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## **"Reinforcing eDemocracy"**

*Check Against Delivery  
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi  
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

eDemocracy Seminar

**Brussels, 12 February 2004**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

## **1. Welcome**

I am pleased to participate today in this seminar on eDemocracy. I would like to thank our speakers for their willingness to come here to highlight the issues and opportunities of ICT for sustaining and strengthening democracy.

The objective of this seminar is to take stock of eDemocracy experiments, to exchange views on results achieved and challenges, and to learn for future research in a dialogue of researchers, policy makers and practitioners. The seminar is a follow-up of last year's eGovernment Communication.

It is encouraging that there is such a great interest, so much even that registration had to be closed already two weeks ago.

## **2. Experience**

Information and communication technology and especially the Internet are a great tool to make governments more open and transparent. It empowers citizens. eGovernment can make governments more relevant to citizens by increasing participation and involvement in decision-making.

It can help restore ownership: the government is of the people. It also increases accountability. ICT makes it possible to follow all administrative steps in formulating and enacting law.

Prof. Manuel Castells said it this way: "the Internet can be used by citizens to watch their governments - rather than by governments to watch their citizens".

As a member of the European Commission, I have the opportunity to see the impact ICT is having on our democratic processes and how citizens and business have directly impacted decision-making.

During last year's development of the new legislation for chemicals we implemented an internet enabled consultation period. By the time the consultation closed on 10 July 2003, we had received 6500 contributions by mail, fax and via our Interactive Policy Making web tool.

All responses were published on a Commission website. So each citizen knows which organisation, company or individual has pushed for which amendments. This was a high point in our Internet enabled government within the Commission to date.

The responses were analyzed over the summer time. Thanks to the consultation we discovered that the legislation had a flaw indeed, one that would have increased costs by several billions of Euros, in particular for smaller companies. The online consultation supported the inclusion of public and industry's opinion on the final form of the legislation.

This way of open consultation over the Internet of a draft law has an analogy with open source software development. The open source community is based on open online critical scrutiny and dialogue to find flaws in a piece of software - they call it bugs. By analogy we have last year been debugging the chemicals legislation.

For the Commission services involved, it was a hard task to analyse the contributions. The sheer volume, variety of opinions and time constraints were a real challenge. We thus also have some first hand experience with the challenges of openness, transparency, personalisation, inclusion, and efficiency.

In another example, the Greek Presidency of the Council of Ministers ran during the first half of 2003 the successful eVote website, where a public debate was held and opinions are being polled on all kind of matters, from Iraq to drugs policy to the future of the EU. They had over 150,000 submissions in multiple languages.

In both examples transparency and openness were increased. Online transparency and openness increase accountability and thereby strengthen the essential norms and values underpinning democracy.

### **3. Mobilization/NGOs**

As also observed by Prof Castells, the initial use of ICT in the field of democracy has been driven in many instances by non-governmental organisations. NGOs allow the consolidating of disparate groups across wide distances. Through ICT, citizens or groups with limited resources, can mobilise thousands of like-minded individuals behind a cause.

Impacting the democratic processes was sometimes thought to require significant financial resources, political clout and in-depth knowledge of process and procedures. Innovative use of collaborative ICT has been one the most effective tools to lower the entry barriers to influencing politics and empowering the citizen.

The proliferation of NGOs and their effective use of ICT has had an egalitarian influence on politics and permitted issue-specific and non-partisan engagement. They contributed to restoring ownership of the political process to the people. This raised awareness of the possibilities of ICT in all democracies.

### **4. Voting/Polling and Models of Democratic Participation**

In Europe, we have several models of democratic participation, including representative and delegate democracy.

In representative democracy, delegates are usually elected on a broad agenda, often working in coalitions. They may pose direct questions to the populous via referenda.

In delegate democracy, politicians are elected for a specific of time period based on an explicit programme, during which there would seldom be additional polling .

Each approach is based on tradition. Each model and combination has different requirements for voting and polling, and each has its specific costs.

For reference, the annual cost of maintaining a traditional electoral register across a country of around 50 million people is about €75 million, while the actual running costs can vary from €20 and 185 million<sup>1</sup>. Each vote costs a minimum of 75 cents<sup>2</sup>.

Generally, electoral commissions are challenged to improve efficiency, productivity and the quality of their services.

However, to date electronic, mobile and internet voting solutions remain expensive compared to traditional methods. This is mostly due to immature technology and one-off infrastructure set-up costs.

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<sup>1</sup> See estimates, "Funding Democracy: Providing Cost-effective electoral services" September 2002. Electoral Commission, Trevelyan House, 30 Great Peter Street, London, Sw1P 2HW (Page 10, 2.1).

<sup>2</sup> See Rafeel Lopez-Pintor, "Electoral Management Bodies as institutions of Governance", UN Development Programme, Sept 2000 as quoted above.

Nevertheless, as we develop better technological solutions, eVoting may become financially more attractive than traditional methods. This would allow referenda to be more widely used than at present. But we will be faced with many constitutional challenges.

## **5. Role of Politicians**

A “culture of consultation” in ministries and committees needs new skills and roles for civil servants, new technologies and new ways of organizing the processes of rule-making in public administrations.

It has been argued by Prof Snellen<sup>3</sup> and others that ICT creates new responsibilities and roles for civil servants. They need to ensure high-quality information and analysis within properly organised novel forms of democratic involvement and in a new relationship to politicians.

The management of multiple and conflicting democratic “expressions of will” in ever larger numbers is complex and demands innovative solutions. Currently, bombarding a minister with email is more likely to crash a server than change proposed legislation. This has to change.

We need to develop context-aware summarising tools to mine huge volumes of contradictory data in natural language. Otherwise increased democratic expression will have little impact, undermining the democratic contract. Automatic analysis of the data would allow more accurate assessment of opinions and likely prompt less generic responses.

Knowledge management and workflow systems that allow the monitoring of all steps - from first reading to assent - will benefit all.

The workload of politicians and administrators becomes both more organised and more transparent. It makes visible where and when decisions are prepared, deliberated and by whom.

Consider how Europe’s lead in GSM and 3G technology could be combined with workflow tools to provide issue-alerts to interested parties and live web-casting of hearings and committees to PCs or PDAs. This is the area of research yet uncharted.

## **6. Advancing eDemocracy and eGovernment**

All European countries have been developing eGovernment plans and strategies over the past years. Much progress has been made. Several Member States are in the world top league.

Last year’s eGovernment Communication called for political commitment and set out a roadmap to accelerate eGovernment implementation and innovation.

The EU has so far supported some 20 innovative eDemocracy projects in the Information Society Technologies programme with over 30 million Euro on voting and participation solutions.

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<sup>3</sup> Ignace Snellen, Oxford University and Erasmus University, “Towards Democracy without Politics” (Vision Book, Directorate-General Information Society, 2004) and “ICTs and the Future of Democracy” in International Journal of Communications Law and Policy, Winter 2000/2001.

During the next two days you will have a chance to hear about a few of these – TrueVote, CyberVote, Webocracy, ePoll and ePower, involving partners from eleven countries.

Overcoming “the democratic deficit” requires practical groundwork, starting small with innovations, learning from experience, sharing of best practice and finding scalable solutions. We need better benchmarks to keep checking the pulse of progress and prepare solid research agendas for the future. Today is a starting point.

## **7. Conclusion**

In conclusion, “eDemocracy” is about reinforcing consultation and democracy. The aims remain the same, only the methods for achieving the aims are altered and enhanced.

Introducing ICT to strengthen our democracies will only be successful if we also overcome resistance to new forms of administrative organisation, and improve skills in institutions and administrations.

ICT can facilitate the exchange of ideas and increase participation in the decision-making process. Policy formulation requires better understanding complex and charged issues, for which ICT offers a new means. Those who previously felt disenfranchised by remote and complex systems now have a means to directly influence the decision-making.

This afternoon and tomorrow, many views and visions will be presented, some of which highly contrasting. This is excellent for the advancement of eGovernment in Europe. Best practices will also be shown that demonstrate that ICT is a powerful means to sustain a vibrant modern democracy in the 21st century.

Let me thank you for attending this event and let me wish all participants a very fruitful event.