Processing e-democracy
Toward a substantial configuration of
the living (e)democracy

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The test tube e-democracy and beyond

This paper originates from the need to review – under a critical perspective – the modern democratic theory attempts to address the complex and ambivalent relationship between the new ICTs and the decision-making process. Much of this literature centers its attention on the analysis of deliberative democracy models which, taking advantage of focus group-like techniques, gradually were able to define the development setting for a special electronic artefact: the test tube e-democracy. Such models, using structured strategies and techniques of citizen engagement – from delphi methods to e-deliberative opinion polls and Net-intensive decision-making procedures (Fishkin 1991) – appear to be the result of an inadequate concept of democracy that, even if pointing to the Greek polis, estimates its citizens as poorly informed, removed from politics, and, especially, lacking any kind of governance ability (Barber 1984, Putnam 1993).

On the other side, the political institutions, worried by their legitimacy decrease due to the geopolitical transformations occurred at the end of the century, are now focusing on their technological efforts to expand citizen participation in the democratic process – still assuming, therefore, the irreversible weakness of representative institutions. The crucial issue for the scientific debate should be the existence of a prescribing dimension pertaining to e-democracy. Such a belief requires the necessity (and urgency) of public intervention toward the opening of formal participative channels, while at the same time the forces activated by the ICTs globalization start to erode the traditional power assets, avoiding exactly those deliberative institutional methods.
The varied strategies applied along the last two decades (Chadwich 2006) suffered for two shared limitations: some difficulties of scaling, on one hand, and the weakness of their outcomes, on the other.\(^1\)

Despite these two decades focused on experimentation and the ICTs ability to lever up the political modernization process\(^2\), the democratic theory was unable to get definitively rid of the directive paradigm and, therefore, to take advantage of the political and institutional spheres’ deep transformations, due to an on-going integration of new technologies in our everyday life that makes negligible the empirical distinction between cyberspace and real life. As a result, both the new public opinion forming and structuring and the deep, steady and mutual adaptation of intermediate organizations (parties, interest and advocacy groups, etc.) to the modern communication infostructure, have been left in the background, thus giving way to very different, and also much less defined, forms of political involvement. As for the empirical research field, such attitude translated in the rhetorical question whether the Internet reinforces existing participation and mobilization patterns or instead it creates new ones. According to the normalization argument (Bellamy and Taylor 1998), the answer to such question attests that «the Internet tends to reproduce the social structures and processes of the offline world by making existing activists even more active and further distancing the disengaged…» (Di Gennaro and Dutton 2006, p. 300).

After a more careful reading, the outcomes of these studies appear, however, conditioned by the operative definition given to the concepts of, respectively, participation and politics. As for the former, several studies aim only to measure quite marginal issues, focusing on participation methods more than on its actual forms. In such instances, the research limits itself to notice how many times people look up online for political data, whether they contact via email a candidate or a

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\(^1\) One of the first tele-democracy experiments was actually the 1977 Qube Interactive Cable System, that enabled citizens to take immediate opinion polls. For an history of e-democracy please see De Rosa 2000.  
\(^2\) Of course the relationship between politics and technology preceeds the Internet. Thierry Vedel highlights its development starting from the 1950s, when, after the Second World War, the computer advent and its ability to process large amounts of data were seen as able to take away the government procedures from arbitrary human decisions. However, the idea of a governing machine was strongly rejected by those who depicted a unhappy outcome based on a technocratic regime and an excessive exemplification of politics (Vedel 2006).
parliament member, if they search within an institutional website or sign an online petition. This is clearly an effect of the dependent variable, with its tendency to impose on the electronic environment participation the same behavioural model of offline engagement (Gibson, Lusoli and Ward 2005). Indeed, both the normalization and the reinforcement models use the individual participation readiness as an explanatory variable, while underestimating elements such as group socialization, viral communication, and the network production of on-going electronic stimuli. Only rarely the empirical studies have begun to include, among their own research indicators, those shared and free-flowing practices pursuing unconventional but quite common formats, from advocacy activities to cyber-protests, from blogs to mobs, up to becoming true ideological platforms in opposing the basic principles of the neo-liberal culture, such as copyright laws and knowledge patenting. A recent Pew Research Center (2006) report asserts indeed that the political participation among new generations – dubbed DotNet (that is, technology savvy) – does not reflect in voting data or typical participative forms, to find rather an expression through other outlets: «Instead of participating less, young people may be participating differently» (Zukin, Keeter et al. 2006).

As far as the second issue, that is, the definition of “politics”, we should consider that such definition tends to reduce the cognitive horizon analysis by excluding all those mobilizing activities not directly related to politics, including, for instance, the open source movement or the open content approach that gave birth to Wikipedia. Now, although such movements seem only marginally linked to politics in its most formal meaning, undoubtedly they are the rich soil producing a different vision of the knowledge society, a freer, more accessible and, essentially, more levelled society. This trend helps not only to connect the new generations to the need of a cyber-rights political protection, constantly threatened by the telecommunication holdings, but to become also crucial nodes of a networked organization much wider and spread out. As a consequence, the negative stereotype that so far has characterized the new generations as politically disengaged is empirically counterbalanced by a clearly different strategy expanding even in the
voting participation realm, that has always been considered a valued reality check (Keeter 2006).

According to the above considerations, we fully concur with Gibson, Lusoli and Ward (2005) when they insist upon the adoption of a more articulated empirical and theoretical model able to introduce also contextual variables related to the Net political activity: «Using this broader contextualised model of online political activity we find support for the idea that the internet is expanding the numbers of online political activity, specifically in term of reaching groups that are typically inactive or less active in conventional or offline forms of politics» (p. 561, 2005).

The high degree of unsuccessful experiments concerning citizen inclusion in decision-making procedures and the deep changes in the so-called political practices for freedom activated by the ICT diffusion, bring us to acknowledge the final defeat of the most traditional beliefs of electronic democracy, almost exclusively based on the contemporary presence of at least four factors within one institutional space:

a) strong political will to innovate the juridical and procedural framework of public choices,

b) predisposition of each communication tools within the electronic environment,

c) experimentation with new policy tools, and finally

d) availability of mechanisms providing participation incentive.

As we can see, this democracy concept tends to confuse the substance (the nature of democracy) with its form (the decision procedure) and seems still too tied to the inequality paradigm: the inequality of initial conditions and opportunities (social divide), the inequality of information and ICT access (digital divide), the inequality of distribution ability and participative strength (political divide). We should give up this democracy concept to embrace instead a belief based on the “enriched formula” of democracy, that is, fuelled and powered by the Net electricity – this is the road leading to a society whose background is moving toward an emergent form of democracy:

«Electricity interprets and redistributes language in new, complex pattern of association and dissociation. Electricity accelerates, amplifies and redistributes language in infinitely expanding networks growing in simplicity (of treatment and
This paper objective is to highlight the main features of the living (e)democracy, a form of democracy that is taking shape due to a particular — although unprecedented — convergence of different elements. In such a context, the retrieval of some discoveries included in the cybernetic model proposed by Wiener and Deutsch (1966) seems particularly effective to understand the nature of communication flows helping to design this specific democratic configuration. The living (e)democracy is therefore inspired to the idea of a «self-modifying communications network or “learning net”. Such a “learning net” would be any system characterized by a relevant degree of organization, communication, and control, regardless of the particular processes by which its messages are transmitted and its functions carried out» (Deutsch 1966, p. 80). At this stage, the e-democracy is no longer just a technical or utopian speculative area, but appears to be increasingly embedded in political practice (Chadwick 2006).
The living (e)democracy: context matters

The increasing use of ICTs within the public sphere is by now a certainty, even as a statistics data. Parties, interest groups and other movements are constantly active on the Net in order to refine their activities, adopting styles and strategies typical of the new environment. The electronic government, with its online service and information delivery, has reached a sufficiently defined level in its development, at least in the advanced countries. At the same time, old and new media are being integrated with new communication formats, in order to better meet the public changing needs. In the new electronic world, any public sphere actor is able to use in a synergic way the transformative forces expressed by the ICTs: «ICTs shape, and are shaped by, the forces of societal modernisation that underpin the latest evolution of participation patterns, at least in advanced democracies» (Gibson, Lusoli et al. 2004, p.5, Norris 2002). As a result, we have an environment highly receptive to novelties both produced in the technology field and specifically related to a political sphere enriched by a significative innovation.

**The E.government**

Both in specialized literature and contemporary administrative culture, the e.government concept is associated with those transformations – in the juridical, technical and administrative bodies – that helped to improve the standards of institutional output, administrative action efficacy and public service quality through ICT-based service and information delivery. As a more or less direct result, the e-government idea became synonymous of e-administration (Calise and De Rosa 2003; Holmes 2002). However, clearly that idea was coined to be more “comprehensive”, that is, to express a legislative tension toward a deep transformation of the governance approach and its communicative nature, in order to require not just the review of service production and delivery formalities, but also the citizen inclusion in the decision-making process about the chosen policies and their evaluation and monitoring as
well. To quote again Deutsch, this problem does not concern power but its direction, where «steering is decisively a matter of communication» (p. xxvii).

Therefore, we can assess that the electronic government concept only today is getting ready to grasp that collection of phenomena for which it was established not many years ago, in 1993, in the wake of the so-called reinventing (Osborne and Gaebler, 1995). Some pieces of this conceptual redefinition are included, for example, in a European Commission official document stating that «Within the public sector, public administrations are facing the challenge of improving the efficiency, productivity and quality of their services by using ICTs. However, the focus should not be on ICT itself. Instead it should be on the use of ICT combined with organisational change and new skills in order to improve public services, democratic processes and public policies. This is what eGovernment is about» (European Commission 2003, p. 4).

As a consequence, gradually the e-governance dynamics proceed along with the e-administration ones in order to integrate access, transparency, and sharing of information resources along with the spreading of decisional abilities in policy-making practices. By e-governance, Perry refers to the activities of «digital support for policy formulation and the scrutiny and oversight of the achievement of policy goals. This includes formal modelling of policy problems, the use of formal meeting management tools, the development of banks of policy-relevant materials in knowledge management systems dedicated to supporting elected ministers and mayors» (2004, p. 16). The use of ICTs is then scheduled along the entire deliberative process, from intervention planning and design to result checking, and they tend to mutate in engagement channels for society actors involved in policies related to health, education, public transport and the environment. The local communities are very involved in such issues, which develop under specific policy formats such Agenda 21, a Participative Budget, or in more complex action plans for the Information Society development. The application of new technologies is also included in public regulation processes thus originating organized e-rulemaking practices (Coglianese 2004). Indeed, the use of ICTs for the development and implementation

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3 In Europe, the governance debate has been revamped by the European Commission in 2001 in order to push member states and local communities to share laws, procedures, and practices concerning the power management within the European Union (White Paper on European Governance, COM(2001)).
of regulatory activities enables a clear improvement of agencies’
decisional timing as well as a direct involvement of civil society in the
same regulatory process, also in accordance with the official directive
approved by the Bush administration with the 2002 E-government Act. Although we still lack any empirical evidence about social and political
implications of ICT use within the regulatory procedures (at least as far
as it goes for an improvement of political rationality), many scholars
believe that such e-rulemaking could increase the institutions’
democratic legitimacy and also improve their compliance degree in
regard to citizen needs, and this is particularly true for those new
intervention areas where the regulatory tools are still missing.

Finally, the e-government addresses another development aspect that
goes along with the above mentioned e-administration, e-governance
and e-rulemaking. This is the electronic voting, a political technology still at
a very experimental stage but with a flourishing literature (Kersting 2006)
and a wide statistical reference. The main arguments supporting the
electronic voting are accessibility and security. They emerge from the
need, on one hand, to prevent the slow but steady decrease of electoral
participation, by making less time-consuming, and thus easier and more
accessible, the voting procedure (in this instance, the argument is clearly
inspired to the rational choice approach). On the other hand, they could
give back the technical reliance to the vote counting system, plagued by
mistakes in several countries (Halvarez 2005). According to the most
radical visions, however, the electronic voting is seen as a tool able to
definitively restore the power to the people, transforming the

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4 A first outcome of this Act was the creation of Regulations.gov portal, which enables users to locate
and access every bill proposed by Federal agencies, along with the option to post comments and
propose public emendements.

5 For an updated review of literature produced on electronic rulemaking, please check the website of
the Regulatory Policy Program at the John F. Kennedy School of Government: E-rulemaking, Resources
Website, http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/cbg/rpp/erulemaking/

6 Actually there are several fields in the e-governance domain. Perry 6 (2004) proposes, for example,
e-democracy, e-service provision, e-governance, and e-management, with a specific reference to the
use of ICTs in allocating resources related to government policies.

7 Both arguments do not always find a positive outcome in the related literature. Indeed, authors
point out that the ICT introduction does not improve in a significative way the voting participation
particularly in the long range. In fact, Benjamin Barber explains that the use of ICTs in voting
procedures tends to privatize politics, by replacing the public debate with the immediate expression of
private prejudices. Also, the e-vote does not fully prevent mistakes in the counting process, thus
paving the way to the possibility of more invisible manipulation options.
representative democracy in a referendum-based democracy, and essentially reducing the quantity and importance of intermediate political organizations. In this latter case, the e-voting could strengthen direct democracy, with still unknown consequences (Buchstein 2004).

The Public Communication

The public communication concept groups some mixed and context-sensitive meanings. In countries with a strong state tradition, as for example France and Italy, the term public communication refers to a wide area of institutional performances in transferring news, knowledge, access tools and transparency promotion. The public communication is then something different from the market communication, including though that segment of political communication related to the «political authority accountability in its administration of institutions and integration of legitimate trends and aspects typical of a political program actualization. It includes the segment of social communication – which could arise both in the public and private sector – to protect real rights and real problems concerning value and quality. It especially includes the entire segment of institutional communication, which is implemented by professional structures and accountabilities existing within the administrative and institutional sectors» (Rolando, 1992).

Under such a definition, the public communication becomes a basic modernization factor included in the framework of institutional reform interventions in order to reduce any possible asynchronism of political change, organizative transformation and social behaviour. This evaluation implies an emphasis on the administrative action result and the redefinition of the relationship between state and civil society. In such a view, the public communication helps in the affirmation of a new citizenship model.

In the so-called state-less countries, such as the United States, the public communication refers instead to all those communication forms generically addressing an audience. In this perspective, the focus in not on the information source’s institutional or public nature, but rather on the critical role undertaken by media channels within the government-citizens relationship, as opinion forming and filtering tools. The central
and independent function gradually assumed by the media is nowadays a certainty, while the specific literature acknowledges the conditioning power they assert both on the political action – determining its style, logic and priorities – and on public opinion as well, modelling its tastes, attitudes, and needs (Altheide 1985). This picture did not prevent, for the past twenty years, a wide increase of strategic communication by the governments, which, by revitalizing the old public relation tradition, have embraced communication as a governance tool.

Therefore, both in the state-centered and state-less societies is easy to isolate a single convergence process which – assuming the communication as a power resource and a bottom-up process toward consensus legitimacy – foresees an increasingly synergic use of information and communication tools. The on-going and mutual relation existing between traditional and innovative tools/channels/media enabling the so-called integrated communication is indeed unprecedented, while the acquisition of professional skills about news management and electronic channel activities greatly reduces the government dependency from the mass media system. The ICTs enables also the re-mediation (Bolter 1999) of communication processes through the bypassing of traditional news agencies. Thus the “going public” action tends to exceed its tiny corner of research strategy for political support to become the inspiring philosophy of any public intervention (by using different methodologies, from surveys to regular feedback acknowledgement).

This overview explains the public communication role in sustaining the transformation, increasing the organization awareness level, supporting ICT introduction and innovation within each government process, redefining the public and private spheres’ borders, and affirming the new citizenship rights. Finally, the public communication has become at the same time an objective and a tool for any e-government strategy. The cybernetic model described by Deutsch foresaw indeed «the embodying of aspects of both communication and self-steering or autonomous control»

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8 Of course we should always keep in mind the easy and unavoidable mixture between propaganda and information, also defined as infoganda (please see, Kenterelidou C., Public Communication and Media. The Case of Contemporary Greece, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, 2005.)
(p. xi), that is, the tight inter-dependency between power engineering (included in government reinventing programs, in redesigning government functions and related enforcement activities) and communication engineering, which blends together the information processing with a new and more complex form of social compliance. Quoting again Deutsch (1966), in short, the function of politics within the new electronic environment becomes the acceleration of the innovative process to address social needs.

The i-Movement

The ICT development has freed new energies. It has given new impulse to those efforts aiming at a society democratization that for different reasons and timing (the cold war, market recession, strict control of power resources) so far have been buried under the ashes (Norris 2003).

Therefore, from the early 1980s throughout the 1990s and until today, we have seen a proliferation of movements and initiatives very different in their organization and strategies that however shared two elements: a full employ of new technologies as tools to coordinate their activities and expand the dialogue sphere, and the willingness to help – through informal, spontaneous, and sometimes apolitical ways – in fostering the knowledge society development. This complex happening has many implications, both at cultural and political levels, and can be reduced to a definition fully expressing its ideological and political nature: informalism.

This is not a neologism and, above all, the informalism concept does not arise with the Net, despite being its growing soil. It finds application in two fields seemingly quite diverse: in art, it refers to the movement that, right after the Second World War, promoted the need for a radical change of aesthetic codes in order to free the artistic expression from the form constraints. The other relevant field is the law realm, the juridical production where informalism is used to legitimize the reappropriation, on the part of the individual, of those decisional spaces gradually subtracted by a social organizative system that has became increasingly
invasive and law-based (Van Krieken 2003). Under this perspective, the legal informalism refers to a production activity of authoritative knowledge about human behaviour and social relationships, a pool of informal knowledge sustaining the juridical code. We have thus highlighted the natural emergence in our society of a more or less consistent body of popular justice principles, while suggesting at the same time the hypothesis that legal informalism could be a less visible and more efficient form of social control. But the most interesting belief is certainly the one that includes informalism within the Foucault category of governmentality, which implies a substantial transformation in power distribution, no longer in favour of society or state but of the individual’s. In such a context, the governmentality «represents a site for the expression of the individuality of the subject and provides a basis for a more thorough individualizing process’, and that informal justice is a 'site of struggle', a 'point of resistance...against forms of power which deny the individuality of the subject» (Matthews 1988, p. 19, quoted in Van Krieken 2003).

The i-Movement (the informalism movement) identifies then a long range movement that, gathering the freedom and self-determination ideals emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s, finds a fruitful development soil in the new electronic environment. This is a mixed movement, with very different action plans and issues, but inspired to a common idea of social justice. The movement main goal is to redesign the organizative rules of the knowledge society, where the institutional power seems to have less legitimacy strength and from here to push for the transformation of economic and political rules. Therefore such informalism refers to the establishment of a new right, to the form assumed by the opposition to the official right now seen as not representing or not protecting anymore the emerging needs. In particular, this informalism is the defence mechanism of the Net subjective spaces against corporate interests.

«Information wants to be free»9, said Stewart Brand – *Whole Earth Review* co-founder – during the first Hacker Conference in 1984. His statement inspired those future initiatives aimed at the free sharing of ideas and tools that, starting with the hacktivism and the first online

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communities (*The Well* was an offspring of *Whole Earth Review* people), differ in organizative formats and strategies but share the same basic philosophy. In 1985 Richard Stallman founded *The Free Software Foundation*, a non-profit organization supporting the free software movement, whose ideals consider immoral the propriety of software code because this prevents the computer users’ freedom. With the birth of the Internet and later the development of the first browsers, such ideas found new strength under the well-known open source movement, which linked together accessibility and user freedom to modify a software source code, thus expanding its user base and freeing that concept from a technical context. Even more so, the free software movement was and is always stressing the most genuine and comprehensive concept of freedom fostered by such endeavours.\(^{10}\)

Shortly, any research field as well as any economy and political aspect, are affected by the free and open source concept: from medicine to physics, from pharmacology to biogenetics, a belief emerges opposing the patentability of pharmaceutical components or the gene code.

While in the political arena accessibility is tied to transparency and openness of democratic processes toward an increased citizen participation, in the economic sector a full war has been declared against the current copyright norms, no longer tolerable in the knowledge society’s new formation. A more radical branch chooses even civil disobedience actions and, inspired by the Zapatista movement, uses the ICTs to battle against the neo-liberal capitalism resulting from the globalization process and occupying the institutional places where very few powers take decisions on behalf of everybody else (i.e., Seattle). A need for a new kind of social justice is gaining ground through the integrated use of ICTs, the emergence of diversified freedom and mobilization practices, and the building of a new symbolic and valued universe: «It is in the realm of symbolic politics, and in development of issue-oriented

\(^{10}\) It is worthed noting that in the context of the free and open source software groups that developed the GNU/Linux operating system, Walter Schacchi (2002) clearly points out the use of *software informalisms*: «The choice to designate these descriptions as informalisms is to draw a distinction between how the requirements of open software systems are described, in contrast to the recommended use of formal, logic-based requirements notations (“formalisms”) that are advocated in traditional approaches» (p.19).
mobilisations by groups and individuals outside the mainstream political system, that new electronic communication may have the most dramatic effects» (Castells 2001, p. 131).

The relationship between law and technology is getting more entangled as the latter is seen as a conditioning force of social behaviour (Lessig 1999). The open access becomes then a binding path even in the cultural realm, where some institutions started to make freely available their electronic catalogues and repositories, thus helping to establish true alternative platforms able to compete with those established by large scientific content providers. All over the world, new collaborative projects are blossoming aimed at knowledge-building through such technologies as the Wiki and the open publishing, where a commons concept is replacing the proprietary model. The copyright is no longer a right but a scientific attribution giving way to a new criticism against the limitations imposed by the Big Media to reduce any creative advancement (Lessig 2004).

At the end of 1990s, the i-Movement moves along a new dimension in the wake of the social software advancement, the gradual relinquish of previous community-based dissent forms and the emergence of a shared society-like organization on the Net, centered on individual subjectivity and opinion structures (i.e., Indymedia). The simple spread of information is no longer able to define the knowledge society horizon. This is the time to let the free expression rolling. It is now the time to open new information flows to renew an obsolete information process tightly controlled by the mainstream media. With the new endeavours, such as media activism, grassroots journalism and blogging, we can finally see the emergence of a new public sphere (De Rosa 2006). These participation forms – and their success among people all over the world – have re-opened the debate on the role of journalism and the media, focusing on ethic issues such as reporter accountability and freedom of speech. In this instance, as well as in those mentioned above, the informalism strength helped to shift the power relationship among institutionalized public sphere actors, the media and political systems and the citizens-voters, thus activating a further expansion of information and communication spaces, sustaining a different opinion leadership,
and especially giving voice to new participants within the attentive public, as described by Schudson (1998). Indeed, if it is true that «new forms of communication create different kinds of public discussion, and even different publics» (Schudson 1992), then the audience of these new communication forms, by taking advantage of social software systems, has a higher knowledge level of any TV audience and a better ability to interact with other actors in the public sphere. The Habermas (1989) bourgeois theory about the public opinion is then renewed by the affirmation of a new effectiveness (Shirky 2004).

Finally, the informalism is the unifying trait for a variety of situations, with their own action logics and organizational models that, however, originates from the same cleavage - closeness/openness – characterizing the institutionalized social systems versus others currently being institutionalized (i.e., cyberspace). Such informalism seems then to be the correct key to grasp the deeply political essence of this «political way of being» (Castells 2004) that, otherwise, risk to be ignored by the current political analysis. According to Norris: «Political participation appears to have evolved and diversified over the years, in terms of the agencies (collective organizations), repertoires (the actions commonly used for political expression), and targets (the political actors that participants seek to influence). The process of societal modernization and rising levels of human capital are primarily responsible for driving these developments, although patterns of participation are also explained by the structure of the state, the role of mobilizing agencies, and social inequalities in resources and attitudes. As a result, contrary to the conventional wisdom, democratic engagement may have been reinvented for modern times, rather than simply atrophied» (Norris 2002, p.1).

**The e-governmentality**

Every kind of i-Movement lives in the electronic environment as a loosely-organized communication infrastructure form, lacking any specific leadership and, above all, providing several networking levels enabling the osmosis process among systems with different ideas. Despite the lack of any visible organizational structure, they prosper in time and are able to create permanent campaign networks through
trusting distribution mechanism arising from different discursive environments (Chadwich 2006). An empirical evidence is the political awareness process that in the last few years has been manifesting throughout the Internet, involving International and other organizations, public and private actors, forums and social movements in global governance issues aimed to affect the direction of the information society development and related matters. A clear example is the World Summit on the Information Society, where important super-national entities such as the G8 Dot Force, the U.N. Information Telecommunication Union and the World Trade Organization meet alongside with a myriad of small groups representing less advanced countries or emerging movements. According to Chadwich, such a process signals the birth of a new global information society regime that, although fragile and with no true regulatory power, is nevertheless able to influence the political agenda due to the size and kind of participating actors. Aiming at describing such structures, Rosenau used the definition governance without government (Rosenau 1992).

However, nothing of all this would have been possible if the Internet did not help to activate a series of large, transversal and spontaneous processes concerning policy learning and democratic deliberation, knowledge and trust delivery, civic and political engagement. This processes unfolded with procedures and a speed that the test tube e-democracy experiments could have never imagined to reach. As a micro-analysis, this government mentality and specific political knowledge acquisition – resulting from the habit to debate, argue and produce self-governance rules within each group (informalisms, according to Scacchi) – is therefore the most relevant product in the political use of the ICTs: «What we observe today is not a diminishment or a reduction of state sovereignty and planning capacities but a displacement from formal to informal techniques of government and the appearance of new actors on the scene of government (e.g. NGOs), that indicate fundamental transformations in statehood and a new relation between state and civil society actors» (Lemke 2001).

Foucault (1977) described the governmentality as the form taken by the government in those society where a decentralized power is in place and its member play an active role in rule production for their
(self)governance. Indeed, the only way to explain the existence of power and dominance technologies is by taking into account the so-called “self-technologies” (forms of self-regulations). Power is actually the result of a strategic interplay between the individual freedom pressure and the dominance state. The action context is designed by the neo-liberalism and the return to a politics centered on individual participation to social choices and, in particular, to those concerning the delivery of strategic resources: wealth and information.

In the electronic environment, the governmentality as an analytical category expresses its own explicatory strength, pointing to a cohesive movement including a varied political phenomenology moving toward the self-representation and constitutionalization of what we have defined as living democracy. But the term refers also to the process enabling more and more citizens to enter the public debate sphere without putting in place a specific inclusive strategy. It rather grasps the on-going tension existing between the redefinition of people’s needs and their fulfilment. The governmentality can be seen also as a formal political arena where informal social forces can exercise their control will.
The living (e)democracy: convergence helps

The living (e)democracy scenario seems to be a power reengineering process resulting from transformative forces both within the institutional structures and naturally emerging from the social fabric, something also in line with the most classic theories of social change. Indeed, the living (e)democracy – visible only when adopting a macro perspective – is neither a government form nor a new democratic theory nor one of the many government-led electronic democracy initiatives, but rather a special democratic configuration. Such configuration catches the position, role and rational scheme of public sphere actors in the new hyper-media environment, where the transformative forces travel on different tracks and in both directions, bottom-up and top-down.

The living (e)democracy model: a substantial figuration
Therefore, we are facing changes and effects resulting from an unprecedented combination of factors:

a) public transparency and openness of administrative and government processes (egov)

b) use of strategic communication to inform citizen and launch inclusive procedures in the public sphere (public communication)

c) spontaneous delivery of political knowledge, skill building and networking abilities (i-movement)

d) constitutionalization of electronic participation as self-representation and deliberation activities (e-governmentality).

This particular e-scenario seems to provide room for the original conditions that – along the history of democracy – have always been linked to deep transformations of the public sphere, as it happened in the past, for example, with the publication of local news-sheets or the advent of television. The transformative forces activated by government institutions in regard to administrative reorganization and consensus regaining, is moving toward two directions: the enactment, where institutions are pro-active players along information and communication processes toward the public, and the engagement, where public authorities are ready to include the civil society in its decision-making processes. On the opposing front, we have the arising of alternative public areas based on the right to self-determination and self-representation for issues of such importance that cannot be left in the hands of traditional political forces – at least not on the International scene where they have much less influence. Here the media system plays a very relevant role about globalization issues, helping at the same the public sphere enlargement, while the Net movements and political activism – with their constant action of organizative production and self-regulation – advance the citizenship empowering factor. The social actors involved in this new public sphere are guided by the democratic dynamics aimed at a critical reengineering of political means and goals.

As a synthesis of literature about e-democracy, Gibson et al. (2004) list four different environments with a more or less strong influence (or mutually substituting) of ICTs on government structures:
a) The outline defined as full-scale erosion assumes the shift toward direct democracy through the gradual erosion of representative institutions activated by participatory technologies (Becker 1981, Grossman 1995).

b) The limited erosion outcome describes a less “invasive” situation where the new technologies help to increase/improve the communication flow between institutions and citizens, and in particular with organized groups (Bellamy and Raab 2005, Bimber 2001). As a result, this outcome brings a decrease in the mediation power usually held by political parties.

c) The modernisation scenario focuses on the communication technologies role for government (and service) reform practices, and on their ability to use such technologies as marketing tools (Gibson and Ward 2000).

d) The reinvigoration outline refers to the (real but indefinite) chances of using the ICTs to improve the relationship between institutions and citizens, by directly involving citizens in public activities through several participative technologies (Coleman 2001). Obviously this last option provides a clear prescription, even if inspired to a less conflicting vision about the relation between representative institutions and citizenship.

The power re-engineering scenario actualized by the living (e)democracy with its tendency toward balance and harmonization rejects the normalization theory. Indeed, in the cybernetic model, the system is naturally pushed toward a balance by the on-going application of forces acting among opposing influences, communication feedback and gradual self-adjustments that help the parts’ integration until a new
power geography takes shape. Organization, Communication and Control are the key elements for the power balancing.

The living (e)democracy has, therefore, a fluid nature that changes in accordance with the flowing of electronic stimuli. The Internet is its natural growing soil but no longer its cage. And in any case, the future is a program (Bridgman in Deutsch 1966, p. 245).
References


