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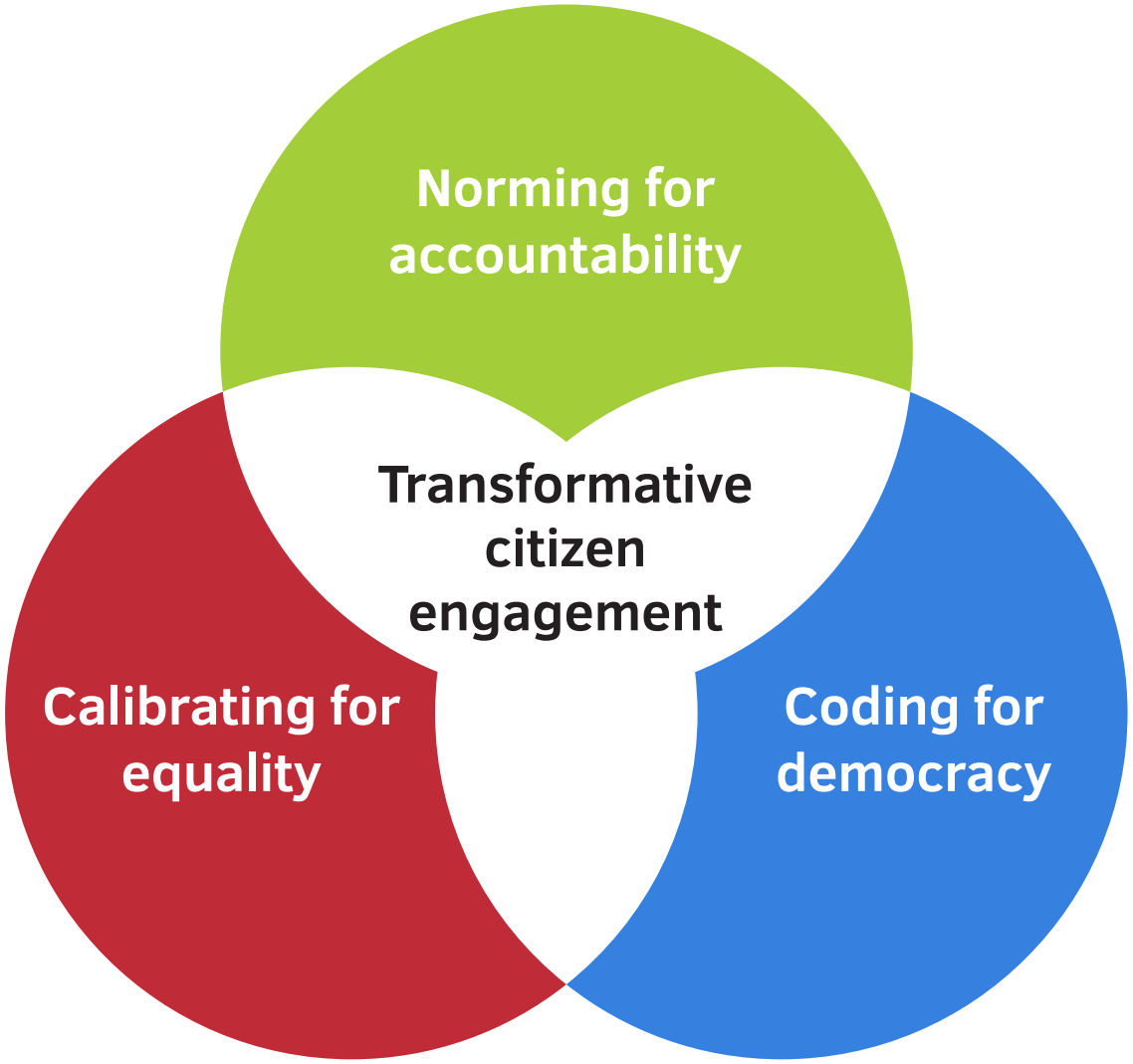
MAKING ALL VOICES COUNT

A GRAND CHALLENGE FOR DEVELOPMENT

RESEARCH REPORT SUMMARY

Voice or chatter? Making ICTs work for transformative citizen engagement



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IT for Change

Participation in everyday democracy

Digital technologies have enabled the emergence of translocal publics, facilitated horizontal and de-territorialised communication, and catalysed rhizomatic forms of political action. While substantial scholarship exists on the role of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in triggering moments of political disruption and cascading upheavals, academic interest in 'slow change' – institutional transformation in the deep processes of democratic governance – has been relatively muted.

This study attempts to fill this gap. It is inspired by the idea of participation in everyday democracy and seeks to explore how ICT-mediated citizen engagement[1] can promote democratic governance and amplify citizen voice.[2]

The research sought to answer four questions:

- How do institutional norms become implicated in the situated practices of governance and citizenship?
- How do institutional structures of democratic governance shape and construct shared meanings and visions of ICT-mediated citizen engagement?
- How does techno-design produce and shape citizen engagement?
- How do citizen-end practices of technology remake digital democracy?

The study involved empirical explorations of citizen engagement initiatives in eight sites: one in Africa (South Africa), two in Asia (India and Philippines), two in Europe (Netherlands and Spain) and three in South America (Brazil, Colombia and Uruguay).[3]

Table 1 Country case studies

Country	Case study
Brazil	ICT platforms used in public consultation processes for the *Marco Civil da Internet* and copyright law reform
Colombia	*Urna De Cristal* platform, a space for sharing information, voicing grievance and e-consultation
India	*Rajasthan Sampark*, a grievance redress portal developed by the state government of Rajasthan
Netherlands	*Ons Geld*, a citizen initiative that mobilised public opinion to lobby for a shift in monetary policy
The Philippines	Open Data portal, created by the Government of the Philippines
South Africa	A participatory mapping initiative for informal traders in eThekwini Municipality, Durban
Spain	The Barcelona Municipal Action Plan (2016–2019), co-created through the *Decidim Barcelona* citizen engagement platform
Uruguay	Open Government National Action Plan, consultations that have combined offline and ICT-mediated strategies for citizen engagement

1 ICT-mediated citizen engagement is defined by this study as comprising digitally-mediated information outreach, dialogue, consultation, collaboration and decision-making, initiated either by government or by citizens towards greater government accountability and responsiveness.

2 To do this, the study used the theory of structuration, developed by Anthony Giddens. The central premise of the theory is that individual actions, interactions and the social system are reciprocally active and not independent of each other. It also borrows from Parvez's work on e-democracy and the "double structuration loop" approach. See Giddens, A. (1984) *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, Berkeley: University of California Press; Parvez, Z. (2006) 'Examining e-democracy through a double structuration loop', *Electronic Government, an International Journal* 3.3: 329–346.

3 Case studies for this research project were undertaken by Mariana Giorgetti Valente, Beatriz Kira and Juliana Ruiz (Brazil), Sebastian Berrío-Gil and Cristian Berrío-Zapata (Colombia), Deepti Bharthur (India), Delia Dumitrica (Netherlands), Gabriel Baleos, Lisa Garcia and Jessamine Joyce Pacis (Philippines), Kathleen Diga (South Africa), Ismael Peña-Lopez (Spain), Javier Landinelli and Ana Rivoir (Uruguay). For research briefs of the case studies referenced in this summary, see http://itforchange.net/mavc/issue-papers-briefs/

So, what does the research suggest for transformative citizenship?

We found that in all contexts, states have been keen to deploy ICTs for citizen engagement, in order to create and leverage political capital. Ideas of transparency and openness have become privileged norms. Often, techno-solutionist ideologies form an aspirational paradigm for governance, packaged with global-level neoliberal influences that shape national and sub-national visions and actions.

Simultaneously, the meaning of citizen participation is being rearticulated. Imaginaries of the 'responsible citizen' and the contributing citizen volunteer are finding a place in national policy documents. Citizen participation is also acquiring other meanings, thanks to digitally-mediated networks and alliances that democratise civic action and civil society, reshaping claim-making processes.

The intertwining structures of democracy and technology unfold differently in each context. While positive consequences for citizenship are evident in this flux, these depend on particular historical conjunctures. The digital promise coincides with a trust deficit being experienced by citizens the world over, as many democratic institutions fail. This deficit can potentially deepen, if governments do not go beyond the rhetoric in their e-participation endeavour. As states and their legal–policy institutions, especially in developing countries, are mostly in a catch-up mode, techno-structures and their default rules seem to shape the boundaries of citizen participation.

Findings and conclusions

Voice without agency

The core value of political equality is what makes participation in a democracy vital and transformative. However, our research shows that digitally mediated citizen engagement practices do not always derive from the idea of equal citizenship. Idiosyncrasies of political regimes shape the operational scope of projects, often encoding inclusion and equality as voice without agency. For instance, while the *Marco Civil* e-consultations in Brazil were rich in deliberation, process outcomes were finally shaped by political actors and lobbies. Online engagement in the case of *Rajasthan Sampark* in India was a one way street; the platform was a veritable black box until grassroots social movements argued and pressed for a design that was more accountable. The historical–political climate in countries like Colombia reproduces polemics that transpose old political rivalries onto online interactions, discouraging free expression and engagement.

Rise of echo chambers

The expansion of communication networks and proliferation of social media has democratised political expression and civic association, but narrowed exposure to oppositional viewpoints, owing to the polarising echo chambers of digitally mediated associational life. This not only undermines healthy deliberation, but also propagates apolitical forms of participation 'gamed' by political elites for manufacturing consent through public management, feeding discourses of responsible citizenship, nationalistic pride and innovation.

Larger anti-democratic trends

Digital technologies usher in the capacity for a 'god view', the digital intelligence to track everything in real time. Digital switches in the hands of the political elite and colluding business interests can aid the blatant exploitation of citizens and an unchecked abuse of power. This function creep not only deepens the citizenship divide that characterises most post-colonial societies in the global South, but also undermines the very institution of democracy. However, alongside the 'informational state'[4] that aggrandises power, is the citizen agent who expresses her sense of hope and outrage through practices of technology. Numerous instances of citizen appropriation of the digital sphere to organise against anti-democratic trends are today part of our social memory.

4 Denoted by increasing control of the state over information creation, processing, flows and use. See Braman, S. (2007) *Information, Policy, and Power in the Informational State*, Cambridge: MIT Press.

Post-colonial states and lack of trust

The space for inter-subjective dialogue is vital for democracy. However, in developing country settings, citizenship for the poor and marginalised is a negotiated experience, often marked by contestation and conflict. Not being heard is the norm; a listening state is an exception. Even with higher rates of Internet penetration, citizens often lack the trust to approach government or lack the sophistication needed to make use of online avenues, leading to an alienation from the digital promise.

Individuated engagement as the norm

While the participation of all individuals is the goal of democracy – an ideal that digital technologies can potentially actualise – the technicalisation of citizen participation can take away from the idea of collective claims, reducing participation to individual transactions with the state and redefining the citizen as a 'consumer' or 'user', as articulated in the e-governance imaginary of the Netherlands. This is bound to displace social justice and political equality from the very design of democracy in digital times.

Delegitimisation of the known and disenfranshisement

With rapid digitalisation, the human element often becomes displaced from interactions in the virtual space, one that is not yet clearly coded with rights and / or re-coded in ways unfamiliar to citizens. For citizens, the rapidity and sense of urgency contained in top-down routinisation exercises in e-government can be disorienting. Upheavals in citizenship routines consequent to the introduction of digital modalities signify deep change in the institutional order. It may also be erroneously presumed that technologies will make up for the inadequacies of legacy systems. But we find that these supposed efficiencies do not materialise in the same way for all citizens. They are also likely to place burdens on the most marginalised, expecting them to invest time and capabilities in negotiating the digital that they often lack. The result is the disenfranchisement of those who have been historically marginalised.

Techno-choices determine techno-practices

Digital choices for democracy can empower or disempower citizens. They can present the citizen with real alternatives for equality, thereby deepening democracy, or prove to be costly, not only for the individual citizen, but also for the polity as a whole. Data sets in an open data portal can hide or reveal what may be productive for transparency and democracy. Prerequisites for online participation can undermine or open up a diversity of views in online spaces of deliberation. short message service (SMS) or 'texts' delivered in dominant languages can marginalise indigenous populations from participatory initiatives. For instance, in Uruguay, while citizen agency in the Open Government National Action Plan process is leading to 'small transformations' in how institutions are structured, citizens' own actions are also being redefined by ICT-mediated access to information. In the Brazilian case of *Marco Civil*, a carefully designed deliberative platform was able to generate a forcefield for an agile and engaged civil society, birthing new networks and advocacy groups.

Virtual space is political space

The spatial architecture of digitally mediated citizen engagement determines outcomes for democracy, given the way social norms and practices can restrain and inhibit the participation of socially and economically marginalised groups in online public spaces. Our research shows how digitally mediated space can 'extend' through the relationship architectures it constitutes. The bottom-up municipal civic–public space of *Decidim Barcelona*, the open government model of Uruguay, and the safe marketplace forged through *FrontlineSMS-Ushahidi* in Warwick market in South Africa, all managed to democratise the space of digital engagement.

Challenges for democratic guarantees

The unacknowledged conditions spawned by digital systems and the consequent impact they have for public ethics, norms and democratic principles are not easily graspable. Actors within and outside government are caught unawares about the material implications of the rapidly evolving digital paradigm. When ICTs are used in governance processes, shifting meanings, norms and power equations create

new challenges for older guarantees in democracy. Contestations around freedom of expression and association, and rights to information, to vote, to be heard, to access public services and to redress, are evident in many contexts.

The need for new rights

Digital resources can confer citizen agents with a modicum of control, but the power of the 'network-data complex' – the consolidation of social control by corporations through the creation of digital intelligence in all sectors of the economy and society – is far too expansive and deep. Armed with the arsenal of Big Data, the ability of states to watch the everyday lives of citizens is already prompting self-censorship. It has also been observed that when the Internet threatens government, government threatens the Internet. As participation becomes digitally recast in new ways, new rights – such as the right to Internet access / connectivity, to digital literacy, to anonymity and to personal data protection – are implicated.

Designing for accountability calls for new norms

Techno-solutionism without strong institutional norms is at best an incomplete antidote and at worst an accountability nightmare. For instance, without a mooring in a robust right to information, open government initiatives in the Philippines are not adequate to unleash the transformative possibilities for active citizenship. Similarly, the assimilation of techno-structures within frameworks of neoliberal globalisation underlines a strong role for private sector accountability in e-government projects. Failing this, timely and responsive service delivery may be compromised, as research in South Africa and India shows us. Democracy itself can lose out if data regimes in governance are not open to scrutiny by citizens.

Recommendations

In light of the findings, we present recommendations on how public policies and programmes can promote ICTs for citizen engagement and transformative citizenship. We discuss three inter-related dimensions:

- calibrating digitally mediated citizen participation as a measure of political empowerment and equality
- designing techno-public spaces as bastions of inclusive democracy
- ensuring that the rule of law upholds democratic principles in digitally mediated governance.

1. Calibrating for equality

The research points to how transformative shifts in citizenship call for cultural pluralisation, racial and distributive democracy. The future of democracy depends on the calibration of digital approaches in governance to empower the last citizen (Box 1). To this end:

- E-participation must be designed to nurture human agency and choice. It must promote engagement of individuals and collectivities at the margins and remove marginality, exploitation, alienation and disempowerment.
- Empowering means and ends for citizen engagement requires an understanding of how democratic space is reconfigured through e-participation design.

Box 1. What does calibrating for equality look like?

- Digital participation is backed by socio-institutional listening frameworks, including the right to be heard, and institutional support and facilitation by intermediaries for citizens who may need assistance.
- E-participation visions are grounded in clear norms and systems that communicate the value of digitally mediated participation for citizen rights and democracy.
- The digital public goods necessary for digital engagement – including technological tools, procedures and standards and organisational architectures for coordination of process and implementation of outcomes – are prioritised and invested in.
- Capabilities of government actors and citizens are built through digital literacy programmes in which the goal of participation is central.

2. Coding for democracy

The design of techno-public space has deeply political consequences and must be made with due consideration to democratic and social inclusion imperatives (Box 2). This must include:

- Considerations about digital gadgets and artefacts (techno-material aspects) and techno-materiality: hardware, connectivity, software, data centres, Internet of Things, remote servers / cloud, data analytics tools, biometric devices and cameras
- Digital protocols on creation, storage, ownership, sharing, use and reuse of public code and public data
- Organisational protocols and practices for information sharing: availability and distribution of deliberative spaces, criteria / formal requirements in relation to different kinds of consultations or policy objectives sought to be achieved, process organisation, feedback about results.

Box 2. How to code for democracy?

- Put in place well thought out digital and organisational processes, standards and protocols on hardware, software, platform, data and information for ICT-mediated engagements.
- Create design principles for websites / platforms / portals, including for online voting, deliberation and transactions with government agencies.
- Make open, accessible and auditable techno-spaces by ensuring that participation protocols are open and transparent, allow ease of access to citizens and address the needs of those citizens having disabilities or access and literacy barriers.
- Involve citizens in the process of techno-design through citizen consultations, with dedicated resources for e-participation and support for techno-capabilities.

3. Norming for accountability

For citizen engagement to be given a central place in digital governance, deep and abiding system integration of democratic values is called for (Box 3). This means:

- Institutional arrangements must be revisited and refurbished to enhance digitally mediated civic-public deliberation and citizen participation in governance.
- The rights, roles and obligations of state agencies, individuals and private entities in relation to citizen engagement must be clarified and well defined.
- Steps to ensure that those at the margins of mainstream digital society are not summarily disenfranchised, given their lack of social capital and fluency to navigate e-participation systems, must be institutionalised.

Box 3. What does norming for accountability mean?

- Fortifying legal frameworks on rights to be heard, to information, to free expression, to grievance redress, to privacy, to bodily integrity and to participation and public services, to comprehensively cover the digital.
- Creating new laws and guarantees on Internet access, digital literacy, data protection, algorithmic transparency and the right to explanation, for meaningful and empowering citizen access to technology.
- Building the capabilities of the judiciary to protect and promote citizen's rights to participation and to produce competent, ethical and independent jurisprudence.
- Putting the last person first by creating capabilities for inclusion, investing and maintaining offline alternatives, and offering facilitated access.
- Centring public interest in e-government arrangements and third-party involvement through transparency in contracts, protection and safeguards of citizen and public data, and audit of partnerships.

Final remarks

This study found that despite the marvels of digital technologies, the ability of citizens to influence governance decisions and contribute new initiatives is, at best, indirect and limited. This does not mean that alternative visions and norms about citizen participation are not emergent. Agents within political systems – political leaders, bureaucracy, judiciary, new political parties – and citizen agents, the world over, are constantly creating and recreating digital democracy and the democratic digital through their conviction and creativity (See Box 4 on how local democracy is reinventing itself). These instantiations in Internet time keep our hope for transformation in social and technological structures alive.

Box 4. Case Study Spotlight: *Decidim Barcelona*

The citizen engagement platform of the Spanish municipality of Barcelona, *Decidim Barcelona*, presents a cutting-edge experiment in deepening democracy and realising the goal of transformative citizen engagement.

- Calibrating for equality: The platform has created a space for liquid collectives and networks and given rise to a new ecosystem of actors able to check hierarchical and traditional actors / power structures. The fact that individuals can have their proposals included in action plans means that traditional power structures that gate-keep democracy can be challenged. This is the result of careful techno-design and policy choices that have enhanced pluralism and built stronger social capital.
- Coding for democracy: Political intent is coded into the software platform, and participation is structured through a techno-public space that is open source and collaborative from the start. Using a hybrid process chain that creatively combines digital and offline spaces for a bottom-up process of municipal planning, it builds synergies between different views on the future of the city. Specific project proposals are mobilised from individuals and civic organisations and curated through open debate, culminating in citizen voting on these concrete ideas.
- Norming for accountability: Strong norms that favour political equality, citizen empowerment and public ethics in governance support the initiative. Privacy and anonymity is institutionally guaranteed, even as public engagement is widely encouraged. Direct decision-making is not completely unmediated, and the results of this process may be vetoed by the city council on grounds of budgetary constraints or strategic mismatch. The rule of law thus plays a critical role in articulating the facilitative boundaries for productive citizen engagement.

About this research summary

This research summary is based on a longer research report by the same authors. It reports on how digital technologies contribute institutional transformation in the deep processes of democratic governance. The research was carried out by IT for Change and its partners, and funded by Making All Voices Count.

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About Making All Voices Count

Making All Voices Count is a programme working towards a world in which open, effective and participatory governance is the norm and not the exception. It focuses global attention on creative and cutting-edge solutions to transform the relationship between citizens and their governments. The programme is inspired by and supports the goals of the Open Government Partnership.

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Research, Evidence and Learning component

The programme's Research, Evidence and Learning component, managed by IDS, contributes to improving performance and practice, and builds an evidence base in the field of citizen voice, government responsiveness, transparency and accountability (T&A) and technology for T&A (Tech4T&A).

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About IT for Change

IT for Change is an Indian non-governmental organisation that works on the theory and practice of information societies from the standpoint of equity, social justice and gender equality. The research it carries out emphasises applied knowledge that informs policy and programming. IT for Change prioritises concrete change, and activities include workshops bringing together civil society and governance actors, participation in expert committees and task forces to influence government policy, and capacity-building programmes for policy-makers.

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