less) than the search for mechanisms to insure that absolute power is not exercised in an unjust or oppressive manner.*
>
> (Post 1999)

This paper sets out to encourage thinking of ways in which the development of information and communications technology (ICT) can not only enhance government, but also to instigate a discussion of how the European Union can use ICT to help reduce the perceived democratic deficit. Before detailing actions that the Union (and specifically the European Commission) is taking, it is worth noting the divergence between government and governance, and the importance of mutual understanding between the two terms.

Simply put, to consider relations between citizens and politicians as being the role of government is swiftly becoming old-fashioned. As Eising and Kohler-Koch state (1999, p3.), governance is the focus, because: "authoritative allocation takes place without or outside of government". Government is merely one part of what Hoff, Horrocks and Tops call 'the electoral chain of command' (2000, p4). This electoral chain of command, however, resembles a feedback loop, with Parliament, Bureaucracy and 'The People' fully integrated into a cycle of constitutional democracy. This normative 'chain of command' makes the assumption that sovereignty is a defining feature of any system in which it operates.

State sovereignty, and thus our traditional understanding of the constitutional model of democracy is facing strong challenges from below (the citizen) and above (the international system). Geoff Mulgan refers to this "declining demand for [government] outputs" as connexity (Mulgan 1997, p220). Whilst the term globalization has come to mean almost nothing and everything at the same time, it is important to consider the impact of non-state forces on traditional forms of government. Technology, whilst not being the only factor, has played a key role in encouraging us to reassess this model. Ironically, technology is also seen as a central tool to help rectify this situation.

New thinking about how to deal with these challenges has lead to use of the term governance instead of government. David Post's quotation cited above is a rather simplistic, but useful starting point for understanding what we mean with the term 'governance'.

Governance is about how political actors and institutions (be they public or private) share tasks and responsibilities in social, political and administrative spheres. In other words, it is about how actors in a certain political setting interact. In this framework, the role of government is a crucial part, but not the only part. *The Rise of the Network Society* (Castells 1996), part one of a massive work by Professor Manuel Castells, expands upon this development of governance issues; Castells refers to a wholesale change in patterns of authority in the international arena, and these patterns of authority are important in terms of governance. As Castells would testify, the network has become a central model and process in decision-making procedures. Concepts of communication and control have been altered by the networked approach to governance, which, in part, is due to new information and communications technologies such as the Internet (see, e.g. Thompson *et al.* eds 1991).

Networks, material or immaterial, play a central role in this model of governance. Governance takes place at multiple levels, such as the local, regional, national and international and is apparent between multiple actors, such as governments, civil society organisations, individuals and private concerns. At the European level, network governance is the most logical model to start to consider as useful for our understanding of how the Internet impacts upon governance.

1.1 Governance in Europe

The European Commission defines governance as: "taken to encompass rules, processes and behaviour that affect the way in which powers are exercised at European level, particularly as regards accountability, clarity, transparency, coherence, efficiency and effectiveness." (European Commission 2000, p4.)[1] This definition focuses upon the mechanisms required to reduce the democratic deficit, and, considering that governance has been placed as one of the four strategic priorities of the present Commission's term, then this is logical. However, there are subtle undertones inherent in any discussion of this type: the European Commission obviously is intent upon making the voice of the European Union sound more democratic, and thus, recognizing the importance of the European level not only in policy-making, but also in citizen-governance relations. It obviously does not make sense to talk of a European government in our traditional understanding of the term; but it is not beyond our imaginations to deal with the concept of European governance. Whilst concentrating upon the democratic deficit, European governance also seeks legitimacy – and thus a self-sustaining role for itself – in relations between citizens and the European Union.

This vision of governance disseminated by the European Commission complements the discussion of governance at the theoretical level: the aims of the White Paper are to "ensure more clarity and effectiveness in policy execution, and maximise the impact of the Commission's actions" (European Commission 2001, p8). European governance, according to the Commission, can be seen as a model of democratic steering that involves certain principles that seek to enhance understanding, support and agreement regarding policies made at the European level between a complex set of actors, and the model of network governance naturally lends itself to this cause (Kohler-Koch and Eising 1999, esp. chapter 1). The fact that there is no traditional 'government' at the European level; that the policy-making activities of the European Union can be separated functionally and genuinely cross borders all contribute towards acceptance of this model as the best explanation for governance in Europe.

1.2 Why is governance necessary at the European level?

Governance issues are very apparent at the European level, and are becoming increasingly so, with discussions on enlargement, the single currency and so on. These discussions regarding the issue of European governance are timely and are being reproduced worldwide (in varying forms and arguments): governments are increasingly under pressures from global forces, which include the environment, human rights, employment, immigration and global capital markets. These pressures have led to the creation of a political will to resolve issues at a European level. As Cerny states: "In order to pursue policy goals which are beyond the control span of the state…a network of international and transnational regimes has grown up, some with more general and some with more circumscribed jurisdictions." (Cerny 1996, p133). These regimes resemble, in some cases, an "international 'quangocracy'." (Cerny 1996, p133.) The enlargement issue and the deepening of political ties between existing

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[1] Note that in the final white paper, these six factors were reduced to five: "openness, participation, accountability, effectiveness and coherence" (European Commission 2001, p32).

members of the Union all require serious consideration and debate, and not just from and between policy-makers.

Citizens within Europe's borders are often misinformed about the policies being formed at the European level and this does not provide the political process with any legitimacy. The creation of a European polity seems to be lagging behind the development of policy. But this is not to say that the developments in European politics do not affect the daily lives of citizens who live in the European Union. As Beate Kohler Koch notes: "Since Maastricht, Community competence has been enlarged, covering many aspects of daily life." (Kohler Koch 1999, p14.) It is just to say that these policies are not legitimated by the general populace in the way that local and national policies are. In the network governance model, the role taken by the European Union would be that of an 'activator' and not of an imposer of regulation upon citizens and organisations oblivious to the reasons for such actions (Eising and Kohler Koch 1999, p6). However, in this paper, reform of the European Union is not the central aim, but merely the primary example cited to show how the Internet and other ICTs can affect governance mechanisms. Towards this, it is necessary to state that what is evidently missing from the Governance White Paper is a clearly defined policy regarding the impact of the Internet in the Commission's reassessment of governance. In the following section, the paper will consider the role of the Internet in contributing towards the model of network governance.

2   Three roles for ICT in network governance

Technology should never be taken as a panacea, and similarly, it should never be presented as a solution in itself. Technology is a tool, and must be used in this way, just as the European Union should consider itself an 'activator' and not the solution to all political issues. Previous work on the implications of technological developments on democracy by Laudon (1977) show that technology in itself will not increase public participation, and thus provide a cure for the concern over democratic governance. Thus, it is not enough to say that *e*Government is a priority issue for *e*Europe (*e*Europe will be discussed later on in this paper). Effective governance requires fundamental assumptions to be made about the role of different actors in social, political and administrative spheres. European governance in this context is about a more democratic and accountable set of European institutions, and one way of encouraging this is to bring the citizen closer to the multiple levels of decision-making institutions. Encouraging awareness (or at least the knowledge that participation can make a difference) is one of the central problems of today's democratic systems. Bryan, Tsagarousianou and Tambini call this 'the crisis of political participation'. (1998, p3.) Three characteristics can be gleaned from current discourse regarding the Internet and technologically-mediated innovations in political practice: networks, responsiveness and dissemination. These are described here in greater detail.

2.1   Networks

Of the three roles for ICT in network governance, the network is the most obvious. But this is not about laying down cables as much as it is in getting social and political networks of people to actually use the Internet to complement their face-to-face meetings and coordinate opinions across the whole of Europe. Several examples of this exist, including the Alliance for a Responsible and United World (http://www.echo.org). Many of these types of networks already operate to discuss issues of importance to themselves. The can revolve around cities (such as in Tampere, where the website http://mansefoorumi.uta.fi operates), interest groups or special issue groups. Rhodes (1991, pp203-205) categorised different types of networks in the following typology: policy community network, territorial community networks, issue

networks, professionalized networks and intergovernmental networks. These substantially different types of networks overlap in a way that almost replicates the nature of the Internet. The central aim for a non-state polity such as the European Union would be to provide the opportunity for these networks to share resources and opinions on common issues.

2.2 Responsiveness

Encouraging debate at grass-roots level is seen as one necessary requirement of a step towards a Europe based upon network governance: but this is only one half of the story. When debates are centred upon issues concerning specific issues, the people involved at policy level must be willing and able to provide responses to interested bodies. This is undoubtedly made an easier task through the Internet's applications. But as the case of Iperbole in Bologna shows, this can also provide an administration with an insurmountable number of requests for support, leaving messages and requests unanswered and further undermining the notion that this innovation is a forward step. This, in one sense can be aided through reference to a better series of Frequently Asked Questions for interested persons to reference, development of archived mailing lists or creation of 'two-way guest books'.[2] As Schmidtke notes regarding the city of Berlin: "often the potentially interactive communication systems are utilized in a one-way manner…There are simply no institutionalised ways of communication which, for instance, would involve the administrative staff." (Schmidtke 1998, pp64-5.) This is in stark contrast to the small town of Parthenay in France, where: "The Mayor, convinced that before introducing new technologies an organizational change should take place, and not the reverse, decided to reorganise the municipal administration." (Hervé-Van Driessche 2001, p11.)

Thus it can be seen that responsiveness to requests for information is more than simply providing the ability to post an email to a standard mailbox. To take advantage of the essence of responsiveness, feedback is required and there is no simple technological fix for this.

2.3 Dissemination

The creation of a community 'memory' is a central part of the process of enhancing democratic governance. To this end, dissemination of information that is publicly available is a crucial attribute of any information system. Whilst, of course, it is not possible to ensure that interested parties read (and absorb) all information available, it is necessary to ensure that information is as easily available as possible to promote transparency and openness. The Internet provides users with the possibility to retrieve this community memory at will. This 'memory' can be organised in many different ways. A good example of this would be the Belgian Government's (who hold the current Presidency of the European Union) Expedition Europe website (http://www.expeditioneurope.be). This, in contrast to the Futurum website (http://europa.eu.int/futurum) is targeted at 17 to 25 year olds living in the European Union. Although the subject matter is similar, the approach is different, encouraging a different sector of society to become involved in the debate. This is an example of providing different information channels, which is made easier through the Internet. The ability to use different channels to enable full dissemination of information to different actors in society will also allow interested persons to provide commentary on issues of interest to their interest groups through debates as envisaged above in the previous sections.

Table 2-1 below shows some of the tools currently available on the Internet to facilitate and promote ICT usage in the areas of dissemination, responsiveness and networking. These tools are to some extent being used across the Internet in different arenas. In fact, some of these have been used in the European arena to a greater or lesser extent, but as the section below

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[2] These tools are described in Richard 1999.

shows, there has been no coherent use of these tools to provide the user with any understanding of how ICT and network governance are being used by the European Union.

Table 2-1: Tools currently available on the Internet to facilitate and promote ICT usage (adapted from Richards 1999).

Mailing lists	Newsgroups
Web-based conferences	One-way guestbooks
Live discussions	Two-way guestbooks
FAQs	Surveys
Quizzes	

3   *e*Government – hype, help or hindrance

> *Government must produce a new "culture" in order to harness the enormous potential of digital government.*

(Barbara Ann Allen, Luc Juillet, Gilles Paquet and Jeffrey Roy 2001, p1.)

Talk of an electronic government presumes that there is a government to improve or develop. In the European Union, this is not as clear as it might be at the national level. The European Commission's response to this has been the development of the *e*Europe initiative. This initiative has an action plan which sets out a number of objectives (http://europa.eu.int/information_society/eeurope/action_plan/actionplantext/index_en.htm). These endeavour to stimulate use of a 'cheaper and faster' Internet by 'investing in people and skills'. Reports are made on progress by the member states as well as the Commission's own objectives. An example of these in the *e*Government section is shown in Table 3-1. *e*Government "aims to ensure that citizens have easy access to essential public data, as well as promoting online interaction between citizens and government" (http://europa.eu.int/information_society/eeurope/action_plan/actionplantext/stimulate_use/egov/index_en.htm). From the objectives described in the table below, we can see that the major role of these objectives is to establish technological solutions to communication between the government and its citizens. The Action Plan, in this sense represents and reflects a large body of work being carried out by European and other states worldwide in improving the interface between citizen and government.

Table 3-1: eEurope Action Plan - Government online - electronic access to public services. Source: europa.eu.int/information_society/eeurope/action_plan/actionplantext/stimulate_use/egov/index_en.htm.

Action	Actor (s)	Deadline
Essential public data online including legal, administrative cultural, environmental and traffic information.	Member States, supported by European Commission	end 2002
Member States to ensure generalised electronic access to main basic public services	Member States	end 2002/3
Simplified online administrative procedures for business e.g. fast track	Member States,	end 2002

procedures to set up a company.	European Commission	
Develop a co-ordinated approach for public sector information, including at European level	European Commission	end 2000
Promote the use of open source software in the public sector and e-government best practice through exchange of experiences across the Union (through the IST and IDA programmes).	European Commission, Member States	during 2001
All basic transactions with the European Commission must be available online (e.g. funding, research contracts, recruitment, procurement).	European Commission	end 2001
Promote the use of electronic signatures within the public sector.	Member States, European Institutions	end 2001

Whilst the technology can be seen as supportive, there is also the tendency to rely upon the technology to solve problems of inefficient government – and thus provide a general response to the increasingly perceived 'democratic deficit'. The link between these two phenomena is not necessarily that obvious and sometimes can be misleading. At least, current practice would show that a search for new tools to combat the democratic deficit and crisis in public participation issues has been one standard answer from policy-making forums. But perhaps we would do more harm than good by reinventing the wheel and not thinking about why we are doing so. The impact of technologically-mediated innovations in political practice on the process of democracy in the European Union is broad and wide-ranging, and as can be seen above in Section 2, the need for understanding the relationship between ICT and new ways of thinking about governance are equally as important as implementing new interfaces for governments and citizens to interact online. However this deeper analysis requires that suppositions about the aims of these developments in governance must be explicit before making decisions regarding relationships with all political actors in the European Union.

So far, it has been stated that attempts to improve efficiency in current administrations do not go far enough in helping with the development of governance at the European level. The quotation from Allen *et al* that opened this section rings very true in the European Union. When all attention is focussed on the issue of efficiency, it can, in some senses, be seen as hindering positive development towards better governance. Again, we need to ask why we should improve efficiency of the institutions that are only a small part of the story without looking to broader issues of governance. What is required is a complete reassessment of how citizens and other political actors are dealt with at the European level. Both the White Paper on Governance and the *e*Europe only go some of the way to stimulate debate on this issue. Indeed, these papers seem to be discussing the issue from polar opposites! If development of the European political space is seen as desirable, then the role of ICT is one that should be carefully considered as a potential activator and not a panacea. Governance of an *e*Europe is not something that has been raised at the discussion table in any meaningful way, so far.

4 *e*democratization or *e*democracy?

One of the most challenging aspects of the Internet and related technologies lies in the fact that they do not provide answers. Only possibilities. A technologically deterministic approach to promoting Internet use in policy making does not provide the European Commission with

more than an empty tool. This is detrimental to the aims of such an inquiry. On the other hand, an examination into better governance at the European level that does not include some analysis on the impact of the Internet does not give policy-makers the opportunity to try out new possibilities afforded by the Internet.

Thus, this paper does not seek to describe what a possible 'electronic democracy' will look like, but rather intends to show how ICT can enhance "processes of democracy already assumed to be in place, in ways that 'increase the political power of those whose role in key political processes is usually minimised'." (Malina 1999, p33, citing Hacker and Todino.) This can be called the process of democratisation.

Whilst admitting that there is a democratic deficit at the European Union level, it is possible to say that the network governance model (which is the predominant model for understanding the European Unions at present) is not undemocratic in itself. The task is therefore not to create a new democratic environment, but to develop the environment already in place to help cure the crisis in public participation. The Internet might provide a suitable medium for this communication model, but in itself, the politically-neutral network technology serves no purpose.

Considered use of discussion fora and other tools made possible by new ICT provide an attractive way to unite European actors in a way that would support the democratic model of network governance. They provide actors from different levels to interact through information and opinion sharing, and allow all opinions an equal footing. These fora have the likely effect of not only reducing the democratic deficit through more defined information channels, but also have the potential to encourage greater involvement between all actors involved in the public sphere. This in turn, may lead to legitimation of the European polity and all political initiatives within it.

4.1   Direct deliberation

This paper is not recommending that direct democracy (often referred to as 'push-button' democracy) become the dominant aim or outcome of these processes. My aim is not to say that technology wreaks upon us a new form of utopia where dissent and conflict exist no more. It is, to borrow a phrase from Stephen Coleman (1999), promoting 'direct deliberation'. For an entity to be legitimate, it does not require universal support. Instead of shifting decision-making authority to the level of the citizen, which would not make much sense in political terms, ICT can be used to give citizens the opportunity to debate topics and help public bodies make informed decisions.

There are several issues that need to be taken into account when considering the development of forums for direct deliberation.[3]

4.1.1   Utility of discussion and feedback

The first thing to consider is whether a topic is considered important enough to spark a debate or not. It seems unrealistic to request all citizens to provide input into many issues that don't affect them in some way. One could say that this is why we elect politicians. For an engaging debate which in the end will have an outcome that affects certain people, the key is not to invite people into the issue that will not be affected by it. Information overload, another commonly used phrase of today, will lead actors to consider the process tiresome and a burden upon their daily lives. As has been shown before, there are different networks that can be brought into play at this stage: for example if an issue being discussed regards industrial change, then discussion should take place between industrial partners and unions (both

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[3] The basis for this schema was first drawn up in Shahin 2001

formal and non-formal groups of workers). Likewise, if an issue has a direct relevance to a certain area, then discussion should focus upon the people who live and work in that geographical space.

4.1.2 Access to networks

The question of access to political discussion is one of the most discussed topics in this area. This, however is joined by the debate on access to the networks that enable discussion to take place in the network governance model. Whilst some believe that access to these networks is a public right, there is the issue of cost and of private market structure in the telecommunications arena (see eg. Tsagarousianou, Tambini and Bryan 1998 for more on this issue). Whilst for any form of democratic use of new technologies will require access to the underlying network structure for it to make sense, this does not require that we wait until universal broadband Internet access is ubiquitous before direct deliberation can begin.

Indeed, however, the question of access now seems to relate more pertinently to the users and not to the infrastructures in question. The idea of the user (and non-user) should be given much more import when dealing with these issues (see van Bastelaer 2001 for a good overview). Whilst everyone should be given the opportunity to partake in the democratic 'experiment', noone should be 'forced' to do so. Simply providing adequate access to these services and processes might be enough to ensure that people will realise that their voice can be heard, but restricting participation in democratic participation to a specific technology is not useful.

This leads onto the question of who will deal with digital communication in the bureaucracies and political circles. Which relates to the question of 'access to'. When we talk about access, we generally think of giving users access to infrastructures and institutions, but we must also think of whom they can contact within the new forms of networks. As mentioned above, it is somehow necessary to show that someone is listening to the opinions and requests from users of the tools. The level of interaction between citizens and bureaucracies and citizens and citizens (C2B and C2C (!!)) are given more weight than the B2C element in this discussion.

4.1.3 Effectiveness of input

Finally, the most crucial point of all is the effectiveness of a contribution made by a political actor. 'Does my contribution count?' would be a fairly reasonable question for any citizen being asked for input on a certain topic. Of course, in one sense, this paper has tried to show that the effectiveness of the input is not only related to whether this actor's opinion actually results in a concrete decision, but that this actor now understands *why that decision was made*.

Initiatives such as the Eurvoice (http://www.eurvoice.org) campaign, which was started to hear the European citizen's opinion of developments in the Information Society in Europe, swiftly came to an end because there was no perceived utility, no structured feedback mechanism and no existing network to build upon. The effectiveness of input was null and this led to the discussion list of the site being unused, until the European Commission finally withdrew funding and support for the initiative.

On the other hand, projects like Uspeak (http://www.uspeak.org.uk) have been quite successful in gathering input and discussing issues of social benefits. From their website: "Uspeak is a direct link between you and Parliament - your opportunity to tell MPs your experiences and your views on tax credits, work incentives, childcare and benefits." This was successful because who was 'listening' and who was 'running it' were both known, and thus the terms of discussion were set at the beginning. Although the site operated behind a closed door (password protection), this gave the participants an idea that they were actually being

listened to. Registration was freely available. Therefore, the utility was clearly stated, the effectiveness of participant input was made clear and access, although closed was freely available.

Thus, the three considerations mentioned above provide some basic pointers towards making one example of ICT usage in network governance real.

5   Developing a European Polity - conclusions

How this is to be done in the context of a unique European framework is still not clearly defined, and whilst the democratic deficit is clearly a problem for European institutions, the broader question of the nature of the European Union (super-state or intergovernmental organization) is still not entirely answered, and unlikely to be answered for some time. This paper has shown that ICT offers both a huge challenge, but also a wonderful promise for the European Union and all levels of governance between it and the citizen.

But the question remains: will the Internet and other ICTs actually help promote the European Polity? This question should be left to time, as it relies upon (as this paper has tried to show) more than mere infrastructure and applications, but we can at least see in the points made above that policy cannot and should not ignore the potentials of future governance structures through use of the Internet, whilst not ignoring other, more traditional, forms of communication. The Internet however does provide some interesting new applications, which can help to revitalise democratic participation through a process of democratisation.

The European Commission has decided that the new technologies must become integrated into their administration, and this is being carried out in many ways.[4] The crucial challenge is to recognise that the Internet affects governance as well as government. As mentioned above, the challenge is to develop an understanding of what the technological possibilities actually allow, and how to best come to terms with that. The promise of the Internet cannot be fulfilled if certain criteria in other areas of governance are not met, and it is thus important that the European Commission develops an understanding of how the Internet can impact upon the European Polity.

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[4] '*Implementing the e-Commission*' conference, held in Brussels on June 26, 2001. http://europa.eu.int/comm/di/symposium2001/invitation.htm.

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