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The effect of new technologies on civic participation models

Abstract: The development of new technologies will enable decentralization and freedom of communication for large numbers of people, by overcoming the barriers that once rendered direct participation of society unfeasible. The continued development of information and communication technologies (ICT) makes it possible for people to participate in political life. Today, the use of e-tools is becoming a way of adapting democracy to the needs of contemporary states and strengthening civil society. The aim of this paper is to answer questions about the essence of ICT and forms of civic engagement through electronic forms of participation. The author seeks answers to the following questions: How does ICT influence political processes? How do electronic communication systems create the conditions for the political engagement of citizens? Can the use of information technologies have a real impact on participation?

Key words: e-participation, information and communication technologies, electronic democracy, e-tools

Introduction

Modern information technologies seem to make it possible to overcome the traditional limitations of civic participation. The crisis of democracy means weakened conventional political groups, antipathy and distrust towards authorities, and the belief that society has no real influence on politicians' decisions and cannot effectively control what the government are doing. One way to overcome the crisis is to use electronic technologies, which build communities and promote greater political participation. First of all, the internet is developing as a tool that rationalizes governance; it is a new tool for political dialogue, an independent means of participation and political debate, and a tool for shaping public opinion.

However, the impact of new technologies on the improvement of democracy does not depend so much on the solutions themselves as on the model of democracy, democratic traditions, the technological and economic potential of the state and citizens' access to information and communication technologies (ICT) and computer literacy (Nowina Konopka, 2008, p. 23).

Many researchers claim that the use of modern technologies significantly increases the level of citizen involvement in public affairs. Civic participation is an important element of democracy. Many theories of democracy consider the level of civic participation as one of the key markers of its strength. Today, the model of democracy based on citizen participation in the political decision-making process (deliberative democracy, participatory democracy) is becoming more and more popular. Such participation can take a variety of forms, from displaying slogans and symbols, through voting, participation in public consultations and political demonstrations, to membership in political parties and the creation of electronic discussion platforms (Kapsa, 2017).

Jan van Dijk and Kenneth Hacker go even further and point out that the use of ICT to strengthen political democracy or citizen participation in the democratic process leads to 'digital democracy' (Lakomy, 2013, p. 139). In contemporary democracies, more and more emphasis is being put on the decentralization of state power and the more general involvement of the public in the decision-making processes, as well as on self-resolution of problems by those who are the most directly affected by them. By sustaining or ensuring the desirable development of such a trend, attention is drawn to direct democracy on a local scale by means of new technologies.

In this context, the aim of the study is to analyze the role of the internet in political life and to answer the question of how the use of technologies has changed the ordinary citizen and affected government-citizen relations. In addition to the theoretical approach, e-participation tools are presented, as well as critical opinions on this particular method of civic engagement.

An attempt to define some key terms

Polish authors analyzing the impact of new technologies use terms such as electronic democracy, cyber democracy, teledemocracy, internet democracy, virtual democracy, technopolitics or electronic democratization. However, in international literature the term 'electronic democracy' is the most common. Martin Hagen believes that electronic democracy is any democratic political system in which computers and computer networks are used to perform the basic functions of the democratic process (communication, articulation and aggregation, decision making) (Hagen, 1997).

Experts on this issue distinguish three different notions: teledemocracy, cyber democracy and electronic democratization. These concepts differ in the use of direct or indirect forms of governance and the passive or active role of citizens. What they have in common is interactivity, the ability to receive feedback, and a large amount of information. Another shared element is the belief that new technologies can change democratic mechanisms and will improve certain aspects of the democratic process (Nowina-Konopka, 2006, p. 86).

As Ferdinando Mendez put it, "depending on the aspect of democracy to be promoted, electronic democracy can use a variety of techniques to increase the transparency of the political process, to strengthen direct involvement and participation of citizens, and to improve the quality of the opinion-forming process by creating new spaces for debate." Electronic democracy was seen as a remedy for the various shortcomings of political life, but emphasis was naturally placed on strengthening the role of citizens in the democratic process (Porębski, 2011, p. 98).

In general, electronic democracy can be defined as the ability of new information technologies to strengthen the level and quality of civic participation in governance. E-democracy means the use of electronic networks to create a more direct form of democracy and to increase the role of online votes and official online debates. Some approaches emphasize that e-democracy is about using the power of new technologies to stimulate civic participation in local decision-making in the inter-election period (Sakowicz, 2008, p. 311).

Of course, the most obvious point of reference in this context is ‘the internet.’ In fact, the internet has become a milestone on the road to popularization and dissemination of new technologies on a mass scale. As Leszek Porębski puts it, when discussing the concept of the internet, at least two factors must be borne in mind. First of all, the term ‘internet’ itself is a very capacious category which includes many technical solutions enabling various types of activities. Secondly, the internet – understood as a computer network – is the best known and most strongly analyzed, but not the only, new technology changing the rules of communication and information flow. Therefore, in the context of the impact on social life discussed here, the notion of ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) seems to be more adequate than the notion of the internet alone. It is a term commonly used in English literature, exactly for the reasons mentioned above (Porębski, 2001, pp. 11–12).

In the opinion of Pawłowska, e-democracy covers all forms of electronic communication between political authorities and public administration on the one hand and citizens on the other. The aim of implementing electronic tools is to increase citizens’ involvement in political processes. E-democracy assumes the use of information technology methods for performing the basic functions of the democratic process, i.e. information, communication, articulation and aggregation of interests as well as the decision-making process. In e-democracy, the most important aspect is not online voting, but the use of digital technologies to strengthen the process of democratic relations between the governing institutions and the governed. However, the mere existence of these technologies is not the only condition for success; they are merely a tool whose use is determined by the social, cultural and moral standards prevailing in a given country (Pawłowska, 2003–2004, p. 130).

Jan van Dijk writes about how ICT increases citizens’ involvement in political life. He calls this ‘electronic participation’ (or e-participation). E-participation is defined by van Dijk as the “use of digital media to facilitate and transform the relationship between citizens on the one hand and governments and public administration on the other, towards greater civic participation.” E-participation is part of more broadly defined e-democracy, as it involves the use of available technological and informational solutions for the more thorough involvement of citizens in public affairs (Musiał-Karg, 2012, p. 61).

The repertoire of electronic participation methods is extremely vast, including solutions such as electronic aids (webcast, FAQs, blogs), electronic consultations (online polls, surveys and questionnaires, forums, panels) and interactive participation (electronically created communities, chatrooms). Among the techniques, one can add extending e-access to information, access to projects planned by the state authorities, submitting one’s own proposals (which in local governments takes the form of participatory budgeting), e-petitions addressed by citizens to public authorities and administrative bodies, e-voting forms and various types of e-forums (Jacuński, 2016, pp. 35–36).

Justyna Matusiak emphasizes that e-democracy understood in this way includes electronic voting, electronic citizen involvement, electronic consultations and electronic control. Electronic voting (e-voting) is understood as voting by means of electronic devices. Such devices may serve the purpose of electronic registration of voters, electronic counting of votes, or even electronic voting with the use of a dedicated tool, first and foremost the internet. Electronic engagement (e-engagement) refers to engaging citizens

in public affairs using electronic means of communication; electronic consultation (e-consultation) refers to the exchange of opinions and views between citizens and officials; and electronic controllership (e-controllership) refers to the verification by citizens of the costs and quality of planned services or investments. One of the basic forms here is participatory budgeting, a tool used not only for electronic voting or electronic consultations, but also for electronic engagement or controllership (Matusiak, 2016, pp. 135–136).

According to Magdalena Musiał-Karg, as well as traditional forms of implementing democratic principles, novel solutions based on new technologies are emerging, such as e-voting, e-initiatives, e-courts, e-archives, e-petitions, e-electoral campaigns, combining the most important democratic principles with innovative forms of implementation (Musiał-Karg, 2012, p. 52). In the monograph *Institutions of Direct Democracy in Practice*, the following tools were listed among those that can be implemented using existing technical capabilities: public hearings, participatory budgeting, civil projects as part of specific public tasks, polling procedures (in particular, so-called deliberative polling) (Jabłoński, 2016, pp. 18–19).

Importantly, the term ‘e-tools’ suggests that technical applications may change or transform a certain condition of civic activity, give citizens greater influence on decision-making and strengthen self-governance in local political life (Sakowicz, 2008, p. 312).

Conditions of civic e-participation: pros and cons of online spaces

It is worth mentioning that discussion on this subject should focus on the following question: how do electronic communication systems create conditions for the political involvement of citizens? Firstly, the internet removes the barriers faced by users of conventional media, enables many-to-many communication (based on the model of the Athenian Agora, where every eligible individual had the opportunity to speak), and improves the exchange of information between politicians and the general public. Three features make it different from other media: the internet is free from spatial limitations; there are no time constraints; and the cost of participation is lower (Kotowicz, 2006, p. 285).

The interactivity of ICT allows citizens to request information, express opinions and demand responses from their representatives; it takes the hassle out of dealing with the state and its institutions, both in an up-front (e.g. the possibility to do everything online) and background (more efficient public service in general) sense; ICT helps people with disabilities, who can now use public services without the need to go to an office in person. Positive effects can also be seen in the functioning of local democracy. Thanks to better access to information, the transparency of local government policies has increased, which also enables better monitoring of local authorities’ activities by residents (Peszat, 2012).

On the other hand, however, citizens must meet certain new demands. The development of political engagement requires knowledge of democratic values, mastering political culture and awareness (political socialization), experience of participation in political life. It is necessary to prepare citizens for the use of computers and to secure appropriate funds. An important empirical indicator is determined by the formation of a ‘culture of

participation,' or 'civic culture.' According to Norris, online citizens should be able to familiarize themselves with and comment on plans of state bodies, including budgets or zoning plans; comment on and participate in government activities through special discussion forums or polls; and vote online (Norris, 2007, p. 163).

It is also worth noting the more skeptical school of thought regarding new technologies. Their opponents argue that electronic debate may turn into a populist plebiscite, or become dominated by people who lack the skills and knowledge to make good decisions. Security is another crucial issue. Other most important arguments include insufficient computer literacy, lack of necessary equipment and insufficient internet access (Węglarz, 2013, p. 22).

According to Dahl, citizens are informed about political issues via telecommunication links and can take part in discussions with experts and among themselves. Despite this, there is inevitably a limit to the political awareness of the general public, and while technical means will help citizens to follow the discussion and vote, they will do so on the basis of incomplete knowledge (Nowina-Konopka, 2008, p. 21).

The Myth of Digital Democracy by Matthew Hindman is worth mentioning here. According to this author, and contrary to popular belief, the internet contributes little to expanding the boundaries of public discourse; on the contrary, it reinforces the power of narrow elites. The author notes that, although the internet has positively influenced the development of some forms of political participation and changed the methods of organization and mobilization, elites still define the way in which content of all kinds is presented on the internet and who can access it to a large extent. Hindman's argument also relies primarily on the notion of digital exclusion, but notes that the user's skills are more important than mere access to new technologies. The possession of such skills defines the main axis of digital exclusion today (Hindman, 2009, pp. 1–3).

Marek Troszyński, a sociologist from Collegium Civitas, emphasizes that the internet is first of all a medium and not a new world or a new way of understanding reality, nor is it a way of life. In his opinion, the internet has been and still is changing our world in the field of communication. People are still people, and they still feel the need to live with others and create communities. Now, they have a completely new range of communication possibilities and make good use of them (Troszyński, 2016, p. 83).

Gibson, Nixon and Ward believe that the various forms of participation in e-politics give a false sense of community, because in the virtual world, the user can usually remain anonymous, which means that individuals can merely pretend to be engaged and active (Jacuński, 2016, p. 38). Actual involvement in a certain cause requires breaking free from one's routines, breaking through everyday patterns. Eventually, it is connected with the danger of facing the problem, which is not the case when things are done online.

In addition, attention is drawn to such barriers to electronic democracy as: 1) unequal access to the internet (digital divide, digital split, e-exclusion); 2) lack of interest in this form of participation on the part of the less educated, the elderly and low income citizens; 3) the high costs of implementing technological solutions, particularly unwelcome by elected authorities whose perspective is usually limited by the date of the forthcoming elections; 4) lack of skills (competences) in using modern technologies among members of a given community, and so on (Nodzak, 2017, p. 358).

Interesting insights can be found in *Information Society in Poland in 2016*, a report published by the Central Statistical Office of Poland (GUS). It indicates that the process of computerization of the Polish society is accelerating every year and the demand for a better quality of ICT services and products is growing. More and more households have computers or other IT devices, and most of them have internet access (in 2016, 80.4% of households were online, 75.7% of which enjoyed broadband access). However, according to the same report, a large group of citizens still have no internet access at home, most often for such reasons as lack of need to use the internet (70.6%), lack of appropriate skills (52.1%), or the prohibitively high costs of hardware (28%) or access services (21.3%) (GUS).

A survey by CBOS shows that the internet is most often used by people aged 18–24 (93%). Interestingly, the percentage of internet users seems to be decreasing with age: 34% in the 55–64 age group use the internet, and only 11% of people above 65 years of age. The urban-rural divide is also visible – internet users living in rural areas represent just 35% of the total population with internet access. The larger the local government unit (with particular emphasis on the largest cities), the greater the possibility of using ICT tools for conducting civic dialogue (CBOS).

Implementation of e-tools as a means of promoting participation

Technological progress and the dynamic development of local government can to some extent be measured in institutional terms by observing the growing number of local democracy initiatives and tools. It is evident that there are more and more new projects aimed at increasing citizen participation in the life of local communities. However, often the following questions are asked: Does it ‘pay’ to try hard and devote time and even money to electronic platforms? Do they actually help to build civic society at the local level, or should they be treated as one of the many marketing measures aimed at improving or brushing up the image of the local authorities? Kedzia emphasizes that the development of communication via a computer network plays a significant role in democratic changes; in other words, a higher level of democracy is associated with better communication (Marczewska-Rytko, 2001, p. 193).

Creating new opportunities for citizen participation in public life is not enough to change the face of democracy. Electronic democracy “cannot, by itself, democratize the communities it serves. The creation of a public space, the articulation of views and the process of creating active citizens require involvement and participation in public debate. Opportunities created by the instruments of electronic democracy are likely to be just an empty shell if they are not embraced by the public and filled with the desire for political participation” (Rachwał, 2013, p. 55).

From the point of view of a citizen, Porębski distinguishes “the fundamental right to shape political democracy” (which includes participation in petitions or the implementation of electoral procedures). This means that e-participation is not only a form of legitimizing the authorities and citizens’ identification with their decisions, but also a way to improve the functioning of the administration and management. Democracy is therefore not a matter of voting once every couple of years – it also engages citizens in dialogue with the authorities and in co-decision making (Porębski, 2010, p. 161).

Practice shows that individuals care much more about those problems which directly affect them, and those for which they can clearly predict and identify the consequences of their own decisions/opinions. The more opaque the decision-making process is, and the more responsibility for the decision is unclear, the less opportunity there is for citizen involvement.

Many interpretations of participatory democracy draw attention to the fact that the local level is conducive to the development of civic participation. The smaller the community, the greater the participation of its members in the political decision-making process. It seems, therefore, that cities should be the pioneers in developing electronic civic participation, increasingly common and desirable in the era of digitization and virtualization of life, including public life. Ambitious and modern cities aim at improving citizens' lives by using technology. In cities, various citizens' initiatives may emerge through discussion. There are websites allowing every internet user to read and support someone else's initiative, appeal, request or protest submitted to a public institution in the form of a petition (Kapsa, 2017).

Regardless of the advantages and disadvantages of particular solutions, a number of online tools designed for political participation have been created all over the world. Examples from the United States, Australia, Canada or the United Kingdom show that the design of a tool for organizing online participatory activities depends only on the needs of the contracting authority and the funds it can allocate for the project. Some platforms are simple tools focused mainly on exchanging information, generating ideas and commenting on them. Others act as simulators and, in addition to collecting information, also show users the likely consequences of their proposed decisions (Maczak, 2015, p. 241).

E-consultation is an increasingly popular form of participation, carried out online and/or by email. One example of an electronic tool for conducting consultations are special consultation platforms (e.g. the Warsaw Consultation Platform, www.konsultacje.um.warszawa.pl). Another solution for collecting feedback from residents are internet applications, combined with smartphone apps, which allow the reporting of minor problems in public spaces to the city administration (e.g. uneven sidewalks, potholes in roads, illegally dumped waste) and the informing of residents about the progress of repair works (e.g. SeeClickFix.com, <https://www.fixmystreet.com>, dost//www.fixmystr) (Podgórnjak-Krzykacz, 2016, p. 38).

E-petitions are one example of dialogue initiated by individuals. *Gopetition.com* is one of the internationally recognized websites of this kind, operating in 75 countries. The most popular one in Poland is *petycje.pl*. By analyzing the type of addressee or the title of the e-petition, one can conclude that such petitions are most often addressed to local government authorities, central administration, companies, private individuals and the media. This shows that local communities are increasingly interested in conducting civic dialogue using ICT (Kuć-Czajkowska, 2014, p. 119).

The methods of direct engagement of citizens in the processes of planning and providing public services are also important. One of the basic forms of electronic participation is participatory budgeting. It is not merely a tool for electronic voting or electronic consultations, but also one for electronic engagement or control. It can be used not only for the online presentation of information about consultations on participatory budgets,

but also for posting training materials (including multimedia), accepting online budget proposals and, finally, for setting up separate websites devoted exclusively to a given initiative, with online voting as an additional feature. As a result, participatory budgeting itself is a form of public consultation, helping citizens to become involved in the life of the local community and contribute to its development, and to monitor budget execution in qualitative and quantitative terms.

The involvement of the NGO sector is particularly noteworthy. It has resulted in the creation of *Naprawmy to* (Let's fix it), an internet portal enabling local communities to report problems in public spaces to the local government responsible (Kuć-Czajkowska, 2014, p. 121).

It should be noted that institutional solutions introduced in Poland are clearly aimed at facilitating citizens' access to public information via the internet, thus enabling them to co-decide on policy directions. The internet is mainly used for information and educational activities (Nowina Konopka, 2008, p. 24).

Despite the attractive appeal and rapid development of e-participation and its tools, the notion does raise certain concerns. First of all, the ambitions for fundamental changes in public management which were to be ushered in by the use of ICT tools turned out to be unrealistic. Meijer et al. identify three key factors that have had an impact on the implementation of e-participation: leadership (including, in particular, new leadership, which means moving away from traditional bureaucratic roles); incentives for citizens to take advantage of new tools and opportunities; and the trust necessary for citizens to speak freely about their preferences, opinions and identities in a manner and to an extent that is comfortable for them (Matczak, 2015, p. 246).

However, as Nodżak puts it, examples of using electronic forms of participation borrowed from administrative practice also show that the use of modern technologies does not guarantee an increased interest on the part of individuals (citizens) in public matters. A closer look at the practical use of tools such as local government websites and the e-consultations available on those websites clearly shows that the number of passive users (not to mention the active ones) of such solutions is rather unimpressive (Nodżak, 2017, p. 360).

It seems, however, that the present situation could change if citizens themselves start interacting more often and more actively with their representatives. The level of political participation depends on many factors: (1) citizens' awareness and level of civic education. Active participation increases citizens' knowledge about the functioning of local authorities, including their capabilities and constraints. (2) Citizens' actual control over the authorities. Increased interest of citizens results in greater transparency of public finances, which leads to more efficient control and less risk of problems such as corruption. (3) The opportunity to decide on changes in the public spaces results in an increased sense of co-responsibility for those spaces. (4) Creating additional opportunities for the exchange of ideas between the authorities and citizens. (5) Increased trust of the community towards local authorities. Greater civic awareness, knowledge about the functioning of the public sphere and transparency of local government activities have a positive impact on the authorities' image among residents (Krześ, 2014, p. 102).

The above arguments clearly speak in favor of introducing new forms of citizen participation. It can therefore be concluded that the implementation of these instruments on a wider scale depends on whether or not the public can be more effectively informed

about their rights, and on whether local authorities themselves can change their attitude; currently they are largely reluctant towards new forms of citizen participation, as they are aware that their work will be assessed and monitored more closely. For many public sector bodies, the new approach is just another statutory obligation that needs to be carried out, apparently without any associated benefits. The problem of cohesion, i.e. the creation of a solution enabling true citizen engagement, has been viewed as a threat. Last but not least, it is necessary to ensure commitment by adapting political processes to the opportunities offered to citizens by the new solutions (Porębski, 2001, p. 15).

Ways of increasing citizen participation in the life of the local community should be sought first of all in unrestricted access to public information, introduction of electronic public consultations concerning the activities of local government institutions or assessment of the performance of public bodies and their officers. The same goes for the wider use of direct democracy mechanisms (consultations, referenda) in cases involving the most controversial projects. This creates an opportunity to build trust in public authorities, which can in this way demonstrate that the needs and well-being of their communities truly matter. As a result of this, local and regional democracy could develop and grow stronger (Grosse, 2008, p. 150).

Conclusions

In conclusion, it should be stated that modern electronic methods do not always bring measurable benefits or the intended results. There are many people who do not use new technologies, internet users often do not believe that they can actually make a change, and the culture of online dialogue can often contravene acceptable standards of decency. Therefore, ICT tools alone are insufficient, and it is necessary to combine them with offline tools, with conversations in the real world.

On the other hand, information technologies influence democratic processes by complementing, accelerating and streamlining three different types of activities: communication, involvement in political debate and participation in political decision making. As a result, the interactivity of e-tools which strengthen participatory processes must always be adapted to the context and environment in which they are intended to be used and to the objective to be achieved.

It needs to be emphasized that it is too early to clearly assess the impact of the internet on democracy. On the one hand, communication technologies eliminate space and time constraints, but do not necessarily overcome political barriers. On the other hand, due to technical difficulties and mindset limitations, the technological (information) revolution will take many years to complete.

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Wpływ nowych technologii na modele partycypacji obywatelskiej

Streszczenie

Rozwój nowych technologii umożliwia zdecentralizowanie i swobodę w komunikowaniu się wielkich mas ludzi, przyczynia się do nierealnego wcześniej przewyższania barier. Postępujący rozwój technologii informacyjnych powoduje, iż człowiek może stać się uczestnikiem życia politycznego. W dzisiejszym świecie wykorzystanie e-narzędzi staje się sposobem dostosowania demokracji do potrzeb współczesnych państw oraz wzmocnienia społeczeństwa obywatelskiego. Celem niniejszego tekstu jest odpowiedź na pytania o istotę technologii informacyjnych oraz o formy zaangażowania obywatelskiego za pośrednictwem elektronicznych form partycypacji. Autorka szuka odpowiedzi na pytania: Jak ICT wpływają na procesy polityczne? W jaki sposób systemy komunikacji elektronicznej tworzą warunki do politycznego zaangażowania obywateli? Czy zastosowanie technologii informacyjnych może mieć realny wpływ na formy partycypacji?

Słowa kluczowe: e-partycypacja, technologie informacyjne, demokracja elektroniczna, e-narzędzia

