

Final Declaration of the 11th Conference of the International Observatory for Participatory Democracy (OIDP): "New Technologies and Civic Participation. Civil Society and Instruments of Communication"

We find ourselves at a passionate moment in the history of humanity, marked by the consequences of technological progress in terms of the social, political, economic and ecological organisation of a world which is becoming increasingly more global.

The implementation of new information and communication technologies, by exponentially multiplying the possibilities that we have to communicate with each other and to circulate information, has resulted in momentous changes in all areas of our lives, including the political, understood in the Aristotelian sense of defining man (although we should say and woman too) as by nature a "social animal".

The social, political and academic question that is raised by the new technologies and citizens' participation, or what is conceptually the same thing, between the new technologies and democracy, embraces multiple combinations of theoretical and practical analysis.

At this, our eleventh, International Conference, we have had the privilege to be able to discuss, debate and reflect on all of these aspects. Concepts such as eAdministration, eParticipation and eDemocracy have, among others, led us to an in depth reflection on the complexity of modern social communications relationships between humans, promoted by the increasingly more generalised implementation of ICT.

Having now come to the end of the Conference, our aim is not to theorise about what Citizens' Participation is, this being a concept that has been extensively debated and defined in previous congresses, but rather to explore what Citizens' Participation models are possible in the 21st century, on the basis of the possibilities offered by a technology that is in constant evolution.

From the perspective of governmental administration there is a certain inertia with regard to seeing Citizens' Participation from a "decidedly ethnocentric" point of view, given that it is frequently conceived as a bidirectional flow between two parties, the administration and the citizens.

This conception, which *a priori* has a highly positive value, does not define, or even come close to defining, the whole of the immense potential that is implicit to the concept of participation associated with the technical possibilities of the web 2.0 and the social dynamics are associated therewith. This new context will make it possible to overcome basically bidirectional or radial relations and open up a new reality of relations to people, associations and institutions based on the idea of a network, i.e. between citizens and administration and vice versa, but also among the citizens themselves, organised in all manner of associations and diverse, plural and multi-thematic social networks, which are the basis of the gestation of what, in sociological terms, is known as "the collective intelligence", which is the result of an easy, rapid and constant fluctuation of opinions, ideas, experiences and actions that are indispensable for the creation of new knowledge.

Despite the positive aspects of the application of new technologies in the development of society such as, for example, favouring communication and dialogue between the administration and citizens, it must be noted that they also present risk factors that could place the cohesion of society in danger, should access to the new technologies not be universal and should the possibility of accessing them not be available to all.

In this sense, we can note that, in the midst of this digital era, part of the population does not have the necessary resources to use these types of tools and, socially speaking, finds itself immersed in what is known as the "digital divide". As a result, the idea of the collectiveness of ICT is not, at the present time, a plausible one, given that part of the population continues to be excluded.

And so, it is the responsibility of public administrations to implement such technical and training resources as may be needed to ensure the functional competence of their citizens as a whole in the use of ICT.

As a consequence, we must not forget how the administrations use these tools, and to what ends.

There are two major paradigms with regard to how ICT are being implemented within the political management model:

Firstly, starting at the end of the 20th century, the modernisation of traditional government was considered through the application of new technologies, solely as a resource to make it more responsive, transparent, flexible and efficient, and to make it less hierarchical. However, sticking to this model merely represented a simple substitution of conventional bureaucracy for a bureaucracy that was electronic, when the original aim had been to eliminate bureaucracy altogether.

The second paradigm expresses, in a more faithful manner, the opinions that we have heard during this eleventh Conference: defending the fact that, for a true change to occur in terms of Citizens' Participation in network –interconnected and accessible– it will be necessary to go beyond the initial idea and to consider the possibility of a democratic model that is more transversal and deliberative, and one that is based on democratic participation.

And this means that we must move towards a distinct system of government, one that will bring with it a change of roles on the part of the public powers in relation to the way in which their decisions are made, and will assist in the resolution of a number of the deficiencies of representative democracies, transforming their political culture into a culture that is civic and innovative.

Following this path will provide us with an opportunity to try and resolve the indifference, the lack of confidence and the fear that many citizens feel with regard to politics, insofar as it will pave the way for new mechanisms and channels of contact, more dynamic, personalised and closer, with their political representatives.

In this way, and by making use of tools, such as the new virtual platforms, a contribution will be made to political and ethical regeneration and an expansion of participatory democracy, coordinated –above all- by local entities, "key points of proximity".

Finally, a reflection addressed to public administrations, in the sense of not forgetting that eParticipation does not present a conflict with

the maintenance of the forms of “presencial” participation, in fact exactly the opposite is the case. We must make sure that the implementation of new technologies does not result in a deterioration of our traditional social networks, based on personal ties.

We must preserve the humanist spirit, according to which a democratic society needs to be based on the culture of dialogue and that dialogue between people has an added value that is greater than the mere exchange of information by means of data transmission.

And so, this final declaration is fruit of the production of knowledge, generated over these three intense days, thanks to the interventions of the speakers, participants, chairs, organisers and all of the people that, as a result, have provided this event, of such significance to the global society of our times, with their input. To all of those who have participated, many thanks for your contribution.

Lleida, 8th April 2011