

DEMOS: Democratic evaluation of multiple options in society

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Abstract

The deepening of democracy and enlargement of citizens' participation in the decision-making process theoretically is, and always has been, on the agenda of all individual countries and associations of nations such as the European Union and the United Nations organizations. The emergence of the information society and its very rapid globalization potentially affects all forms of human activity. The debate on the possible threat posed by the global information society to human rights, and the potential advent of hyperpowerful governments, is counterbalanced by proposals for genuine use of the technology to bring decision-makers and citizens closer, and to allow the latter to influence decisions.

This paper discusses concepts of direct *versus* indirect democracy, without entering into a formal comparison, and some potential advantages of more direct democracy at a local level. It proposes the exploitation of commonly available tools of the global information society to introduce new forms of democratic consultation with a view to facilitating the evaluation, by citizens themselves, of the options presented and allowing them to influence decision-making.

The DEMOS model proposed, is based on exploitation of information highways, particularly the Internet, for obtaining direct participation in debates of citizens and their representative groups.

It is inspired by the momentum of the European Scenario Workshops Initiative (EC DG XIII-Innovation programme) and proposes a two-way channel using the information highways and covering all the stages of decision-making: from concepts, to action plans and reform proposals' approvals by the citizens, up to formal voting. Emphasis is given to the implementation at local/community level as an emanation of the ancient Greek *demos* (the assembly of the citizens).

The proposed environment is presently under experimentation, in synergy with other pilot implementations for digital cities, at a European level.

INTRODUCTION

Democracy, from the Greek *demos* (people) and *kratos* (power) is considered to be an archetype for governing people in a state of justice. Nowadays, worldwide, there is a growing wave of dissatisfaction and indifference among laypeople, expressed mostly as abstinence from political actions and from voting, in practically all western countries. In ancient Greece, democracy was direct with citizens empowered (a notable limitation) participating in the decision-making process in the *agora* (market).

The present *indirect* or *representative* democratic system, however, was considered to be the best way to approach this ideal a century ago. Representative democracy was founded and developed mainly because of the existence of political and natural as well as information barriers in communicating and expressing views on a given subject at a certain time. In such systems, democracy is more susceptible to the danger of strong lobbies, persuasion, and even blackmail because many people do not have enough influence in the political decision-making process regardless of whether the system is open to all. Decisions are made by very few people (politicians and their advisers) who do not very often consult and communicate with their electoral bases except during electoral campaigns.

The democratic character of political discourse is a matter for discussion. It is believed, not without foundation, that in many cases it is controlled by elite institutions, most conspicuously political campaigns and the political media that select what messages to disseminate via limited resources of editorial space and time. This massive level of control is not a foregone conclusion.

To ensure that political discourse is democratic, a change in the political media is needed. This change refers to the agenda-setting function of the political media, whereby those who control the distribution of information set the course of the debate. In setting the course of debate, the political media perpetuates a top-down model of political discourse, in which those at the top of the information business hold control over the information provided to the public for discussion (Dutton, 1990).

The only way to promote a system where society is governed by the *people as a whole* is to abolish or to limit the powerful position of many groups in society and allow smaller groups, as well as isolated and disabled citizens, to be informed, to participate in, and to influence the decision-making process concerning all major developments in their neighbourhood, community, city, region or country. To this end, citizens should have the possibility of becoming an integral part of a system for the democratic evaluation of multiple options in society.

The issue of deeper citizens' participation in democratic decision-making has attracted a lot of attention worldwide, particularly in Europe, with the publication of several expert reports at the initiative of the European Union (European Commission, 1996a, 1996b, 1996c) and a reflection has started on improving the decision-making process through the use of information highways to abolish

traditional barriers and so as to avoid, at the same time, the creation of new barriers due to computer illiteracy.

DEMOCRACY REVISITED IN A GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY

The idea of a direct democratic system is envisaged by the electronic democracy concept allowing the creation of a new, virtual agora, with open, free, and extensive discussions, and with a view to making optimal decisions regarding local society.

The aim of this revisiting of concepts is not to compare direct *versus* indirect democracy as systems in order to substitute for existing systems of government, but to propose alternative ways to improve the present situation using a step-by-step approach. However, in experimenting with issues such as these, one has to take into account two major concerns and propose measures for solving them, that is, how to benefit from the strengths of direct forms of democracy while limiting their weaknesses and, if more direct democracy is to be the solution in local society, how to distinguish between the simple participation of citizens in the debate and seeking their input and feedback as opposed to responsibility for the implementation of these decisions and their follow-up.

The key element in this debate is easy and free access to public information, free expression of views, extensive discussion for better understanding and, finally, approval of measures to be taken regardless of whether their implementation will be delegated to the executive power directly or whether there will be a formal vote before decisions are taken. At an early stage towards a more direct form of decision-making, it cannot be expected that electronic assemblies of citizens make fast decisions as a continuous process, but it seems more advisable to expect an adequate environment for effective and democratic decision-making. In this respect, the role of elected representatives, even if it seems *de facto* to be limited is, in reality, enlarged by taking a different dimension. Instead of being the only decision-makers, they become guarantors of the democratic process and, in a way, process arbitrators, facilitators, and managers. This might constitute an evolution of parliaments and governments.

Modern information and communications technologies (ICT) play an important role in the vision of direct democracy because they remove constraints in space and time allowing, through computer networks and user-friendly interface tools on the Internet, the opportunity of access to free debates and exchange of thoughts and ideas, and free and direct access to public information and government sources.

Technology does not only provide answers but also imposes new political questions to be answered like, for example, what kind of legal territorial principles will be created by the new electronic highway. These new political questions will also radically influence the future organization of the state. However, in order to establish a system of direct democracy, the whole present political system needs to be changed into new structures supported by infrastructures like the Internet.

A DECISION-MAKING MODEL

A possible scenario envisages the rise of a new electronic information and decision-making layer. This layer would consist of extensive exchanges of information and public electronic discussions, leading to strategic decision-making by means of public consultation and referendums. One of the major difficulties encountered, and a potential problem of direct democracy, is the necessity for theoretically all citizens to devote their permanent attention to public electronic discussions and to be aware of what is happening all the time by consulting public or personal email-based systems and databases.

In this paper a model for the Democratic Evaluation of Multiple Options in Society (DEMOS) is proposed. Its main objective is to contribute to democratic decision-making by establishing a framework for involving and educating ordinary citizens about the information society, and by demonstrating how a platform initiative for electronic democracy may be implemented starting with smaller communities, cities, and regions. The introduction of systems like DEMOS will facilitate the following:

- establishing a favourable environment for public participation;
- providing a platform, stimulating interest in electronic democracy;
- initiating and controlling the electronic democracy process by civic and social organizations themselves;
- providing better information through the development of issue-based discussions, e.g., on sustainable development, the information society;
- providing a level playing field for all candidates;
- giving citizens an opportunity to put their views on questions asked by participants in public debates and to influence decisions, mainly at local and regional levels;
- providing an open discussion forum for citizens, available 24-hours a day;
- increasing participation, and reaching young voters and citizens with specific needs (e.g., the elderly and disabled persons).

THE ACTORS

Electronic democracy represents a major step towards the implementation of the information society involving a large number of actors, such as administrations, citizens associations, social partners, and academics.

Such an initiative will have to start with an assessment of how people can make best use of the potential of new technologies, in order not only to improve communication among themselves, with their administrations and at the global level, but also to enlarge participation in decision-making processes. However, the model is based on the assumption that citizens and administrations are fully aware of the capabilities of electronic highways, and trained to use such facilities. Therefore at the first stage of experimentation and pilot implementation, we need to consider its availability as a training tool for all and to foresee that promotion and demonstration actions are addressed (Laopodis, 1996):

- local and community level administration authorities, by demonstrating the potential of information society;

- civic and societal associations and groups, by giving them the opportunity to initiate and control open discussions and debates;
- citizens, by providing an open discussion forum available 24-hours a day;
- specific social groups, such as women, young voters, and citizens with special needs (e.g., the elderly and the disabled), by increasing the opportunities for participation;
- decision-makers at different policy levels (local, regional, national, etc.), by giving them a holistic approach, for full coverage of the election process life cycle.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Changes towards more direct forms of democracy have to be approached very gradually. It has to be made clear that experiments with electronic forms of democracy are primarily *a way to participate in the discussion, not in the actual decision-making*. This is to prevent the risk of an increasing gap between citizens and government with no satisfaction of expectations raised. Direct public participation in decision-making will only be possible when its legal status is introduced.

Methodologically, an experiment, bringing people behind the electronic steering wheel (keyboard, voice recognition, etc.) should be implemented in a number of distinct stages: envisioning, designing, creating, transforming, exploiting, and finally managing.

- *envisioning* - creating belief in the new direction and vision. Envisioning is not only about opening people's minds to change, it is also about creating a vision to which the whole idea can work. The vision should identify priorities for the operations and the objectives.
- *designing* - formulating the new processes and technological background. An analysis of the existing operation is essential to the project. Such an analysis provides an accurate base line against which any desired changes in processes and technology can be measured. It ensures that the vision is practicable given the context of the local communities, and helps to prioritize the changes proposed.
- *creating* - exploring the vision and developing a practical and effective pilot that will deliver in use the new issues. The plans and designs created in the previous phase are used to build and implement the organization, procedures, information systems, and technology that will transform the local society.
- *transforming* - implementing the required organizational changes and promote the new issues through an awareness campaign and pilot usage. Heavy emphasis is placed on change management activities to smooth the transition from old to new operations. Coordination between enablers is as important as ever to synchronize the people, process, and technology aspects of the change. This phase focuses on supporting proven citizens' participatory methods and techniques such as the European Awareness Scenario Workshops.
- *exploiting* - the exploiting phase, therefore, has no clear end point. However, several activities are essential to reap the full benefits of the launch effort. The first one is aimed at securing the benefits identified during the project and is

related to providing a framework for the effort to continue improving. The second activity is tuning the local society for further use since, after any major change, a period of confusion is undergone as new relationships are forged, and system bugs are rectified. A third set of activities relates to synergy with ongoing activities and/or launching complementary activities at regional, national, and European levels.

- *managing* - to ensure the efficient time, resource and financial management of the project.

BUILDING UPON THE EUROPEAN AWARENESS SCENARIO WORKSHOPS

The European Awareness Scenario Workshops (EASW) initiative launched in 1994 in the framework of the EC VALUE II Interfaces programme (presently Innovation) is the result of number of interrelated activities undertaken at European level to enhance the interface between Science-Technology-Society (European Commission, 1994, 1996d; Interfaces, 1994, 1995).

It is based on the *scenario workshop* methodology developed in Denmark (DBT, 1993; Bilderbeek, *et al.*, 1994) to deal with the problem of formulating visions and recommendations for attaining *sustainable urban living in the coming decades* in different cities. This methodology revisited served as a platform for facilitating the participation of societal groups in information society-related development (Andersen, *et al.*, 1995; Laopodis and Fernandez, 1995, 1996).

This approach allows for the participation of all interested members of the public organized into four role-groups of participants: *local policy-makers, technology experts* in the field, *residents* and groups of citizens, selected after advertisement in local radios and press, *private sector/investors* representatives in the local or regional business community so that they can conduct an ideological debate within and between groups, in the early stages of the development of technology. The skills and experience of participants allow for contributions but the process does not privilege knowledge as an instrument of control. This way participants carry out assessments and develop visions and proposals for technological needs and possibilities. Through this process, the general public or appropriate public interest groups can have an influence on the direction or application of technology and ensures that policy-makers and research and technology development managers are aware of new demands from technology.

With the support of a facilitator (national monitors and several project advisers were added to the European version), the debate is organized around *four alternative scenarios* for the development, representing ideologically very different paths. The result of the process is a set of recommendations and a *vision* statement describing a commonly agreed path of sustainable development for the community, and a (or even *the*) means for successfully achieving that goal.

Laopodis and Fernandez and others have further developed this discussion on the role of citizens in the global information society (Andersen, *et al.*, 1995; Laopodis and Fernandez, 1996) by exploring case studies/scenarios on provision of ICT services for citizens in the local community, flexibility and integration of

working and family life through teleworking and, finally, quality of life for elderly people in the information society.

This model of awareness raising for citizens in the global information society could be successfully used for experimenting with the introduction of electronic democracy in different communities. Several pilot projects emanating from research and technology development programmes such as Esprit have already demonstrated their potential value at a European level. Systems such as Municipality Voyager-Iperbole, Citycard, Web for groups, and so on (Omega Generation, 1996), are considered to include characteristics of the DEMOS proposal and are being adapted to local requirements.

THE DEMOS MODEL

Democratic Evaluation of Multiple Options in Society (DEMOS) is a proposal for a model improving direct electronic democracy. It relies on the simple concept of integrating publicly available information, local governments, and citizens in an interactive system with simple rules that offer transparency. Information and data regarding decisions to be taken can be generated for, by, and communicated to and from:

- i) individual citizens (and citizens' groups) in the form of requests, expression of needs, discussions, opinions, preferences, amendments and, finally, acceptance through a voting mechanism;
- ii) government structures of any kind, i.e., local, peripheral (region, county, city) and central (national, supranational) in the form of both informal and formal invitations to express opinions, preferences, as well as proposals, announcements of intentions, alternative options and major choices, as well as dissemination of public information and decisions;
- iii) representative structures such as municipal, regional, national, supranational parliaments with decision-making power or, in the future, with a facilitator of the process role.

Reflecting the above structure, the DEMOS model consists of the following components (Figure 1, Figure 2).

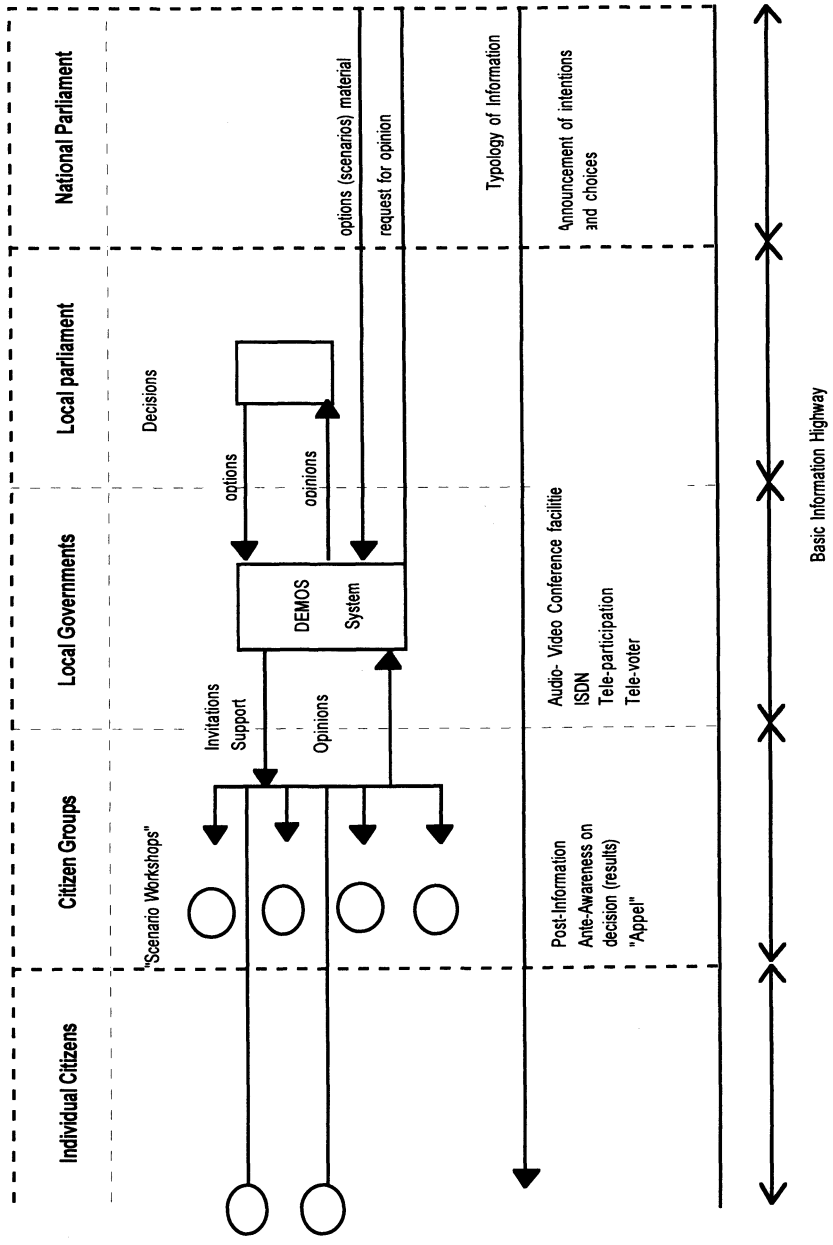
Central Information Repository

This repository, which has to be operated under the responsibility of the formal institution itself (government, parliament, etc.), must contain up-to-date information on every institutional initiative or decision made, in non-bureaucratic language that is easy to understand for ordinary citizens, and is made accessible through telecommunications means and networks such as the Internet. However, in addition to other facilities, basic services have to be assured as a minimum by a normal phone (though a help desk) to unconnected citizens, and special care should be taken about informing elderly and disabled people by providing adapted means (voice, text, etc.).

Basic Information Highway

An Internet-based facility with full email, browsing capabilities, etc., constitutes the communications carrier.

Fig. 1 : The DEMOS Model



Workshop Function

This function consists of a number of support services, electronic or human-based, such as the following facilities which are primarily community-operated and inspired by the European Awareness Scenario Workshops initiative.

Audio and video-conference facilities

These facilities allow the organization and setting-up of virtual citizens' assemblies of any kind, according to their needs, using traditional and advanced telecommunications technology.

Awareness Scenario Workshops Module

- scenario development project teams;
- scenario teleworkshops;
- awareness raising.

This module is the human heart of the system playing a multiple role:

- Scenario development project team: a multidisciplinary team of experts who develop scenarios for multiple options for society voluntarily or on request on hot issues involving political or technological options.
- Organizers of real and virtual scenario workshops: they develop the material, tools etc., to organize the debate, so that it is not restricted to selected groups but allows the teleparticipation of every aware citizen.
- Promotion/awareness and training: promotes the concept to citizens and decision-makers to allow for larger acceptance.

Citizens' Help Desk

A 24-hour, electronically accessible, help desk to answer any queries related to the basics and the use of the system.

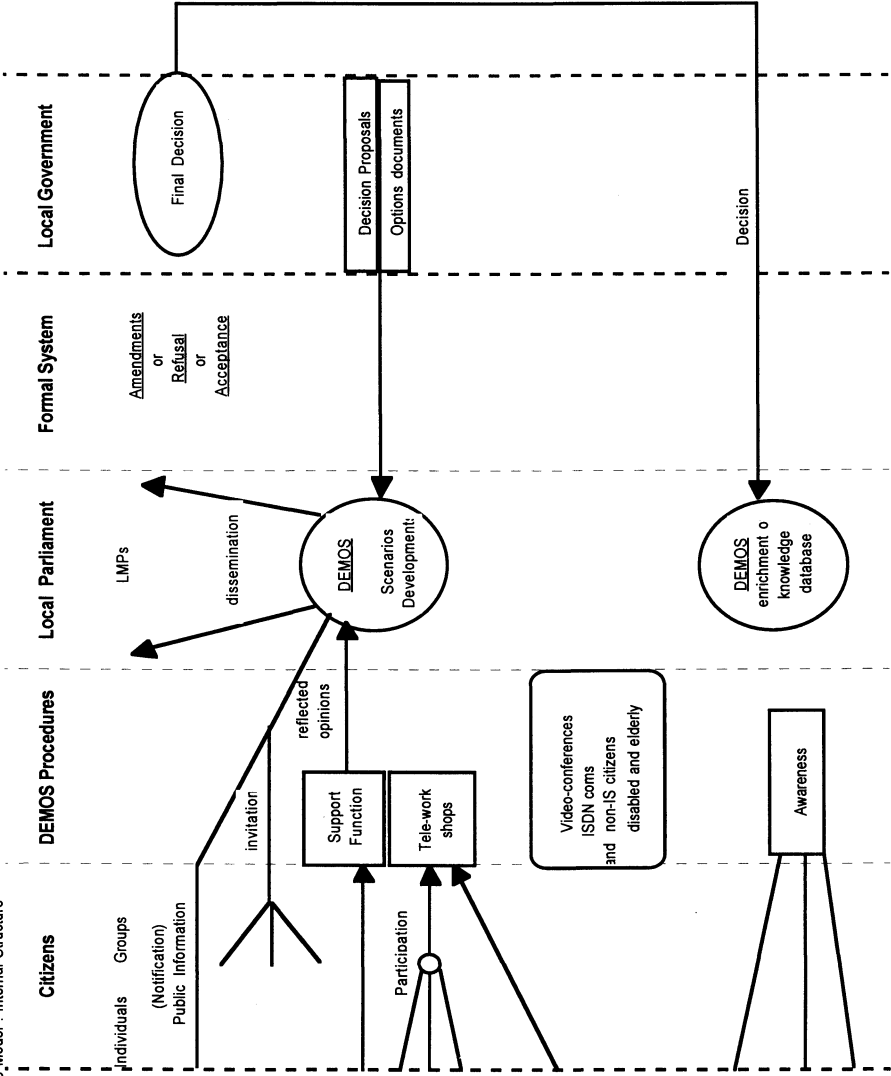
Information/Data Typology

Classification and categorization of documents and standardized messages to allow secure and unambiguous circulation of virtual and real documents.

The EASW can be used as a tool both for promoting the concept and for improving citizens' participation in this democratic debate. This methodology offers a discussion forum where citizens, technological experts, local authorities, and the private sector can confront ideas and launch a discussion which can be followed by electronically-supported stages to avoid physically mobilizing many people. In addition, a scenario development mechanism should be established to offer governments, parliamentarians, and citizens' groups the possibility of disseminating controversial aspects of the same issue and trigger citizens' reactions. For both these activities a *teleworkshop support function* is needed using videoconference facilities in different places.

This mechanism should be composed of a citizens' knowledge database as part of a more substantial information kiosk for electronic democracy where all decisions are adequately registered and can be easily accessed by interested people.

Fig. 2 : The DEMOS Model : Internal Structure



CONCLUSIONS

Enhancing citizens' participation in democratic decision-making in all matters of everyday life is a necessity but also a challenge especially in view of a global information society.

Initiatives such as the European Awareness Scenario Workshops (EASW) of the European Commission (DG XIII.D) have been launched during the last years to promote the concept of citizens' participation in a democratic debate for evaluation of options in relation with technological developments involving local communities and active citizens' groups. On the other hand, several experiments are being developed that aim at new forms of citizens' involvement using ICT (Omega Generation, 1996).

The model DEMOS proposed in this paper explores a means of offering the global information society so as to move this reflection towards a higher step, i.e., the gradual promotion of a direct electronic democratic system allowing societies to be governed by the people as a whole and not by isolated representatives' schemes quite apart from the citizens.

DEMOS uses the EASW methodology and its tools for awareness purposes and proposes a number of functions at the service of citizens at the local level in order to express their views, formulate proposals, forward opinions, and accept or reject governmental initiatives through an electronically-based system of expression of opinion and voting.

On the other hand, DEMOS allows governments at different levels to inform citizens about initiatives and proposals, to establish an interactive dialogue and, finally, to make decisions with (almost) all citizens involved. In such a system, representatives change their roles to arbitrators and guarantors of the process.

The DEMOS Model is under further study leading to an experimental implementation involving a consortium of citizens' groups, local governments, ICT companies, and universities.

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